Poverty, Stereotypes and Politics: Counting the Epistemic Costs

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Abstract

Epistemic analyses of stereotyping describe how they lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings of social actors and events. The analyses have tended so far to focus on how people acquire stereotypes and/or how the stereotypes lead to distorted perceptions of the evidence that is available about individuals. In this chapter, I focus instead on how the stereotypes can *generate* misleading evidence by influencing the policy preferences of people who harbour the biases. My case study is stereotypes that relate to people living in poverty. I show how these stereotypes influence policy choices in ways that generate misleading evidence about people living in poverty. I argue that the stereotypes generate the misleading evidence by supporting policies that restrict the agency of the people in poverty. In generating this misleading evidence, the stereotypes place additional constraints on the epistemic agency of everyone, making it harder for anyone, including those who do and those who do not endorse the stereotypes, to gain true beliefs about people living in poverty. Going forward, I conclude, adequate epistemic analyses of stereotyping ought to be more expansive, acknowledging both the way that stereotypes generate misleading evidence by constraining the agency of those stereotyped, and how we can all thereby be epistemically constrained by the stereotypes harboured by others.

1. Introduction

Many people harbour stereotypes associating people who live in poverty with being lazy (Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Hoyt 1999; 1996; Lindqvist et al 2017), uneducated (Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Hoyt 1999), scroungers/shirkers (Romano 2014), blameworthy (Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Henly and Danziger 1996; Henry et al. 2004; Seccombe et al. 1998; Beck et al. 1999), engaged in substance abuse (Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Hoyt, 1999; Gorski 2012; Lindqvist et al 2017), irresponsible (Shepard and Campbell 2020), and not having the right types of values, e.g. not valuing education (Gorski 2012). These stereotypes clearly have the potential to bring significant harm. Within philosophy there has recently been an upsurge of interest in the harms that stereotyping can bring. However, philosophical research has tended to focus on gender and race stereotypes, giving little attention to poverty stereotypes. This chapter aims

to fill this gap in the literature, analysing poverty stereotypes from the perspective of an epistemic analysis of stereotypes and stereotyping.[1]

Epistemic analyses of stereotyping focus on either (i) ways that stereotypes are formed in response to information in the social environment (Begby 2013, 2021), (ii) ways that stereotypes lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings when they are applied to individuals, groups, or social events, (Blum 2004; Fricker 2007; Mills 2007; Collins 2002; Gardiner 2018), or (iii) both (Gendler 2011; Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2019, 2021). The first task of this chapter will be to show how existing epistemic analyses of stereotyping—especially, although not exclusively, those taking the form of (ii)— apply to cases of poverty. We will see that they do yield insights but that they also fail to capture crucial features of poverty stereotypes and stereotyping.

In examining how stereotypes lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings, existing analyses have tended to focus on interpersonal interactions, and how these are shaped by stereotypes. They have also tended to focus on how stereotypes prevent individuals who harbour stereotypes from responding to evidence that they have available to them. I shall argue that the psychological and sociological work studying poverty stereotypes[2] illustrates three limitations to these existing epistemic analyses, qua analyses of the ways that stereotypes lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings of people living in poverty. What

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[1] Some of the literature on poverty points towards ways that poverty and race can intersect producing distinctive forms of stereotyping and discrimination (e.g. Gilens 1995, 1996; Cuddy, Fiske and Glick). For the purposes of the current paper, I focus narrowly on poverty stereotypes rather than how poverty can intersect with other aspects of social identity (e.g. Gilens 1995, 1996), but I recognise that is a shortcoming and further work applying the same ideas in the context of intersectional stereotypes would be required for the sake of completion of my project.

[2] The focus of the empirical research discussed here tends to be on the US and UK context. It may of course be that stereotypes relating to poverty, and the effects of poverty stereotypes, differ across cultures. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise how stereotypes can shape policy, while remaining open to the possibility that stereotypes shape policy in different ways across various socio-historical contexts.

the psychological and sociological research illustrates is that stereotypes relating to poverty are clearly (a) instrumental in the implementation of social policies as well as shaping social interactions, and (b) thereby *generate* misleading information rather than only shaping the way that people respond to information that they have available to them. They consequently (c) can have negative epistemic impacts on people other than those who harbour the stereotypes, even when these individuals are unaware of the stereotypes. Each of (a) to (c) create barriers to people gaining knowledge and understanding of people who are perceived to be living in poverty, so they are epistemic barriers. The paper will call for an expansive epistemic analysis of stereotyping that reflects each of (i) to (iii).

This chapter will therefore both illuminate the role that poverty stereotypes perform and at the same time highlight ways that epistemic analyses of stereotyping need to be expanded to apply to cases where stereotypes are influential on social policy.

2. Existing epistemic analyses of stereotypes and stereotyping

Let us begin, then, by getting a fuller picture of current epistemic analyses of stereotyping. Some work in the epistemology of stereotyping focuses on how stereotypes are formed in response to information in the social environment (Begby 2013, 2021; Gendler 2011; Puddifoot 2021). Endre Begby (2013, 2021), for example, argues that people may form stereotypes (e.g. "women are less good at abstract thinking than men") in response to information available in their environment where the environment is sufficiently hostile, and they have not been exposed to evidence that challenges their stereotyping beliefs. Begby (2013; 2021) suggests that the formation, and maintenance, of stereotypes can be epistemically responsible in these types of scenarios. Several authors working on implicit bias suggest that sometimes people harbour implicit stereotype that associate members of

specific social groups more strongly than others with certain characteristics, which reflect

base rate information about the distribution of certain features across society (see also

Gendler 2011; Antony 2016; Johnson 2020; Basu 2020). In many analyses of stereotypes,

they are taken to be generics (Leslie 2008), not universal generalisations but instead claims

about what is a characteristic, majority, or striking/dangerous property of members of a

specific group (see, e.g. Begby 2013, 2021; Beeghly 2015). Stereotypes could therefore be

supported by the evidence that is available in a society even while there are occupants of the

society that perceptibly do not fit them.

Other work on stereotyping focuses on how stereotypes impact people's ability to gain

knowledge and understanding of social actors and events.[3] Research on the epistemology of

stereotyping highlights how stereotypes can lead to misperceptions of people, their

behaviour, their character, and the quality of the testimony that they produce.[4] Lawrence

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[3] The definition of stereotyping that I endorse, and that I am working with here, is "a social attitude that associates members of some social group more strongly than others with certain trait(s)" (Puddifoot 2021, 13). It is a non-normative definition of stereotyping, meaning that it is not committed to all stereotypes being false or misleading (cf. Blum 2004). For defences of a non-normative approach to stereotyping see Fricker 2007; Kahneman 2011; Jussim 2012; Nagel 2014; Beeghly 2015, 2021; Antony 2016; Johnson 2020; Puddifoot 2021. Most of the claims in this paper could be articulated in the same way on a normative account of stereotyping. Where I make claims reflecting my commitment to a non-normative approach, implying that stereotypes can be true/accurate/reflect reality, those who endorse a normative account can translate these into claims about social attitudes that are not stereotypes, and the main points will stand.

[4] When speaking of the epistemology of stereotyping and epistemic analyses of stereotyping I am intentionally putting aside moral encroachment views (Basu 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Basu and Schroeder 2019; Moss 2018a, 2018b; Bolinger 2020). On moral encroachment views, moral factors can encroach on the epistemic, determining what is rational or justified to believe or knowledge. Stereotypes are central to some defences of moral encroachment. Specifically, cases of stereotyping that reflect social realities are taken to support moral encroachment views. It is argued that in such cases people who apply the stereotypes may be doing nothing that would be deemed wrong on traditional epistemic analyses, which focus on how people respond to evidence. However, it is claimed, moral encroachment theories can account for what is wrong. I reject this argument on the basis that people who apply stereotypes that reflect something of reality can nevertheless make mistakes that would be deemed wrong on traditional epistemic analyses (Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2021, forthcoming; see also Gardiner 2018). In my view there is no need to appeal to moral factors to determine that the people stereotyping have done something epistemically wrong. The epistemic analyses described in this section outline some of the ways that people who engage in the stereotyping can make epistemic errors, and how they can misunderstand and misperceive individuals due to applying a stereotype.

Blum (2004) argues that stereotypes both prevent people from being viewed as individuals, from their individuality being recognised, and have a homogenising effect, preventing the diversity of features found within a group from being noticed and attended to. Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on testimonial injustice can also be classified as an epistemic approach to stereotypes and stereotyping because it emphasises how perceptions of testimonial evidence are distorted when false stereotypes are applied to those who are providing the testimony (see also Collins 2002; Mills 2007). Jesse Munton's (2019a, 2019b) work on statistical generalisations also points towards ways that stereotypes may lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings. Munton describes how generalising beliefs have an implicit modal profile, that is, they have implicit content representing how modally robust the generalisation is. Even where the explicit content of a generalisation reflects reality, the implicit content may be misleading, leading people to make judgements as if the generalisation applies more broadly (or less broadly) than it does. What this suggests is that beliefs that take the form of generalisations about social groups, including social stereotypes, can mislead by making people apply a generalisation more or less widely than it should be.

In previous work defending my multifactorial approach to stereotyping (2019, 2021), I have added to these descriptions of the ways that stereotypes prevent people from properly accessing and processing information. I have highlighted how stereotypes also lead to a failure to notice and remember features that do not fit with a stereotype, failure to notice similarities between members of different social groups, failure to acknowledge potential explanations of behaviour that are not based on stereotypes about the social group to which the person behaving belongs (Puddifoot 2017, 2021, see also Gardiner 2018). Stereotyping can also lead people to be silenced and to smother their testimony (Dotson 2011), preventing

information that they might provide from being available to inform judgements about them and others (Puddifoot 2021).[5]

In identifying ways that stereotypes lead to distorted perceptions of social actors and events, Fricker (2007) and Blum (2004) take themselves to also be identifying ways that stereotypes and stereotyping bring moral wrongs. If people who engage in stereotyping fail to give recognition to the individuality of a person, or homogenise members of a group, then this constitutes a lack of respect (Blum 2004). Where people are given less credibility than they deserve when providing testimony due to stereotypes about their social group, this can bring both epistemic and moral harms (Fricker 2007). On both Fricker (2007) and Blum's (2004) accounts, the stereotypes that bring the harms are false. Reading this early literature on stereotyping it would be natural to conclude, as Blum does, that the moral harms of stereotypes and stereotyping are intrinsically linked to the falsity of stereotypes (cf. Beeghly 2021).

There is good reason, however, to think that stereotypes and stereotyping bring significant epistemic costs and associated moral harms that can be detached from the falsity of the stereotypes (Puddifoot 2017, 2019, 2021). It is possible to see this by focusing in on a stereotype that reflects an aspect of social reality.[6] In the UK most barristers are white and

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[5] See, also, Gendler (2011) and Saul (2013) on the epistemic costs of implicit bias. Implicit biases can be interpreted as implicit stereotypes (Puddifoot 2021), so claims about the epistemic costs of implicit bias can be viewed as claims about the costs of stereotyping. Recently, Robert Pasnau (2020) emphasises how there can be a cumulative impact of the epistemic costs of implicit bias. At any single time, one may be influenced by an implicit bias, but also by previous distorted perceptions that were shaped by implicit bias.
[6] It is difficult to say exactly how to determine if a stereotype should be labelled as accurate or inaccurate, true or false because the semantic content of generics is ambiguous. This is because stereotypes do not tend to be universal generalisations (e.g. "all scientists are men")(Begby 2013; 2021), and if stereotypes do carry a specification of the probability that members of a particular group have certain characteristics (e.g. for each scientist there is a 67% chance that the scientist is a men), the specification is usually implicit rather than explicit (Munton 2019a, b). It is therefore difficult to make the case for saying any specific stereotype is accurate. Nonetheless, we can, for the sake of the current argument, focus on an example of

male. Someone who has experience of the legal system may therefore harbour the stereotype "barristers are white males", the stereotype "barristers are white", or the stereotype "barristers are males" because of their exposure to barristers. The stereotype that they harbour could be said to reflect social reality, and perhaps could also be said to be accurate and true. Let us assume, as seems likely, that the stereotype is not a universal generalisation, "all barristers are white men/white/men", but something more akin to a majority generic, with the content that typically barristers are white men/white/men (Leslie 2008). In such a case, the stereotype could be said to accurately reflect social reality. Even if the stereotype could be said to be accurate, however, it could nonetheless bring significant epistemic errors, and attendant moral wrongs. There is a concrete example of how this can happen in the form of the experiences of Alexandra Wilson, a young Black female barrister who in 2020 described how she was repeatedly mistaken for a defendant and told not to enter a courtroom when she was going to work:`

> …I walked in through the main door and stopped shortly before the security scanner. I looked up and smiled at the officer, who was holding a clipboard with sheets of paper. He glanced at me and then back at the paper. He looked up again: "Could you please tell me your name so that I can mark you as here for your case?"
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> I looked over at the piece of paper, which contained a list of all of the defendants due to appear in court. "I'm not a defendant. I am a barrister, here to represent a client," I replied.
>
> I was the only person being treated like this. There were male and female lawyers. I was the only black lawyer.
>
> The security officer lowered his clipboard and apologised. He ushered me through the scanner. I felt a little flustered as I went upstairs to meet my client.
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> From the courtroom door, I could see that the magistrates' chairs were empty, suggesting that now was an appropriate time to step in to speak to the prosecutor. "No. You mustn't go in there!" a member of the public shouted out at me from across the hall. I narrowed my eyebrows in confusion. "Only lawyers must go into the courtroom, not journalists!"

stereotype that is a strong contender for being an accurate stereotype if any is, because it reflects an aspect of social reality. That is, we can focus on the stereotype that barristers in the UK are white males.

I looked down at my new black suit. My loafers were polished and my black leather handbag matched. I was clutching my notebook and my bag was peeping out of my laptop. I couldn't think of anything that could make me look more lawyer-like. I turned again to see the court usher standing behind me and holding the door to the courtroom open. She whispered that I should ignore the woman's warning and should head on into the courtroom. I smiled appreciatively. I could see the grey-haired prosecutor leaning over his desk, presumably tapping away at his laptop. Followed closely by the usher, I stepped into the courtroom. "You need to wait outside and sign in with the usher."

The voice came from a woman sitting on the bench beside me. She was similarly dressed to me, clad in a black suit, and had a laptop in front of her. She was clearly another legal representative. I remained where I was and she continued: "The usher will come outside and sign you in. The court will call you in for your case."

"I'm a barrister," I stuttered. "I'm here to represent a client." The woman's jaw dropped and her face flushed red. She looked embarrassed. "Oh, I see," she muttered under her breath.

I could feel a lump growing in my throat as I walked across the courtroom towards the prosecutor. What was it about my appearance that day that had made it so difficult to appreciate I was a lawyer? I took a deep breath and stepped towards the prosecutor. He was only about five metres away from me now. "You need to leave the courtroom!" a voice bellowed at me from the front. I lifted my gaze to see the court legal adviser on her feet and pointing at the door. She continued: "The usher will be out shortly."

I stared at her blankly, thinking surely she must be joking. "Are you represented today?" she inquired, looking at me with a concerned expression. I sighed in disbelief. I explained again that I was a defence barrister and I was just trying to speak to the prosecutor about my case. She looked me up and down and then took a seat. "Oh, right, OK," she said quietly. She, too, turned back to her computer and began tapping away. (Wilson 2020)

The stereotype applied in this case seems to be that "barristers are white", as other white female and white male lawyers were not treated the same. The stereotype may reflect the social reality that barristers in the UK are typically white, but in Wilson's case it led several individuals in a very short space of time to misperceive Wilson and her actions in trying to enter the courtroom that was her place of work. There were clear signs that Wilson was a barrister: her clothes, her laptop, her notebook, and her behaviour in entering the courtroom as she did. However, these signs were either not noticed or were misinterpreted. This case

illustrates the importance of acknowledging that stereotypes can bring significant epistemic costs and moral harms that are detached from their falsity and inaccuracy.

Based on this type of observation, I have proposed evaluative dispositionalism (Puddifoot 2021). Evaluative dispositionalism is the view that when evaluating acts of stereotyping, attention should be directed at two things: the ways that a person has formed the belief in a stereotype—i.e. did they display a disposition that would tend to produce true beliefs?—but also the many ways that believing the stereotype makes the person disposed to respond to evidence they experience downstream regardless of the accuracy of the stereotype. Stereotypes can dispose people to fail to recognise individuality (Blum 2004), fail to give correct or fair levels of credibility to testimony (e.g. Collins 2002; Fricker 2007; Mills 2007), fail to accurately remember past behaviours of an individual (Puddifoot 2017a,b, 2019, 2021, forthcoming, ms), interpret ambiguous evidence as if it unambiguously fits a stereotype (Puddifoot 2017a,b, 2019, 2021), and so forth. Each of these are epistemic costs. One thing in common to each of these epistemic costs of stereotyping is that they involve a failure to properly access and process *available information* about individuals to whom stereotypes are applied.

3. Applying the existing epistemic analysis to poverty stereotypes

With this outline of existing epistemic analyses of stereotypes in place we can proceed to see how, like the stereotypes that are more ordinarily the focus of attention of epistemic analyses of stereotyping (i.e. race and gender stereotypes), poverty stereotypes have many of the effects described by existing epistemic analyses.[7] There is a story to be told about how people

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[7] It is worth noting that some of the effects described in this section could follow from the application of other stereotypes. For example, someone might harbour a stereotype associating being responsible or rational with

form stereotypes relating to poverty, and we shall return to how stereotypes can seem to be supported by information available in society in section 4. However, the main goal of this chapter is to consider how poverty stereotypes can lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings, and this shall be reflected in the focus of the discussion of this section.

Epistemic analyses predict that where people are stereotyped negatively due to living in poverty, or being perceived as such, the stereotypes are likely to be false, but also, regardless of their falsity, to dispose those stereotyping to fail to properly access and process information about them (Puddifoot 2021). More specifically, epistemic analyses of stereotypes suggest that people will be morally wronged by stereotyping because they will be assumed to be more like other members of their perceived social group than they really are, to be homogenised. Stereotypes such as that people living in poverty are lazy, irresponsible, and substance abusers are predicted to create a moral distance (Blum 2004), meaning that other people do not see the similarities between themselves and people living poverty that might otherwise make them feel morally obliged to help. According to the epistemic analyses to stereotyping, people who engage in stereotyping are more likely to notice features and behaviours of people living in poverty that are fitting with them being lazy, scroungers/shirkers, engaged in substance abuse, irresponsible and lacking the right type of values than other features. Stereotypes are likely to be applied even though they are not relevant (Saul 2013; Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2021). Ambiguous behaviours displayed by people living in poverty are likely to be interpreted as fitting the stereotype (e.g. as lazy or irresponsible) even when they could have equally justifiably been interpreted differently, and should be interpreted as simply ambiguous (Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2019, 2021). Where people

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being middle class. Under such conditions, poor people may be unduly perceived not to be responsible or rational not due to a stereotype relating to poverty but instead due to a stereotype of responsibility or rationality. However, for the sake of the current discussion focus will be placed on stereotypes specifically relating to poverty.

living in poverty act in ways fitting with the stereotype, the actions are likely to be wrongly attributed to characteristics that they are associated with due to being poor (e.g. irresponsibility/laziness), as opposed to being explained by features of their social situation that might have led them to act that way (Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2019, 2021). Meanwhile, where they act in ways that are not fitting with stereotypes their actions are likely to be wrongly attributed to their situation (e.g. they got an extra helping hand from the government) rather than to their own efforts (Puddifoot 2017a, b, 2019, 2021). At the same time, where people living in poverty attempt to convey information, including about the hardships that they face, they are likely to be given less credit than they are due, or they might choose to truncate their testimony if it is risky.

In fact, the literature on the psychology of poverty suggests that people do not completely homogenise people living in poverty (cf. Blum 2004). Instead, many people tend to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving poor and the working and unemployed poor who seek benefits (Katz 2013; Handler & Hasenfield 1991; Henry.et al, 2004; Henly and Danzinger 1996). There is not an assumption that all poor people are the same, but instead a subcategorization of people living in poverty. However, when zooming in on the categories of poor people who are more likely to be viewed as undeserving, there seems to moral distancing: participants are less likely to approve policies to help able-bodied unemployed people, single mothers, or adolescent mothers because they are viewed undeserving (Applebaum 2001). This moral distancing plausibly involves seeing able-bodied unemployed people, single mothers, and adolescent mothers as more different than they really are to oneself (and to others living in poverty). Generally, it has been suggested that a distance is created between people who live in poverty and those who do not, such that the latter fail to see similarities between people living in poverty and those who are not living in

poverty (Lott 2002). In addition to this, poverty that could be explained in several ways, and is therefore ambiguous, is explained by people who tend to stereotype in terms of the person's internal choices and behaviour, e.g. their laziness or irresponsibility, rather than in terms of external factors, like their social situations or public policy (Chafel 1997; Doherty et al. 2014). Participants who engage in stereotyping have therefore shown a tendency not to be sensitive to the genuine reasons for a person living in poverty, which may in some cases be that they are lazy and irresponsible but could also in any specific case be due to the lack of support from social structures or policies. This suggests that they wrongly viewed ambiguous information as consistent with a stereotype (of laziness and irresponsibility) rather than as ambiguous. Evidence that information is interpreted in a way that is consistent with a stereotype comes from a study in which participants watched a video of a girl's performance on an oral exam. Where there were visual prompts suggesting that she was from a poorer background (clothes, playground in the background), participants judged that her performance indicated a substantially lower level of ability than when visual prompts suggested that she was from a less disadvantaged background (Darley and Gross 1983).[8] Meanwhile, there is evidence suggesting that people experiencing poverty can face an uphill struggle to be believed (see, e.g. Riemer 1997; Smith 2020).

There are various ways, then, that stereotypes relating to poverty seem to obscure perceptions of individuals, leading to biased responses to the information that is available about them.

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[8] For similar results see Baron et al. (1995). It is likely that the effect that is found in this type of case will differ by context. In other work on stereotyping, it has been found that the extent to which stereotype-confounding information is noticed and remembered can be determined by situational factors (see e.g. Stangor and McMillan 1992). People under conditions of high cognitive load, time pressures, or processing large amounts of information seem to store information in a way that fits existing schemas, so they are less likely to store and recollect information that is inconsistent with a stereotype. Meanwhile people who are under less cognitive load, no or less time pressure, or who are processing less information are more likely to heavily process and therefore notice and remember information that is inconsistent with a stereotype. They can then show a bias towards remembering stereotype-confounding information better than information that is consistent with a stereotype.

There are various ways, in other words, that possessing poverty stereotypes disposes people to respond poorly to evidence relating to people living in poverty. Many of the claims of existing epistemic analyses of stereotypes can be fruitfully applied to cases of poverty. However, the empirical literature on poverty stereotyping that has been discussed in this section also points towards an important aspect of the epistemic role of stereotypes that has often been missed from epistemic analyses of stereotypes: the political role that the stereotypes perform. More specifically, the way that stereotypes shape people's judgements about the appropriateness of particular social policies. Recall that it was mentioned above that it has been found that the possession of certain negative social beliefs about specific subgroup of people who live in poverty—including able-bodied unemployed people, single mothers, and teenage mothers—predicts willingness to endorse policies to support members of those groups (Applebaum 2001). There can obviously be profound consequences of these judgements about policy for members of the groups who are negatively stereotyped. My specific focus in the next section is on one negative consequence: the way that the stereotypes, by influencing policy choices, can generate misleading information about people living in poverty.

3. Poverty stereotypes, public policy, and misleading information

In section 2, we began to see how evidence suggests that stereotypes can influence which social policies find support. This section elaborates on this point and illustrates how social policies endorsed due to stereotyping can generate misleading information.

As mentioned in section 2, there is empirical evidence that people's willingness to endorse policies that provide social support are determined by their beliefs about the deservingness or lack of deservingness of the poor people who would be supported. Experimental participants

were significantly less likely to endorse liberal policies to support able-bodied men than widows with children, physically disabled, or physically ill people (Applebaum 2001). Participants were also significantly more likely to recommend liberal policies to support physically disabled people than able-bodied men, teen mothers, and single mothers (Applebaum 2001). The willingness to endorse a policy that supports a particular group tends to track the perceived deservingness of the group. What this suggests is that stereotypes that associate specific subgroups of people living in poverty with characteristics that suggest that they are undeserving of help, such as laziness, reduce support for strategies to aid the target groups.

In addition to this, psychological research suggests that where participants take features of certain people living in poverty (e.g. their lack of effort, alcohol/drug abuse, poor money management) to be important causes of their poverty (Cozarelli et al 2001), or view the poverty as controllable and therefore a choice of the person living in poverty (Henry et al. 2004), they show less support for social policies that support that group. On the flipside, people are more likely to recommend liberal policy where they do not take features of people living in poverty to be important causal factors but instead identify social and economic factors as the main cause(s) of poverty. Political conservatives, for instance, are both more likely to attribute the cause of poverty to the individual, and less likely to support anti-poverty or welfare support policies (Zucker and Weiner 1993; Cozzarelli et al. 2001). Stereotyping beliefs about people who live in poverty, associating them with being the cause of their poverty (Cozzarelli et al 2001), and with having control over, and choosing, their financial situation (Henry et al. 2004) are thus good predictors of the likelihood of support for policies aiming to eliminate or mitigate the negative impact of poverty—those who harbour

stereotypes associating people living in poverty with being causes of and in control of their poverty are less likely to endorse such policy.

Stereotypes can therefore have the effect of undermining support for anti-poverty strategies and more generous social welfare policies by for associating people living in poverty with specific negative traits and with personal responsibility their financial situation.[9] They can have this effect on human psychology simply due to their presence within culture and cultural discourse in a society. But there is also the potential for politicians and political commentators to deploy the negative stereotypes to influence policy preferences and voting behaviours.

For example, in response to the financial crisis in 2008 there became increased coverage in the media in the United Kingdom of welfare abuse (Romano 2014). The narrative of the "broken society" emerged, in which poor people were associated with deficiencies and inadequacies (Mooney 2011). Politicians engaged in the public use of and perpetuation of negative stereotypes about people who were dependent on state support. For example, the UK chancellor of the exchequer spoke about people "sleeping off life on benefits" (Romano 2014). It seems reasonable to see the images of the "welfare abuser" and the "lazy benefits claimant", and the association of poor people with society being broken, as being deployed to harshen the public view of people living in poverty (Mooney 2011). The stereotypes have a rationalising and legitimising role, providing support for social policies that diminish social entitlements (Mooney 2011; Romano 2014). By associating people in poverty, especially those people on welfare, with welfare cheating and with images of the broken society,

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[9] These stereotypes are likely to be especially pervasive where the experiences of people living in poverty are given a deficit of attention, for example, in the media, so they do not have the opportunity to influence public opinion (Smith and Archer 2020; Kurtulmus and Kandiyali forthcoming).

politicians attempt to generate support for less generous public policies by contributing to the narrative of the undeserving poor who are responsible for their own struggles. A similar example from the United States is the stereotype of the "welfare queen" that was deployed by Ronald Reagan to justify curbs to benefits to African American women (Lubiano 1992; Collins 2002; Gorski 2012). Policies like conditionality on benefits, and harsher penalties for failing to meet conditions, are thereby rationalised as responses to the poor behaviour or character of people living in poverty.[10]

This brings us to another important point. In addition to influencing the degree of support that there is for policies to help people living in poverty, stereotypes can influence judgements about what type of policy should be introduced (Henly and Danzinger 1996; Gorski 2012). For example, stereotypes that associate poor female adolescents with irresponsibility might lead voters to favour stigmatizing sexual education programs targeted at working class girls, when the resources devoted to these programs could otherwise be far more effectively used to address the structural causes of poverty and to mitigate the harms of poverty (Gorski 2012).

Where this support for policies translates into support for political representatives who implement those policies, the policies are at least partially the result of the existence of stereotypes. Similarly, where there is a lack of support for generous social policies, and this translates into support for political representatives who seem unlikely to implement such policies, a lack of policy can be the result of stereotypes. Altogether, psychological research suggests that stereotypes can be important determinants of social policy.

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[10] See Smith (2020) and Kurtulmus and Kandiyali (forthcoming) for more on how the media harms people living in poverty, including by exposing them to epistemic injustice.

Now let us consider how, once these social policies are in place, they can shape the information that is available in society. This point can be understood by focusing on childcare and education policy. Let us take as an example a (probably not too difficult to imagine) society in which stereotypes relating to unemployed poor people shape policy relating to childcare and education support for financially disadvantaged children. In this society, unemployed able-bodied poor people, single mothers, and teenage mothers are associated with laziness and irresponsibility, and with being responsible for their poverty. There is consequently a lack of enthusiasm among the general population for policies that support them and their families. Because public discourse surrounding poverty focuses on these groups, and associates them with being undeserving, there is in general a lack of support for policies that support people living in poverty, including in the domains of education and healthcare.

There are significant disparities in the educational outcomes of children living in poverty and those from wealthier backgrounds. For example, the *Education in England: Annual Report 2020* by the Education Policy Institute tracks data showing that children living in poverty are persistently less likely than the rest of the general population to achieve educational qualifications.[11] However, research has identified that good quality early years childcare and education can significantly improve the long-term educational outcomes of children from financially disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Barnett 1995; Karoly et al. 2005; Bakken et al. 2017). Policy makers can choose to invest in good quality childcare and education, and thereby choose to engage in actions that are understood to improve the educational outcomes of people living in poverty.

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[11] For a study of how stereotypes relating to wealth and class may contribute to these educational disparities see Durante and Fiske 2017.

In this type of situation, policymakers have the potential to shape what information is available within society about people who live in poverty and their educational outcomes. By investing properly, they can support more children living in poverty to achieve their potential, and consequently create a situation in which people from poorer backgrounds are more heavily represented among those who have educational qualifications, creating more role models and other positive exemplars of people who have lived in poverty and succeeded in education. If policymakers choose not to invest in policies that improve the educational outcomes of people living in poverty—say, because there is a lack of support in society for support targeted at financially disadvantaged individuals—then their decisions will contribute to a misleading set of statistics, role models, exemplars, that *doesn't reflect the educational potential* of people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Where policymakers fail to address educational disparities in this way there can be downstream effects. Educational qualifications serve as "markers of credibility" (Fricker 2007) or "markers of trustworthiness" (Anderson 2012), marking people out as credible and trustworthy sources of knowledge. They are imperfect markers because having a qualification does not always guarantee that you will be treated as credible, and there are cases where people have the qualifications but there is reason to doubt that this reflects a genuine ability or knowledge set. However, for people living in poverty, qualifications can be useful markers of credibility, providing entrance into the professions, for example. Where people living in poverty lack the markers of credibility, the knowledge that they have, including about their experiences of living in poverty, is less likely to be given the credibility that it deserves by some people. People living in poverty will have less opportunity to shape the hermeneutical

resources—knowledge, concepts, narratives, and understandings (Dotson 2012) —in society if they lack the marker of credibility that an educational qualification can provide.

A lack of proper investment in early years education and childcare (and other resources and services to support the education of people living in poverty) can therefore contribute to producing a misleading epistemic environment. Without proper investment it will continue to be the case that (i) statistics show that people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to succeed in their studies than the general population, (ii) there are significantly fewer highly educated role models from poorer backgrounds than from the rest of the general population, (iii) people encounter significantly fewer exemplars (e.g. teachers, lecturers, doctors, lawyers) of people from poorer backgrounds who have succeeded in education, and (iv) the knowledge, concepts, narratives and social understandings found within society are overly representative of the experiences of more financially advantaged individuals. There is very good reason to think that (i) to (iii) will fail to represent the true educational potential of people who live in poverty because where investment has been made in early years education and childcare (and similar services), education outcomes of financially disadvantaged children have improved. As such, (i) to (iii) are misleading. In addition to this, as long as living in poverty produces insights and ways of understanding the social world that are not gained by (most) people who do not live in poverty, (iv) will be unrepresentative, failing to represent the experiences and social understandings of a significant number of individuals in society.

In sum, in this section we have seen the potential for stereotypes to shape policy, and for these policies to generate a misleading informational environment. Stereotypes can, then, indirectly generate misleading information by shaping public policy. Stereotypes can

contribute to the creation of a misleading social environment in which people can be led by misleading evidence to form false impressions of people living in poverty.

4. Poverty stereotypes, agency, and the controlling images approach

The primary take-away message from section 3 is that stereotypes do not only distort people's responses to available information, they also generate misleading information by supporting inadequate public policies. However, a secondary message that can be taken from the discussion is that stereotypes can generate misleading information of this type via policies that restrict the agency of people who are directly affected by the policies. Where people who live in poverty are not given the opportunity to develop skills that they need to succeed in education settings their agency is constrained. They are constrained by lack of opportunity so that they cannot achieve goals that others can achieve. It is because they are constrained in this way that the information available in society about their potential to achieve is misleading. What this suggests is that an adequate account of the epistemic role of stereotypes ought to integrate aspects of an alternative approach to stereotypes and stereotyping: what is described here as the *controlling images approach to stereotyping*.

On the controlling images approach, emphasis is placed on how stereotypes control and restrict the agency of people to whom the stereotypes are applied (Collins 2002; Beeghly 2021; Webster 2021). In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies four main stereotypes or controlling images of African American women: "mammy", "matriarch", "welfare queen" and "jezebel". Collins describes how these stereotypes both serve to justify the oppression of African American women and constrain how they can behave. If an African American woman is the head of the family and goes out to work, she risks being viewed as a "matriarch", i.e. a bad mother who spends too much time out of the house, cannot supervise

children adequately, and is overly aggressive and emasculating to husbands and male partners. If, however, she does not work, for instance, staying at home to look after her children, she risks being viewed as a "welfare queen". As Beeghly (2021) notes, Collins' view captures how stereotypes can shape the world and individuals. Webster (2021) provides more details about how stereotypes can shape the world, building on Collins' work on controlling images to describe how people's agency can be curbed by stereotypes, so that the options available to people are severely restricted. People may choose certain paths in life either to conform to or resist stereotypes. In each type of case, the stereotype constrains their choice and agency.

The controlling images approach to stereotyping is not in conflict with epistemic analyses of stereotyping. It is possible, and I think right, that stereotypes are bad both because they produce distorted perceptions of those to whom the stereotypes are applied and because they act as controlling images (Webster 2021). What I am suggesting here is that to develop an adequate epistemic analysis one needs to borrow something specific from the controlling images approach, acknowledging the significant role that stereotypes play in constraining people's agency. The discussion in section 3 of this paper suggests that one way that stereotypes constrain people's agency is *indirectly* by producing support for public policies that constrain agency. Where stereotypes produce support for public policies that, for example, prevent people living in poverty from getting markers of credibility, they place constraints on what people living in poverty do. But this effect does not happen by stereotypes directly constraining the choices of people living in poverty. The effect does not involve financially disadvantaged individuals choosing one path in life over another to conform to or to challenge stereotypes relating to poverty (cf. Webster 2021). Instead, what

happens is that stereotypes shape the possibilities that are available to people by producing public policies that do not support people living in poverty to reach their potential.

It might be objected at this point that the impact of policy on the agency of those living in poverty is significant to the controlling images view but irrelevant to epistemic analyses of stereotyping because it is an effect on agency rather than on whether or not a person can achieve knowledge or understanding. I agree that the impact of policy on agency can and should be reflected in an account of how stereotypes operate as controlling images.[12] Nonetheless, acknowledgement of the impact of policy on agency is also crucial to understanding the barriers that people face to gaining knowledge and understanding of people living in poverty. Public policy creates a hostile epistemic environment for individuals aiming to have a proper understanding of the potential of individuals living in poverty. Take, for example, someone who attempts to rid themselves of negative stereotypes relating to people living in poverty by doing something they take, arguably correctly, to be epistemically responsible. They search for information about people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds who have had educational success, they seek out statistics, they investigate the socioeconomic background of role models that they find in society (e.g. high profile academics and scientists) to see which of these individuals comes from a financially disadvantaged background. We can even stipulate for current purposes that they engage in each of these activities because they have done some research into how to change the stereotypes one endorses and found research showing that exposure to counter-stereotypical individuals can help (Blair et al 2001). In a society where social policy has failed to support

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[12] In fact, mention of how people's epistemic agency can be constrained by education policies, creating a misleading informational environment, is found in existing work outlining the controlling images view. Take the following quote from Patricia Hill Collins: "restricting Black women's literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts or sound judgement, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion binary" (Collins 2002: 79).

people living in poverty to achieve their full potential, this person, who is arguably acting in an epistemically responsible way, is unlikely to find a set of information that challenges their initial negative stereotypes about people living in poverty. They are likely to find information about some people who came from financially disadvantaged backgrounds who have achieved. However, as noted above, stereotypes are not universal generalisations, so a single counterexample, or even a small number of counterexamples, may not challenge the stereotype or shake the person's commitment to the stereotype (Begby 2013, 2021). On the other hand, they are likely to find that people from financially advantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among those with educational success because of the additional resources (e.g. books, toys, educational outings, tutors, private education) that they have had access to, and because they are less dependent on governments providing high quality early years childcare and education for all. The significantly higher representation of people from financially advantaged backgrounds, and corresponding lower representation of people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, would fit with the content of stereotypes that associate people living in poverty with laziness, irresponsibility, being shirkers and so forth. Doing something that is epistemically responsible could in this case strengthen and reinforce the person's negative stereotypes.[13] This is because the information that is available in the person's social environment will not reflect the full potential of people living in poverty to gain educational success, markers of credibility, and to contribute to knowledge and understanding in society. The information will not be representative because of failures of

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[13] Someone might object that seeking out information about individuals from financially disadvantaged backgrounds is not enough to suffice for epistemic responsibility, and that an epistemically responsible person would instead be responsive to evidence suggesting that levels of educational attainment are a reflection of structural factors rather than educational potential. I would respond that someone who seeks out empirical evidence and responds to evidence about how to overcome their biases is being epistemically responsible (Puddifoot 2014). Notoriously, stereotypes can be resistant to change in response to sincerely avowed beliefs, meaning that even if someone were to be aware of the role of structural factors, they may continue to harbour the stereotypes. If someone believes, based on high quality evidence, that the best way to improve their beliefs is by seeking out counter-stereotypical examples this is epistemically responsible.

public policy and the impact of these failures on the agency of people living in poverty. This is a significant *epistemic* cost of poverty stereotypes.

Here, then, we find that stereotypes have a dual negative impact on agency when they influence public policy surrounding issues like education. The stereotypes can place constraints on the agency of those who are members of the groups targeted by the stereotypes: e.g. people living in poverty. Members of these groups can be denied opportunities to exercise their agency because of a lack of social policies to support them. At the same time, the *epistemic* agency of all people who live in the community can be hampered by the lack of social policies to support marginalised individuals. It can become harder for all people to form true beliefs by being epistemically responsible because of the misleading and hostile information environment that is created.

6. Towards an improved epistemic analysis

What, then, should an adequate epistemic analysis of stereotypes look like? It should acknowledge the ways that stereotyping beliefs can be poorly supported by the evidence, and how individuals harbouring stereotypes can consequently be disposed to respond poorly to evidence about individual social actors and events to which the stereotypes are applied (Puddifoot 2021). However, it should not focus solely on *interpersonal perceptions*, that is, perceptions by individuals of other individuals or groups. An adequate epistemic analysis of poverty stereotypes must also reflect the ways that stereotypes contribute to the acceptance, endorsement, and implementation of public policies. Stereotypes have a political role. This political would be acknowledged in a complete epistemic analysis of poverty stereotypes.

The political role of poverty stereotypes is so important to an epistemic analysis because of the way that policy failures relating to poverty—that is, failures to adequately address the needs of people living in poverty—create a misleading epistemic environment. Existing epistemic analyses of stereotyping have tended to focus on the ways that stereotypes lead to a distorted perception of the information that is available to an individual, but the discussion in this paper has aimed to show that stereotypes can also *generate misleading information* via public policy.

As we have seen, the process of generating misleading information can involve those people directly impacted by the public policies having their agency constrained. They can be prevented from achieving their potential due to the existence of social policies that do not give them adequate support. We have also seen how this constraint on the agency of those targeted by stereotypes can curb the epistemic agency of other people by creating a hostile and misleading epistemic environment. What this suggests is that an adequate epistemic analysis of stereotypes ought to acknowledge that stereotypes can play a dual negative role when they influence public policies: they can at the same time constrain the agency of those negatively stereotyped and curb the epistemic agency of those seeking the truth about the group that is stereotyped.

A final feature of this augmented epistemic analysis of poverty stereotypes is that it highlights how people can become misled by stereotypes without harbouring the stereotypes themselves. It has been acknowledged elsewhere that a stereotype can shape interactions between, and perceptions of, individuals even if none of the individuals involved endorse the target stereotype, if one or more of those involved is aware of the stereotype (see, e.g. Anderson 2010; Beeghly 2021). The argument in this chapter suggests that people can be

misled by poverty stereotypes even if they are not aware of the stereotypes. Where enough people in a society harbour stereotypes, those stereotypes can influence public policies, which in turn generate misleading information. Those people who initially harboured the stereotypes may be especially susceptible to being misled by this information because they are predisposed to view people living in poverty negatively. But other people, who did not harbour the stereotypes, including any who were completely unaware of the stereotypes, can be exposed to the misleading information too. In a situation where policies endorsed due to stereotyping generate misleading information about people living in poverty, everyone faces a more hostile epistemic environment.

7. Conclusion

Epistemic analyses have much to offer when it comes to understanding stereotypes relating to poverty. Existing epistemic analyses capture how individuals can have distorted perceptions of people living in poverty who they stereotype, outlining specific ways that this stereotyping prevents knowledge and understanding. However, in this chapter I have argued that an adequate epistemic analysis of poverty stereotypes ought also to acknowledge how the stereotypes produce support for policies, and how these policies can generate misleading information about people living in poverty. It has been argued that the policies generate this misleading information about people living in poverty in part by curbing the agency of individuals who fit into this category, so epistemic analyses of stereotyping ought to borrow from controlling images approaches, acknowledging how important it can be that stereotypes can constrain the agency of those stereotyped. An analysis of this sort highlights how even people who do not personally harbour negative stereotypes about people living in poverty can face a hostile epistemic environment and constraints on their epistemic agency due to the stereotypes harboured by others.

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