2 Key Conceptual Themes

FROM THE DESK OF LYN SAHR

At Ruby's Pantry we are filling the food gap for thousands of families every month. Although we can provide a moment of happiness for parents by being able to feed their families, as the food goes away ... so goes the happiness. There is an old saying, "If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach him how to fish, he eats for a lifetime!" We want to help people along the way to the satisfaction of self-sufficiency. That's one of the reasons we ask for a $20 donation. However, it is an uphill challenge.

There are three types of family situations that we recognize have needs. First, those that are not able to work. These dear folks are special and near to God's heart. Along with churches we are there to help them which is our Biblical responsibility.

The second type is the family situation where the heads of the household are not able to find jobs but they want to work. Shame on us for sending millions of jobs to other countries and taking away the dignity from the parents of children stuck in poverty this way. ...

And then there is the third type of situation, people who do not want to work and will not work. What do we do with this problem? The Apostle Paul writes this: *"On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.* ***For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'"*** (II Thessalonians 3:8–10; emphasis mine).

I know that sounds harsh but the underlying reality is that people cannot find satisfaction without providing for themselves to the best of their ability. ... At Ruby's Pantry we give people the opportunity for dignity and accountability which will help lead to contentment.

—Lyn Sahr, white male, founder of Ruby's Pantry, "From the Desk of Lyn Sahr," August 5, 2015

This letter penned by Lyn Sahr gets right to the heart of neoliberal stigma. Sahr is the founder of Ruby's Pantry (RP) and pastor of a small, conservative evangelical Christian church in Minnesota. Almost every month, Sahr writes letters clarifying RP's mission, vision, and values through a variety of stories, ponderings, and appeals. These letters go out to organizers, volunteers, and staff at RP and are also available online for public consumption. The letters clarify RP's position on the causes of hunger, who is responsible for hunger, and solutions to hunger and, in so doing, shed light on RP's worldview and political orientation. This letter is just one of the millions of texts and artifacts circulating in American society today that reinforces stigma against the poor by focusing on the individual causes of poverty—a mainstay of conservative evangelical discourses. These texts are so ubiquitous that most Americans would either nod in agreement or shrug them off without skipping a beat.

In this chapter, I use Sahr's letter as an entry point to chart out key conceptual themes in this book—ideology and discourse, neoliberalism, the stigma of poverty, welfare, race and gender, and religious theology, all of which work together to produce neoliberal stigma. The goal of this chapter is to answer a rather lofty question: Where does stigma come from? Similar to how structural racism is held in place by racial ideologies, it is my contention that the unjust food system is also fixed in place through ideological assumptions that cohere in each of these themes. These assumptions are not grounded in real facts about people but are socially constructed; in time and with repetition, they become real in people's minds. Furthermore, ideologies become sedimented in policy and therefore impact people in material ways. I should point out that even as I write about each theme separately, they are inextricably linked together and in practice much more difficult to parse out.

"People Who Do Not Want to Work and Will Not Work"

The tension at the heart of this book has to do with the third situation that Sahr describes—"people who do not want to work and will not work." This of course is not a fact, but a social and political myth. In this great American myth, these are the lazy and irresponsible people, "bad citizens," who do not take responsibility for their lifestyles. These are the folks who will do anything to get out of work. They take advantage of the system and live off the labor of good citizens. They do so because they have deep-seated character, moral, and spiritual flaws. This idea or ideological formation that there are people who "do not want to work and will not work" is a formidable one. It is the centerpiece of social and political debates in American society—even when not explicitly stated—and is constantly in circulation in American culture. This fundamental belief informs the way in which Americans give to charity, how they reach out to others, how they behave in work and nonwork environments, how they think about the problem of and solutions to hunger, and how they vote on policy (e.g., Gilens 1999). It can be found most blatantly in conservative discourses, but also in seemingly neutral liberal discourses. This belief is one of the cornerstones of neoliberal stigma.

I define *neoliberal stigma* as the otherizing and social-distancing phenomenon created through neoliberal political economic rationalities that operate across a range of cultural, political, and institutional practices. In the framework of neoliberal stigma, hard work, self-help, and self-reliance take center stage, consistent with Calvinist assumptions. However, in addition to these values, other meanings are attached, such as the glorification of wealth; economic responsibilities of citizenship (i.e., contribution to the bottom line or GDP); entrepreneurialism as a means to solve ethical and systemic issues; and the centrality of "choice" in the marketplace. When individuals fail to live up to the ideals of the marketplace, the consequence is an identification of difference, a separation of people into Us and Them, disapproval, and rejection. People who typically "fail" on neoliberal parameters are poor citizens, people of color, and other exploited groups, because they lack economic wealth—a necessary condition for citizenship in a neoliberal era. In a neoliberal framework, wealth is the unspoken criterion for humanization and the receipt of justice, a calculus, which then allows poor people to be denigrated, dehumanized, and delivered injustice. Neoliberal stigma expresses itself in communicative processes of framing, blaming, shaming, and silencing. However, unlike traditional Calvinist discourses, which tend to be explicit and harsh, neoliberal stigma is flexible and can also be found alongside more compassionate discourses. A key difference between how neoliberal stigma expresses itself via conservatives and liberals is with regards to religion; conservatives tend to believe that prayer and a personal relationship with God can solve problems of structural violence, whereas liberals tend to believe in the sufficiency of science and information in solving structural problems.

In his letter, Sahr weaves political, nationalistic, and theological threads together to explain the causes of hunger. Social distance between Us and Them—the latter being Sahr's third group—is produced through prescriptions about what it means to be a good citizen, where citizenship is tied to economic productivity and work is framed as dignity. In this framework, those who are economically underproductive are marked as lazy, deviant, and irresponsible, and not following God's way. In the opening of the letter, Sahr reinforces a key catchphrase in conservative thought—"teach a man to fish"—which he uses to prioritize individual hard work and entrepreneurialism as opposed to more systemic solutions. Sahr then gives a nod to nationalism by connecting hunger to the outsourcing of jobs: shame on us for causing "American" families to starve. This diatribe erases the fact that hunger in the United States is linked to global hunger—the commodification of food, land grabs by American agroindustries, and neoliberal policies.

The third category of people Sahr describes is a racially coded category; the fact that this racialization is *not* explicit is significant because neoliberal stigma typically occurs in a "color-blind" manner. In the wake of the civil rights era, whites have had a harder time expressing racism for fear of looking bad, but racism has not gone away; rather, it has taken on new forms of expression. Sociologist Bonilla-Silva (2010, 3) observes that the new racial ideology in place today is "color-blind racism" or "racism-lite" in which racial inequality is reproduced by practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial: "Instead of relying on name calling (niggers, Spics, Chinks), color-blind racism otherizes softly ("these people are human, too"); instead of proclaiming God placed minorities in the world in a servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not work hard enough; instead of viewing interracial marriage as wrong on a straight racial basis, it regards it as "problematic" because of concerns over the children, location, or the extra burden it places on couples. Yet this new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order."

Indeed, when it comes to welfare, Gilens (1999) notes that an important reason Americans hate welfare is because of the racialized beliefs the public holds about welfare recipients. He avers that race is the subject just beneath the surface of terms such as *welfare*, *urban*, *crime*, and *poverty*—terms used strategically to evoke people of color. The homeless beggar, the welfare queen, the gang member are strongly associated with minorities in the mass media and the public imagination. He writes: “Although political elites typically use a race-neutral language in discussing poverty and welfare, it is now widely believed that welfare is a ‘race-coded’ topic that evokes racial imagery and attitudes even when racial minorities are not explicitly mentioned” (67).

Several studies in the social sciences confirm these findings; for instance, one survey of racial stereotyping found that the “mere mention” of affirmative action made white respondents significantly more likely to agree with negative racial generalizations like “most blacks are lazy” (Sniderman and Carmines 1997). In short, even though Sahr does not depict the third category of people in explicit racial terms, the implication is clear.

Now we might argue that “Sahr did not mean it this way,” or perhaps he is just ignorant, unaware, or politically incorrect. Or perhaps I, the researcher, am reading too much into it. Perhaps. But what is made crystal clear in his letter is his standpoint or positionality in the world. In the arrogance of the writing, in his gaze of Others, Sahr betrays his whiteness. *Whiteness* is a “location of structural advantage,” a worldview, standpoint, or “place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society” (Frankenberg 1993, 1). In the social structure, the place or the point where Sahr is standing is right at the top, and he uses this position to gaze down at Others on the rungs beneath. In so doing, Sahr participates in maintaining the social order. Parker and Aggleton (2003, 17) argue that we should see stigma not as isolated phenomena or expressions of individual and cultural attitudes, but as central to the constitution of the social order: “Within such a framework, the construction of stigma (or, more simply, stigmatization) involves the marking of significant differences between categories of people, and through such marking, their insertion in systems or structures of power.” This is precisely what Sahr does: he marks out categories and differences between Us and Them thereby operating the levers of power necessary to maintain the social order. This is also what we will see many people do in the course of this book. Now, Sahr may not recognize this and he may not "mean" it, but intentionality is irrelevant because discourse still has psychological and material impacts on those it marks.

In another letter, Sahr betrays his whiteness in a more compassionate manner, although here it is the anachronistic nature of his discourse that is disturbing. Sahr reminisces about a song he used to sing in Sunday school:

> Jesus loves the little children,
> All the children of the world.
> Red and yellow, black and white,
> They are precious in God's sight.
> Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Given his age, Sahr would have sung this song between Jim Crow and the civil rights era; however, to be still thinking this way implies that he has lived a racially segregated life and has never had to think about the meaning of his own racial identity in the world. This is clearly not the song "red and yellow, black and white" people sing today when talking of racial equity. What they say instead, standing in solidarity with people of color, is Black Lives Matter and Native Lives Matter. If one has genuine feelings of compassion for people of color and if one is truly committed to Black liberation, "a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive" (Black Lives Matter 2018), then one should take one's cues from those fighting for their lives. One should stand in solidarity with people of color in *their* movements, saying in unison with them, yes, Black Lives Matter. Sunday school ditties from the 1960s just do not cut it anymore and they never have except in white institutions.

Many liberals will shake their heads in disgust at Sahr's racism and oppressive interpretation of scripture yet might harbor similar ideological orientations in which they blame the poor for their situations. Typically in these instances, science, health, evidence-based medicine, and the economy are used eloquently to justify stricter controls over the poor. Dominant discourses are rife with journalists and health experts wielding prohealth, antipoor, neoliberal batons at food assistance programs. For example, an article on the front page of the *New York Times* (2017) titled "In the Shopping Cart of a Food Stamp Household: Lots of Soda," puts on display the stereotypes associated with people who are food insecure and use assistance programs. The article by Anahad O' Connor suggests that a disproportionate amount of food stamp money is going toward unhealthful foods such as junk foods, sodas, and sugar-sweetened beverages. This is despite the fact that the USDA report actually found little difference between purchases made by SNAP households and other households. In a similar vein, Ludwig, Blumenthal, and Willett (2012), in an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, argued that growing health care costs are reasons to warrant restructuring programs like SNAP. They applaud the WIC program, which already imposes severe restrictions on food purchases by mothers. Instead of advocating for broad-based structural solutions—increasing the minimum wage, entitlements, providing child care subsidies, and removing price supports for industrial agriculture—these professionals advocate for policies to further discipline the poor. The cold calculus of neoliberal stigma is seen in this clincher: "The public pays for sugary drinks, candy, and other junk foods included in SNAP benefits twice: once at the time of purchase, and later for the treatment of diet-induced disease through Medicaid and Medicare" (2568). In these two articles the ideological assumption that food insecure people have poor decision-making skills results in recommendations for harsher systems of poverty governance. This is typically the way in which neoliberal stigma expresses itself among liberals: it appears rational and balanced in the interests of science, logic, and the economy, but denigrates minoritized groups in the process and in so doing maintains the status quo.

It is not surprising that in each of these articles, the voices of privilege displace the voices of the oppressed. The voices of the hungry, food insecure, and SNAP recipients are neither present nor represented. Poor people, single mums, single dads, and children—those who suffer the disproportionate burden of hunger and food insecurity—are absent from the discourse. As a pattern, the voices of those we hear in the texts correspond to their systemic location. Sahr, O'Connor, and Ludwig, Blumenthal, and Willett: their words betray normative masculinity and whiteness, the connection between "property, privilege, and paler skin" (Slocum 2007, 521). They are on the top of the social ladder looking down. Their words perpetuate a narrative that legitimizes the social order, in which some people are on top and others below. This kind of elitism is similar to racism of which Bonilla-Silva (2010, 8) writes: "Those at the bottom of the racial barrel tend to hold oppositional views and those who receive the manifold wages of whiteness tend to hold views in support of the racial status quo." Amidst the clanging of industrial, entrepreneurial, and political interests, there is a complete erasure of those at the bottom of the food system—people living with hunger and food insecurity (Pine and de Souza 2013). It has become normal today to talk about the poor without consulting them. The tacit assumption is that poverty is normal, ordinary, and the poor have nothing of value to offer and do not deserve representation (DiFazio 2006). Their silence is accomplished through discourses that shame and blame food insecure people as well as discourses that appear rationale, logical, balanced, and scientific, but that are in fact permeated with neoliberal values and assumptions. Even as responsibility is continually shifted and refocused from macro to micro, from system to individual, from government to community, from oppressor to oppressed, the people most affected—symbolically and structurally—are silenced.

The next section provides an overview of the key conceptual themes interwoven throughout this book. These themes taken together answer a fundamental question: Where does the stigma of hunger and food insecurity come from?

Stigma and the Political Economy of Stigma

The term *stigma* in its Greek roots refers to marks on the skin or tattoos made by a pointed object; historically, it was a technique used to mark slaves, criminals, and prisoners of war so as to recognize them in case they escaped (Jones 1987). Since then, the phenomenon of stigma has come to encompass both visible and invisible marks on bodies, in bodies, or even near bodies, as in *stigma symbols*, which refers to the signs and symbols that associate an individual or a group with a particular debased identity (Goffman 1963). For instance, food pantries and food stamps may be seen as stigma symbols because they come to stand in for the conditions of hunger, poverty, and welfare. Erving Goffman (1963, 3), who pioneered the work on stigma, defined *stigma* as a "deeply discrediting" attribute, wherein stigmatized individuals are believed to possess a characteristic or a trait conveying a devalued social identity. Stigmatizing processes include labeling, stereotyping, and separation of people into Us and Them, the end result of which is discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). Today stigma is seen as a multilevel concept, including *intrapersonal stigma*, which refers to the internalization of negative attitudes by the stigmatized; *interpersonal stigma*, or person-to-person discrimination; and *structural stigma*, which refers to societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized (Corrigan, Markowitz, and Watson 2004).

Critical perspectives on stigma advance a broader historical and sociopolitical understanding of the nature of power and privilege interlocked with stigma. Theorists lament that over the past sixty years, the central thrust of stigma research has been at the individual level with a focus on stereotypes, negative perceptions, and consequences, often to the exclusion of broader societal patterns that create and reinforce stigma (Link and Phelan 2014; Parker and Aggleton 2003). Parker (2012, 166) invites stigma researchers to move beyond Goffman's initial model of stigma as a "mark" or negatively valued difference and toward thinking about "stigma as social process fundamentally linked to power and domination" or the "political economy of stigma." Stigma and stigmatization function at the point of intersection of culture, power, and difference—and it is only by exploring the relationships among these categories that we can understand stigma not as isolated phenomena, or expressions of individual or cultural attitudes, but as central to the constitution of the social order (Parker and Aggleton 2003). The political economy of stigma thus focuses on "how stigma is used by individuals, communities and the state to produce and reproduce structures of social inequality. It also pushes us to examine the political economy of stigmatization and its links to social exclusion and how historically constructed forms of stigma are strategically deployed to produce and reproduce social inequalities" (Parker 2012, 166). Stigma in essence then is as much a function of power and privilege as it is about disenfranchisement and marginalization: stigma is tied to history, politics, and injustice at every level.

Ideological Formations, Discursive Practices, and Discursive Erasures

Ideology and ideological formations play a pivotal role in social processes such as stigma. According to van Dijk (1990, 1995, 2001), ideologies are similar to social cognitions in that they are shared by members of a group, abstracted from personal knowledge and experiences, and have undergone a process of generalization and normalization. However, ideologies are more fundamental social cognitions in that they reflect more basic aims, interests, and values of groups. Ideologies may be thought of as underlying presuppositions, basic convictions, and axiomatic or elemental beliefs that are the basis of sociopolitical cognitions of groups. Because of its elemental nature, ideology is able to bring together and “make sense” of a variety of different issues. For example, people’s specific attitudes about welfare, immigration, business outsourcing, and patriotism may all be based on a basic racist ideology. It is important to point out that unlike beliefs, where people are able to articulate “what they believe in,” individuals are usually unaware of the ideological dimensions of their positions and therefore are not committed to them. This is why to see Sahr articulate the ideological dimensions of his beliefs so explicitly is both surprising and helpful. It helps to make sense of his view on hunger and food insecurity—as well as the route he takes to solve the problem. Dominant ideologies are often accepted as nonideological commonsense assumptions about the world and may be used by groups to disenfranchise other groups. Dominant ideologies demonstrate a very typical strategic pattern of flattering the in-group, while derogating the out-group. They exhibit positive self-representation and negative other-representation and an opposition between Us and Them (van Dijk 1995, 2001).

Ideology, discourse, and practice are inextricably linked together. The term *ideological formation* or *ideological discursive formation* (IDF) denotes the collapsing of the plane of ideology into that of discourse (Fairclough 1989). Ideologies find expression in discourse—the realm of cultural meanings, messages, knowledge, and knowledge systems that human beings operate within—or more simply in social practices, talk, and text (Fiske 1991). The mutual influence of (discursive) representation and (material) reality has been long and well-established across disciplines, a notion central to Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory. Ideological formations influence practices, procedures, structures, and institutions in the material world. Stigma is rooted in ideology, and thus the same interaction holds true. Microlevel occurrences of stigma do not exist in isolation but are continuous with the macrolevel context of politics and culture. Stigma is enacted, mediated, and managed through discourse, and discourse in turn influences material realties that create conditions for disenfranchisement (Fiske 1991). Indeed, Harter et al. (2005, 312) define *stigma* as the "structuring of social relations that reproduces definitions of outsider and other."

In this book, I use terms such as *absence*, *silence*, and *erasure* to signal the fact that it is not just visible practices that should be interrogated, but also *discursive erasures*—those practices that have been rendered invisible and are hidden or absent from discourse. In so doing, I am drawing specifically on the *culture-centered approach* (CCA) to communication, in which communication scholar Mohan Dutta (2007) argues that it is the absence and erasure of voices from dominant epistemic structures that produces material disenfranchisement. The CCA is grounded in a body of scholarship called *subaltern studies*, of which Dutta writes: "Subaltern refers to the condition of 'being under.' The subaltern voice is marked by its absence, by not having been noticed. Therefore, subaltern studies scholarship interrogates the ellipses, absences, and silences that are marked in the dominant writings of knowledge. Through the articulation of these absences, subaltern studies seek to create alternative ways of knowing the world, opening up discursive spaces to marginalized voices" (310). Because the subaltern is in a positon of having been erased, the goal of the research is to identify absences and erasures, as well as to recover voices, by asking questions such as: Whose voice is missing? Who is unheard? Who is not speaking? What is absent or missing from the story? Who is not in the picture? Who is not at the table? Who is trying to get a seat at the table, but cannot?

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism can be understood in at least three ways: political economic doctrine, subjectivities, and governmentality (Larner 2000). As a political economic project, a core belief of neoliberalism is that an unfettered market with less government will provide more efficient services and jobs. Neoliberalization involves the privatization of public resources and spaces, the minimization of labor costs, reductions in public expenditures, and elimination of regulations for private corporations. Neoliberalization also involves the devolution of responsibility from the state to private actors and entities—a primary reason we have seen a growth in charitable food assistance over the last thirty years (Rose and Miller 1992).

In terms of subjectivities, neoliberalism influences personal identity and relationships through the creation of *neoliberal subjectivities*, a term denoting the ways in which market logic increasingly pervades the thoughts and practices of individuals (Rose 1989). The ideals of individualism, efficiency, profit, and self-help have become internalized within individuals, to the exclusion of other social determinants of well-being. Massey (2015, 26) argues that "vocabularies of the economy" have altered ourselves and our everyday social relationships; "this vocabulary of customer, consumer, choice, markets and self interest moulds both our conception of ourselves and our understanding of and relationship to the world." There has been a "semantic stretching" of market terminology from the realm of business and economics to other spheres of social life (Holborow 2015). Social relationships are defined by monetary transactions. Terms such as *equality*, *social justice*, and *public* are displaced by the language of self-interest and competition (Massey 2015). Holborow (2015) notes that the cluster of neoliberal keywords such as *output*, *entrepreneur*, and *choice* are part of the ideological glue that hold the neoliberal narrative together. She writes: "It redefines the relationship between the individual and society with social behavior being guided not by collective institutions and interaction, but by supply and demand, by entrepreneurs and consumer choice, by individual companies and individual people. Social activity and exchange becomes judged on their degree of conformity to market culture" (34). Neoliberalism offers a social order in which equality, collectivism, social justice, and public good are dismissed in favor of an individualistic bootstraps ideology.

Thirdly, neoliberalism can be viewed in terms of *governmentality*, a Foucauldian concept, implying "a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance" (Larner 2000, 6). For Foucault ([1963] 1994), in the modern era, social control or governance was exerted not by direct coercion, but through the process of creating *docile bodies*—individuals who knew the parameters for self-regulation, parameters that were reinforced by procedures that acted as regulatory measures or "disciplines." A key characteristic of neoliberal governmentality lies in the process of creating citizens capable of self-regulation. Larner argues that though neoliberalism may mean less government, it does not mean less governance. Indeed, there is more governance today than ever before, but today regulation occurs through practices designed to govern individuals from afar. Welfare agencies, for instance, are managed through technologies of governance such as budgeting, accounting, and outcome metrics (Bondi 2005). This is also seen in Sahr's letter, in which he invites a kind of self-monitoring by creating three categories of people by which we can surveil ourselves and others.

The Stigma of Poverty and Welfare

The condition of poverty has, since the beginning of modern Western society, carried an array of negative meanings. Chaim Waxman (1983), in *The Stigma of Poverty*, observes that the stigma of poverty attributes to the poor a status of being "less than human." The poor are thought of as having a weak character, lazy, irresponsible, and not interested in educating or improving themselves. Judgments about the poor include the belief that the poor have no morality and engage in stealing, mugging, and sexual promiscuity. The question of who is poor and to which group of people stigma attaches is a subject of debate. In 1966, sociologist David Matza argued that it was almost impossible to define precisely which segment of the poor population constituted the "disreputable poor"; however the condition of pauperism came closest to it, including people such as the "dregs," "newcomers," "skidders," and the "infirm." Although paupers—including beggars, tramps, criminals, and prostitutes—form the core of the stigmatized group, stigma and its effects can be found throughout the lower class. Stigma occurs with decreasing severity, such that the further removed one is from the core, the less severe the stigma—but in general, lower-class culture is seen as pathological, abnormal, and contradictory to an acceptable way of living. The experience of stigma is also shaped by how visible a particular "mark" is. For instance, homelessness is often more visible and disruptive than other forms of poverty because people lack homes and are therefore subject to the gaze of others. Because people without homes also experience challenges with cleaning and grooming, their impoverishment is more discernible (Waxman 1983).

In the West, the stigma of poverty is thoroughly intertwined with the stigma of welfare, going all the way back to the Middle Ages, when English Poor Laws enforced a variety of harsh measures intended to stigmatize the poor (Waxman 1983). The laws started a several-hundred-year trend in which poverty became a problem of the individual, rather than a social or structural problem. This is also when poverty governance as a system of social control was instituted. Poverty was considered a negative condition and a result of idleness and moral failure, and welfare policy was primarily concerned with maintaining public order rather than care of the poor on their own account. Repressive policies during the Middle Ages were intended to stigmatize or set poor people apart from others; for instance, those receiving public assistance were required to wear distinctive clothing and badges. These policies were legitimized by the belief that only the process of rigid resocialization could eliminate the moral defects of poverty. Later reforms to the Poor Laws separated the "deserving poor" from the "undeserving poor" based on the perceived health and ability of individuals—a distinction that goes all the way back to Calvinism, which saw work as an absolute duty and the best way to please God (Waxman 1983).

During the eighteenth century, under the guise of science, the theory of social Darwinism led to increasing antipathy toward welfare and increased poverty governance (Waxman 1983). The "survival of the fittest" theory led to many reforms of the Poor Laws, including the doctrine of less eligibility, which stated that persons on assistance had to be kept in a condition worse than that of the lowest-paid worker so as to provide a strong incentive to work. This was based on the suspicion that poor people would avoid work if there was no incentive to do it—a suspicion that is alive and well today, as seen in Sahr's letter.

Over the last three decades, discourses of suspicion surrounding the poor and those on welfare have been taken up, perfected, and unleashed in full force, coinciding with neoliberal and conservative values. In 1984, Charles Murray, an American libertarian social scientist, published *Losing Ground*, a book that was the seminal statement of the conservative position on poverty and social welfare and an influential text during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton eras (Elisha 2011; FitzGerald 2017). This text was crucial to setting the stage for a disciplinary and punitive public assistance system and ushered in a more muscular form of poverty governance. Murray's main thesis was that social welfare programs increased poverty rather than eliminated it by creating incentives that rewarded short-sighted behavior. Murray argued that the behavior of the poor was shaped by economically rational choices; welfare programs created a context in which the rational choice was *not* to be independent and *not* to get ahead in the world. Simply put, according to Murray, it had become profitable to be poor. The solution then was to implement a system that asserted a tricky balance between rights and duties linked to work, moral values, and family values, all of which would reduce the evils of welfare dependency. This is the ideology behind poverty governance even today: receiving public assistance must be made difficult—to the point of being unbearable—such that only those who “genuinely need” the support will seek it out.

Intersectionality: Race, Gender, and Whiteness

The feminist concept of *intersectionality* refers to the interactivity of social structures of race, class, and gender in the experience of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1991). In her work on identity politics and violence against women of color, Crenshaw argues that the experiences of Black women are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism; however, these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. In other words, discourses are either about gender or race, but never about both; as such, Black women are marginalized within both spheres. Intersectionality addresses the life experiences of individuals and communities that are *multiplicatively oppressed*—whose lives are structured by two or more disadvantageous categories. Conversely, intersectionality also implicates those who are *multiplicatively privileged*—who experience multiple systemic privileges. For instance, in the context of stigma, this means that individuals whose identities cut across a variety of stigmatized social categories such as poor/brown/female will experience stigma more severely than those who are poor/white/female. The next section unpacks the stigma of race, gender, and whiteness as they relate to systems of disenfranchisement and privilege.

With regards to race, in many ways, Fanon’s (1967, 172; emphasis in original) bleak words—“Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro”—are still relevant today and applicable to an ever-broadening group of racial and ethnic minorities. Race is not a fixed or natural category; it does not have a biological essence but is a result of discursive, material, and social processes. Racial groups are social creations and reflect a process of both affiliation and external ascription that are constituted in structures and everyday practices (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). Racial stigma is the tacit association of "Blackness" with "unworthiness"; within this mindset, social disparities become sites for the production of stigma, particularly when there is the belief that the disparity is the fault of those who lag behind. Historically, the focus of the antiblack frame was on physical and moral attributes of Black Americans (color, hair, lips, apelike, smell, immoral, criminal, dangerous, lazy, oversexed, ungrateful, rebellious, and disorganized families). These stereotypes were geared toward ensuring white settlers as the true and rightful owners of land and resources. Referred to as *inherited racial stigma*, the root cause of racial stigma can be traced back to the institution of chattel slavery and the associated rituals and customs that supported the master-slave hierarchy (Feagin 2013). Feagin observes that racism and capitalism "emerged together as part of the *same* political economic system that took root in European countries and their colonies in North America. In this early period, thus, modern capitalism *was* systemic racism, and systemic racism *was* modern capitalism" (25; emphasis in original). Proslavery writing emphasized the savagery, cannibalism, devil worship, and licentiousness of Africans; at the time, scientific arguments—such as those grounded in craniometry—were used to explain the alleged mental and physical inferiority of Blacks (Feagin 2013; Washington 2006).

Today, race is marked by an active suppression of "race" as a legitimate topic in public discourse. In the Jim Crow era, the social standing of Blacks was explained in terms of biological and moral inferiority, but in a neoliberal era, the social standing of Blacks is explained in terms of market dynamics and cultural limitations, such as a poor work ethic or lack of personal responsibility (Goldberg 2009). Racial stigma flourishes because of the "collective forgetting" that has occurred via the sanitizing of collective memories and national narratives (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Feagin 2013). These discursive erasures have resulted in the weakening of collective memories of oppression while constructing and reinforcing positive, often fictional memories of history. For example, the story of genocide, slavery, theft, and colonization is reframed as a story about modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and wealth (Feagin 2013). Because this bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized, even reasonable white Americans have difficulty recognizing present-day racial realities accurately.

In addition to race, the stigma of welfare is deeply contoured by its association with women, poor women, and unwed mothers, tied to notions of irresponsibility, illegitimacy, and promiscuity (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Seccombe (2011) argues that the welfare debates of the 1990s hinged on changing assumptions about the role of women in the marketplace and the family, where a patriarchal dictum about women being under the control and supervision of men was prominent. An analysis of newspaper articles published in the years before welfare reform (1995–1996) showed several references to the (incorrect) fact that women on welfare "don't work"; they were described as "teen mothers," "overly fertile," or "drug users" (Hancock 2004). During this time, the tropes of the "poor black woman," "welfare mother," and "welfare queen" took center stage. Feminist scholars Fraser and Gordon (1994, 311) write: "The expression *welfare dependency* evokes the image of 'the welfare mother,' [who] often figures as a young, unmarried black woman (perhaps even a teenager) of uncontrolled sexuality." These patriarchal notions continue to be structured into the welfare system itself. Fraser and Gordon observe that governmental entitlement programs are deeply gendered, such that the more "feminine"-track programs of SNAP and Medicaid are deemed "welfare," while other, more "masculine" programs of social security and unemployment benefits are deemed legal entitlements and therefore not stigmatized. Thus, even though both tracks are dependent on government support, the "masculine" programs posit recipients as "rights-bearers" and "purchasing consumers," whereas the feminine track continues "the private charity tradition of searching out the deserving few among the many chiselers" (321).

In thinking about race, there is a tendency to focus on people of color while overlooking whites as a racial group implicated in racial issues. The study of whiteness reflects a new approach to understanding the continuing dominance of whites today (Frankenberg 1993; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Nakayama and Martin 1999). It is based on the recognition that in a racialized social system, all actors are raced, and race has implications for all actors because it disenfranchises some and privileges others. The late Ruth Frankenberg, a white woman and a pioneer of the field, observed in *White Women, Race Matters* (1993) that whiteness has at least three dimensions to it: "First, it is a position of structural advantage, associated with 'privileges' of the most basic kind, including for example, higher wages, reduced chances of being impoverished, longer life, better access to health care, better treatment by the legal system, and so on. … Second, whiteness is a 'standpoint' or place from which to look at oneself, others and society. Thirdly, it carries with it a set of ways of being in the world, a set of cultural practices, often not named as 'white' by white folks, but looked upon instead as 'American' or 'normal'" (54). Similarly, Kobayashi and Peake (2000, 394) observe that whiteness is a position of normalcy and moral superiority "from which to construct a landscape of what is same and what is different," and it allows other places such as foreign tourist sites to be subjected to a white gaze. Whiteness is the ordinary power that white people have. It is the hiddenness of whiteness that allows for its conflation with existing social norms, values, and institutions such that white cultural interests are often confounded with national interests—and meanings of citizenship. Conversely, nonwhite cultures are seen as deviating from the norm and are thus inferior to white cultures.

Participating in whiteness means continuing to see the world through a "white racial frame," which is ubiquitous and operates at multiple levels (Feagin 2013). Feagin observes that the white racial fame has a strong positive orientation to whites, highlighting white superiority, virtue, moral goodness, and action, and a strong negative orientation to racial "others." He writes in the preface: "The white racial frame includes a broad and persisting *set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, interlinked interpretations and narratives, and visual images*. It also includes *racialized emotions* and *racialized reactions to language accents* and *imbeds inclinations to discriminate*. This white racial frame, like most social frames, operates to assist people in defining, interpreting, conforming to, and acting in their everyday social worlds" (xi; emphasis in original). People are socialized into whiteness and the white racial frame in multiple arenas—at home, at school, through the media, work, politics, and corporate decisions. Importantly, whiteness studies recognizes that though racism is easily identified in its more vulgar forms, more often than not it occurs today insidiously through ellipses, defensiveness, microaggressions, and in the machinations of policy—in ways that cannot easily be detected as "racist." Simply put, the "crazy right-wing" person flying the confederate flag and the white liberal with the Black Lives Matter sticker may have similar responses in their everyday lives to situations about race: they may both live racially segregated lives, cross the street when they see a person of color, volunteer at food pantries and homeless shelters, and be against affirmative action policies, although for allegedly different reasons.

Religion and Faith-Based Organizing

Despite declining patterns of formal religious adherence, faith-based organizations (FBOs) are a dominant source of community engagement and service provision today. FBOs employ a wide range of political theories, ideologies, and practices, ranging from "faith-permeated" organizations, in which there are explicit references to faith, to more secular or postsecular organizations, in which humanistic values are prioritized (Adkins, Occhipinti, and Hefferan 2012). A key distinction between evangelical and liberal positions found in the West is in their attitudes toward social action, which cut right through denominations (Beaumont and Cloke 2012). The more liberal theology accepts a less dogmatic understanding of God by interpreting scripture through critical and literary analysis, in which human reason, tradition and cultural and political climate are applied to Biblical interpretation. On the other side, the evangelical position has four main priorities: the need for personal conversion, a belief in the Bible as the infallible word of God, the centrality of the cross at the heart of the salvation message, and the need for evangelism. These distinctions delineate two very separate territories of Christianity with regard to attitudes toward social action (Beaumont and Cloke 2012).

Scriptures are multivocal as such different communities end up emphasizing different voices in Scripture depending on their ideological orientations. A key distinction between evangelical and liberal positions can be found in the *gospel of prosperity* and *liberation theology* perspectives. The gospel of prosperity has a long history of stigmatizing the poor (intentionally and unintentionally) by proposing a direct relationship among the attainment of one's goals, material success, and belief in Christ. Quite simply, those who are rich are blessed by God and, by implication, those who are poor are not. Waxman (1983, 80) explains: "Just as the Lutheran and Calvinist Protestant tenets of the calling and predestination led to a view of work as inherently positive and material rewards a sign of chosenness and virtue, they unintentionally provided a new religious legitimation for the perception of the poor as immoral. If material rewards for hard work as taken as a sign of moral worth, then wealth tends to become identified with worth and the absence of wealth with the absence of moral worth. … Thus, the Protestant ethic provided a new theological legitimation for repressive policies towards the underserving poor."

The gospel of prosperity is still preached today around the world. In the Zimbabwean context, Bornstein (2005) has shown that Christian organizations such as World Vision construct development as something that can be crafted from "within" individuals. These discourses mask the economic and political forces beyond community control and instead locate responsibility for development among the poor. In the United States, Sager and Stephens (2005) found a tendency in their analysis of sermons to blame the homeless for their problems; the message was that poverty was a result of spiritual failing and that with proper religious commitment, the homeless too could experience material rewards. In short, if the homeless just "got religion," they would not be homeless.

The prosperity gospel finds its counter in the *liberation theology* and *Black liberation theology* perspectives, in which God is identified not as a God of the rich and powerful, but as the "God of the oppressed"—also the title of a seminal book by the late Black theologian James Cone (1997). For Cone, eschatological freedom or a vision of a new heaven and earth was essential and fundamental to the survival of oppressed groups. For people oppressed by physical and material enslavement and with little wealth to show, power came via the presence and Spirit of God. God did not provide an abundance of wealth but an abundance of spirit. Paulo Freire (1970), a forerunner of the liberation theology movement in South America, interpreted the gospels of Christ as a call for social justice. Asserting the interconnection between spiritual and political freedoms, Freire underscored that inequalities among human beings were not the result of God's will but of conditions perpetrated by human action.

More recently, scholarship has interrogated the convergences (and divergences) between faith and neoliberalism in the context of social action. Mona Atia (2012, 809) refers to the melding of religiosity and neoliberal economic rationales in Islamic FBOs as "pious neoliberalism," which she defines as the "discursive combination of religion and economic rationale in a manner that encourages individuals to be proactive and entrepreneurial in the interest of furthering their relationship with God." Atia examined how Khaled, a well-known transnational Islamic revival and development effort in the Middle East, calls on Muslims to become pious and entrepreneurial subjects. Rather than drawing on discourses of social justice and equity, organizational narratives draw on self-help and management science in service to faith doctrines. The discourses are designed to cultivate neoliberal subjects who work toward financial investments, self-improvement, productivity, and entrepreneurship. Atia shows how piety and neoliberalism intermingle while highlighting the contradictory aspects of neoliberalism. Here religious and economic rationale do not compete or contradict each other but, similar to conservative Christian discourses, blend seamlessly together.

These fundamental differences in faith beliefs have enormous implications for how social action is practiced. For conservatives, individual conversion is the means to overcome personal failure; as such, their social action work focuses on individual reform and empowerment. This can be seen in Sahr's letter, in which the implicit recommendation for the third group of people he mentions is a change of heart and a change of their lazy ways; there is no Biblical responsibility toward this group of people. For liberals, poverty is seen as unjustly caused by social, economic, and political structures, so social action involves providing support to individuals, but also getting involved in resistance movements, advocacy, and policy work (Occhipinti 2005). However, here efforts are constrained by the problematic tensions embedded in whiteness, which wants to reach out to the Other, but at the same time maintain the wages of whiteness. Contrary to Sahr's position, a vastly different framing of hunger can be seen in more liberal Christian and Jewish traditions, as explicated by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC, n.d.):

> The Talmud explains that each Jewish community must establish a public fund to provide food for the hungry, and our sages explain that feeding the hungry is one of our most important responsibilities on earth: "When you are asked in the world to come, 'What was your work?' and you answer: 'I fed the hungry,' you will be told: 'This is the gate of the Lord, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry'" (Midrash to Psalm 118:17).

Providing several scriptural references to reinforce its position, RAC advocates for better public policy—policies that increase SNAP benefits and funding for antihunger programs.

Conclusion

The problem at the heart of this book has to do with the belief circulating in American society that laziness and irresponsibility are the true causes of poverty—a belief codified in Sahr's description of a category of people who "do not want to work and will not work." Age-old welfare discourses combine with new meanings in a neoliberal era to unleash a more subtle and nuanced antagonism toward the poor and minoritized groups, captured in the term *neoliberal stigma*. The loci of these ideological formations are complex and intertwined, coming from religious, economic, and political domains. Neoliberal stigma relies on an incessant refocusing of narratives from the macro to the micro, from the system to the individual, from whiteness to brownness, from socioeconomic conditions to problems of morality, spirituality, and character. Neoliberal stigma is flexible and though it is more obvious in conservative discourse, it can also be found among folks across the political spectrum.

Neoliberal stigma has important implications for practice and policy; it has the effect of reinforcing individual-level solutions to poverty and enforcing harsher systems of poverty governance. Studies in political science show that Americans tend to attribute poverty to individual shortcomings and a "lack of effort" on the part of poor people (Feagin 1975; Kluegel and Smith 1986). In evaluating the causes of poverty, people place more importance on poor people's behavioral characteristics—such as the lack of thrift, poor money management, and lack of effort, ability, and talent, as well as loose morals and drunkenness—rather than on structural reasons such as low wages, scarcity of jobs, poor schools, and racial discrimination (Feagin 1975). The failure of whites to see the systematic connections between history and the present results in people being blamed for disparities and for "reaping what they have sown." These beliefs have important consequences for policy, such that Americans typically express greater support for the principle of helping disadvantaged groups than for actual policies aimed at enacting those principles (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Contrary to what many theorists believed, racism and racialized thinking have not been annihilated with industrialization and modernization. In fact, racism has already been linked to neoliberal policies that negatively impact the livelihood, health, and opportunities for people in the African and Caribbean regions, as well as within the United States (Giroux 2014;

Goldberg 2009; Klein 2007). There is little disagreement today that racial ideologies played heavily into welfare reform and workfarist policies; the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 disproportionately affected African Americans and communities of color (Soss et al. 2004).

In the end, we might say, “Well, Sahr did not mean it like that,” “he is ignorant and unaware,” or that “he is politically incorrect” and “he really cares about helping people,” or that I, the researcher, am reading too deeply into it. However, Sahr’s letter and the other texts depicted in this chapter are part of the massive deluge of discourses circulating in American society that reinforce stigma against the poor and minoritized groups and carve out demarcations between Us and Them. Regardless of intention, these narratives directly impact the health, well-being, food security, and livelihoods of citizens and play a role in maintaining the social order.

This is a section of doi:10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001

Feeding the Other

Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

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Citation:

Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries
By: Rebecca T. de Souza
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001
ISBN (electronic): 9780262352789
Publisher: The MIT Press
Published: 2019

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Libraries

The MIT Press

MIT Press Direct

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This book was set in ITC Stone Serif Std and ITC Stone Sans Std by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: De Souza, Rebecca, author.
Title: Feeding the other : whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries / Rebecca de Souza.
Description: Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, [2019] | Series: Food, health, and the environment | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018036775| ISBN 9780262039819 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780262536769 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Food banks--Minnesota--Case studies. | Poor--Minnesota--Case studies. | Stigma (Social psychology) | Social stratification. | Paternalism. | Racism.
Classification: LCC HV696.F6 D399 2019 | DDC 363.8/8309776--dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018036775

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1