

A NARRATIVE GOAL FOR ENABLING MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

IDENTIFYING BELIEFS
TO SUPPORT A
POVERTY-FREE FUTURE:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

HARMONY LABS

December 2025

TO ASSESS PROGRESS in eliminating poverty we need a clear articulation of our current position and desired destination. We cannot evaluate whether narrative interventions are effective without first defining what success looks like. By creating a comprehensive set of measures we can determine if we're achieving the necessary shifts in individuals' beliefs that will lead to systemic change.

This literature review synthesizes existing research to help define the "narrative goal" for enabling mobility from poverty and, ultimately, ending poverty. This narrative

goal represents the minimum set of beliefs people will hold once our efforts have succeeded. A substantial shift towards the narrative goal represents real progress toward a society where everyone can flourish.

While not an exhaustive review of the literature on poverty, economic mobility, or systems change, this synthesis organizes the psychological and systemic constructs associated with narratives about poverty and flourishing. Four key insights emerged, each informing our narrative goal and measurement framework:

1. POVERTY AS ISOLATION:

Poverty is not merely a lack of income, but a profound disconnection from the social and physical networks that provide opportunity.

2. THE NECESSITY OF BOTH INDIVIDUAL ACTION AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE:

Ending poverty isn't achieved through a single solution or action. Instead, it requires a network of indirect, interconnected efforts that have complex, emergent effects.

3. THE POSSIBILITY OF ENDING POVERTY:

We can mend the opportunity network so that poverty is not an inevitable outcome, and that everyone has the capacity to weather setbacks and access the resources needed to reach and sustain financial stability and resilience.

4. FLOURISHING AS THE GOAL:

The vision extends beyond ending poverty to enabling flourishing, which means more than financial success. It encompasses connection, autonomy, and resilience.

THESE FOUR PILLARS represent the fundamental beliefs diverse audiences in the U.S. must hold, in order to achieve a poverty-free future. They guide our measurement framework and inform our next phase of research:

conducting survey-based studies to understand current beliefs and attitudes about poverty and flourishing held by different audiences, and enabling us to better target and evaluate narrative interventions.

MOBILITY FROM POVERTY AS THE CHALLENGE

Illustrations by
CHRISTIAN
GRAILINGEN

*A Narrative Goal
for Enabling Mobility
from Poverty*

MANY ECONOMIC EXPERTS AGREE that economic mobility is diminishing in the United States, that rising inequality is part of the problem, and that the problem is big (see Haroon & Harrison, 2024 for a review). But experts actually disagree about what, precisely, the problem is. Haroon and Harrison (2024, P. 3) assert that the problem is a lack of economic mobility itself:

Critical to the promise of the American dream is the expectation of intergenerational mobility. Invoked in ubiquitous phrases such as “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,” “rags to riches,” and “self-made,” an enduring U.S. economic story is that if someone works hard enough throughout their educational and professional careers, they can reasonably expect to be better off than their parents.

But is it really just as important for young people born into the middle and upper classes to exceed their parents’ financial success as it is for young people born into poverty to be able to do so? Continuous measures of economic mobility like intergenerational

rank shift tend to imply all mobility is good mobility or that all movement “up” is good.

But some experts assert that “economic mobility” is a metric imperfectly operationalizing something much more important, especially when the goal is mobility from poverty. Acs et al. (2018, P. 7) quote John A. Powell as saying:

Poverty is not just about a lack of money. It’s about a lack of power.

Economist Amartya Sen defined poverty as capability deprivation: not simply a lack of income, but a lack of real freedoms and opportunities to achieve outcomes people value (Sen, 1999). By Sen’s definition, people experiencing poverty don’t just have less money than other people; they are deprived of choices. In this model, the transition from social class to social class is incremental: a matter of gaining access to more choices. The transition from poverty to “not-poverty” is transformational; it is a matter of gaining access to choices.

Isolation, not just income, as the key barrier

MANY OF US HAVE HEARD about “systemic determinants” of poverty, but recent research has illuminated more precisely what the issues with the system are. People experiencing poverty are isolated by missing bridges to opportunity. While others have social networks and physical access to build financial stability, people experiencing poverty are stuck on isolated economic islands with no bridges to better circumstances (Chetty et al., 2023).

Those economic islands can be geographic places, where available jobs and transportation options limit economic participation. Raj Chetty’s team’s research

confirms the obvious disadvantage that people experiencing poverty face when living in job-poor neighborhoods. They also struggle to gain financial stability when they live in a place with limited transportation options (Chetty & Hendren, 2015). Most Americans have to travel to work, and the absence of local jobs or a transportation network make economic participation impossible for many people (e.g., Gobillon et al., 2007). Research shows that job decentralization has moved employment opportunities away from central cities to suburbs, creating spatial barriers for low-income workers who often lack reliable

transportation (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Center for American Progress, 2022).

Ideally, people could follow jobs, but that requires capital, and skyrocketing housing costs have forced low-wage workers further from those core urban areas with growing opportunity (Center for American

Progress, 2022; Urban Institute, 2019). High housing costs in job-rich areas create a spatial mismatch where low-wage workers are either forced to reside in job-poor areas with expensive commutes, or live in high-cost areas they cannot afford (Center for American Progress, 2022; Hsieh & Moretti, 2019).

Cross-class connections as a bridge to opportunity

THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY PHYSICAL ISOLATION are compounded by other systemic barriers, such as sparse social connections. Weak social ties are the key to overcoming isolation, and social scientists agree that these connections have been declining across the US for decades (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 1995). We just aren't meeting that many new people (Putnam, 2000).

The importance of bridges to opportunity through social connections is clear in the data—children in poverty who have two parents are more likely to move out of poverty (Chetty et al., 2022); people who know others with good jobs are more likely

to get good jobs (McDonald, 2015).

So, the isolated economic islands can also exist within social networks. Despite widespread belief, for instance, that education in general is a pathway to economic mobility (or to doing better over time), it's much less effective as a catalyst for mobility out of poverty specifically. Chetty and his team (2023) discovered that, for young people raised in poverty, getting a college degree was effective in helping them move up only if they attended a school where they formed social connections across class lines. Chetty and his colleagues (2022) refer to cross-class connections as economic capital, and they show that people in higher classes are much more likely to be connected with people in high social classes than are people experiencing poverty.

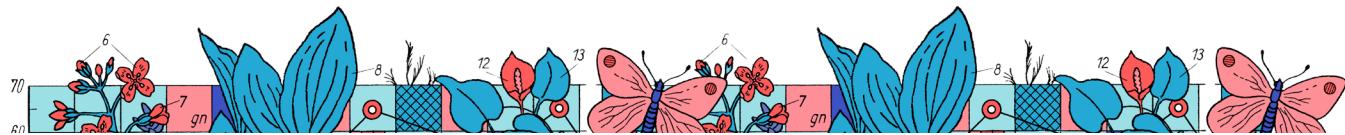
That means that, as the social fabric has deteriorated, people in poverty haven't necessarily lost more social connections than everyone else. Instead, they likely started with fewer connections to begin with. When everyone loses one professional or cross-class connection, most people still have others to fall back on. But for people in poverty, losing that one connection might mean being completely cut off from the broader economy.

The problems caused by physical isolation are compounded by other systemic barriers, such as sparse social connections.

Pillar 1: Poverty as Isolation

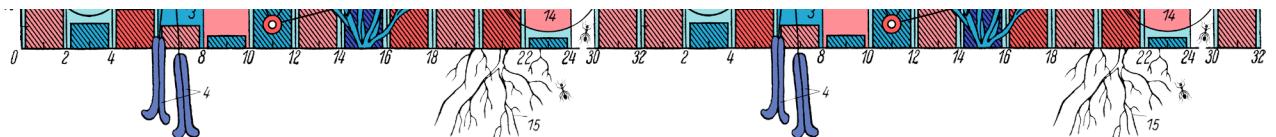
AS PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY are forced further from opportunity, and the network of acquaintance weakens, some

people and communities are increasingly isolated islands in the national economy, denied the social and physical bridges to participation.



PROBLEM:

People in the US experience poverty because they are disconnected from the opportunity network others have access to, not because of their own personal shortcomings.



DISTRIBUTED, OBLIQUE CHANGES TO INDIVIDUALS AND STRUC- TURES AS THE MECHANISMS

CLEARLY, MOBILITY FROM POVERTY requires repair to social and physical systems of opportunity. But it's important to recognize that humans are bad at understanding what causes systemic behavior, as pointed out by systems thinkers (Sweeney & Sterman, 2000). While our guesses about *where* to intervene are often right (all those bridges), our guesses about *how* to intervene are often wrong. Meadows (1999) observed, for instance, that global experts understand that the leverage point in economies for solving poverty is “growth”, but that most experts are trying to push that lever in the wrong direction.

Kay (2012) observes that trying to head directly to a systemic objective often results in failure because an emergent phenomenon is not a mirror of its causes. (We'll get to this in a moment.) The solution to systemic poverty isn't for everyone to trans-

fer cash to people experiencing poverty. That would be an “isomorphic” solution or one where each individual does the same thing and that thing is a solution which mirrors the problem. Instead, the solution emerges obliquely, likely through education access, infrastructure development, local economic initiatives, social innovations, and housing solutions that create unexpected feedback loops.

We already know about this complexity, but to know that something is complex is not to know where to start. Kay (2012) asserts that we can only find the solution by working on the issue, because it is exactly the process of solving that will lead us to discover the solution. If the precise set of steps toward success cannot be known ahead of time, we need a strategic principle from which we can reason about each step as we proceed.

A little background in how systems work can help.

Simple individual behaviors create complex systemic effects

BECAUSE HUMANS ARE NATURAL STORYTELLERS, our intuitions often lead us to describe systemic phenomena as we would tell a story with a hero and other specialized characters. In the early 20th century, some scientists believed that birds must be directly communicating or even using “natural telepathy” to coordinate their movements, with the idea that a leader or a few specialized individuals guided the rest of the flock (Selous, 1931).

In 1987, however, Reynolds demonstrated that the most complex flocking (or murmuration) dynamics could emerge from programming each bird with precisely the same simple rules: separation (avoid crowding neighbors), alignment (steer toward the average heading of nearby flockmates), and cohesion (move toward the

average position of the group).

None of these individual causes mirrors the shape of any bird murmuration. None of the rules is “make a V shape”. The V shape is “emergent” potentially from all the individuals’ following the same set of basic rules.

Just as Selous tried to explain flocking with complex individual choices, it is common for people to explain poverty by telling stories about individual poor people as protagonists striving (or not) for success. When we reason like this, we assume that the effect we want, which is the end of poverty, would be caused by each affected individual making choices to end their own poverty.

But in Reynolds’ model, if each bird were simply reprogrammed to maintain a slightly larger separation gap, the shape of

a flock—and the fate of its marginal members—would change drastically. And it appears that's part of what has happened in the US social network. Shifts in the labor market, universal isolation imposed by COVID, transfer of real social interaction to parasocial simulation on Instagram are all reprogramming events that reset many, many people to slightly change their flocking behavior (Haidt, 2024; Kovacs et al., 2021). Each of us is drawn to social connection just a little less than we were previously, and the people with the fewest crossclass social connections have experienced negative economic consequences while other groups, like young men, may be experiencing other emergent

consequences like health and well-being decline (Umberson, Lin, & Cha, 2022).

Reestablishing the economic capital of people experiencing poverty doesn't necessarily require each of them to make one rich friend. Nor does it necessarily require each rich person to seek out people experiencing poverty. If the problem arose in part from all of us just having fewer connections, then part of the solution could be as simple (to explain, not to do) as all of us making more connections. That wouldn't look like "fixing poverty", but it could tighten up the network, reconnect isolated communities and people, and have important emergent economic effects.

Social structures constrain individual behaviors

EVEN WHEN ALL THE INDIVIDUALS are operating according to relatively simple rules, the structures of societies do constrain the expressions of those rules. Leading systems dynamics researcher Donella Meadows (1999) names 12 key leverage points in systems including many which operate on structural constraints. Examples include "constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards)" and "the structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures)".

Structures themselves are not actors—they don't make decisions or pursue goals. Rather, structures create the landscape of constraints within which individuals navigate their choices and actions (Ross,

2024). Philosophically speaking "structures" are "in some sense and to some degree, constituted by relations between individuals" (Haslanger, 2016). People are aware that their actions are constrained in this way. In fact, managing our behavior so that it is appropriate to different socio-structural contexts is so important that our minds are wired to automatically create context-specific expectations for how events should unfold so that we don't violate norms (Chang & Sanfey, 2013). This is a little like allowing our socio-structural environment to fine tune our flocking parameters; the same underlying rules are driving our behaviors, but our minds automatically try to make us fit into the world that structural constraints define for us.

Pillar 2: *Individual action and structural change*

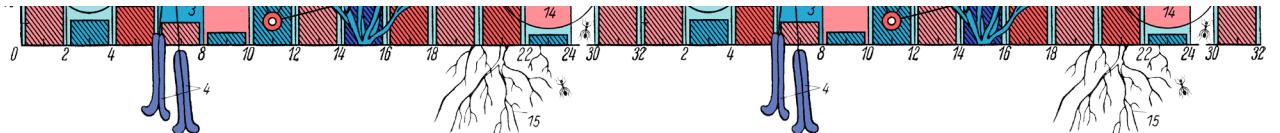
ENDING POVERTY IS A COMPLEX CHALLENGE that demands a combination of efforts, not a singular solution. Just as intricate patterns emerge from simple, collective actions in nature, overcoming poverty requires an oblique approach involving individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions working

together. This means pursuing a combination of individual and structural shifts. Everyone has a vital role to play in these distributed, interconnected efforts, which, though seemingly indirect, are essential for fostering broad economic mobility and creating lasting change.



APPROACH:

Ending persistent poverty requires the transformation of both the interconnected systems that sustain it, and the individuals inside those systems.



UNIVERSAL FINANCIAL RESILIENCE AS THE GOAL

TO SAY “WE CAN END POVERTY” is not in any way to say “everyone can have everything they want”. It is to say that if the network can deteriorate, then it can be rewoven. For instance, COVID reversed, at least temporarily, the gentrification trend that has been forcing people out of some high opportunity neighborhoods (Ding & Hwang, 2022). And mentoring programs which create cross-class connections for kids living in poverty can provide that single point of contact with the broader economy that they need (Karcher,

Davidson, Rhodes & Herrera, 2018).

Economists are aware that we can preserve income variation but, at least theoretically, eliminate absolute poverty (e.g., Decerf & Ferrando, 2022). Ending poverty doesn’t mean eliminating struggle or striving. We don’t seek to eliminate failure or success. In seeking to end poverty, we seek to end determinism. To end poverty as Sen (1999) and others describe, we must only create and maintain universal opportunity, not universal ability or affluence.

Pillar 3: An end to poverty

WHEN WE MEND the opportunity network, poverty ceases to be a deterministic outcome. Differences in ability and income may still exist within a robust opportunity network, but one’s zip code, parental income, race, or other demographic factors

should not play an outsized role in determining life outcomes. We can create expanding and democratizing access to opportunity that increases the chances that everyone can overcome poverty over time.



THE PURSUIT OF FLOURISH- ING, NOT THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH, AS THE VISION

THE ABSENCE OF POVERTY, however, is not a vision for a future; it's not the end of the story. To be able to narrate the end of poverty, we need a positive vision for the future. Because the economy is the means by which we imagine creating this transformation, it is easy to forget that money is not the point. In their work, Acs et al. (2018) identify three components of mobility from poverty, asserting that someone has not experienced mobility from poverty, until they experience increased:

- ECONOMIC SUCCESS,
- BEING VALUED IN COMMUNITY, AND
- POWER AND AUTONOMY

Instead of seeing mobility from poverty as fixing a deficit, modern definitions like this imagine creating the opportunity for people to flourish. And

that calls on us to define flourishing.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) observed that a half century of focus on psychological pathology had left psychologists with “scant knowledge of what makes life worth living,” but in the years since then, scientists have learned a lot about what all humans need to flourish. The model that we find simplest to connect to is Ekman and Simon-Thomas’ (2021) CPR model. In this model, the conditions for anyone to flourish are:

- CONNECTION TO OTHER HUMANS,
- POSITIVE EMOTIONS, AND
- RESILIENCE

This model is strikingly similar to the definition of mobility above, but it doesn't contain anything about money. Why? Flourishing researchers have found that money isn't part of what we consider flourishing.

Money as resilience

WE'VE ALL HEARD that “money can't buy happiness,” but research suggests that, for most people, it actually can. More precisely, what money reliably does—for everyone, and especially for those experiencing poverty—is provide a buffer against hardship and a hedge against disaster (Killingsworth, Kahneman, & Mellers, 2023). The asymmetry here—where money is crucial for everyone in moving from hardship to stability, but only for some in progressing from stability to abundance—reflects a similar asymmetry in how humans process emotions.

There is no mental continuum from bad to good. Instead, the parts of our minds responsible for monitoring “badness” and addressing existential threats are separate from the parts responsible for creating “goodness” and positive feelings like happiness and joy (Kahneman, 2011).

Flourishing depends on resilience—adaptability or the capacity to regain stability when challenges arise. Our work in creating mobility from poverty is about creating the conditions for resilience: connectedness to people, jobs, healthcare, and other resources that ensure everyone can achieve a baseline of stability and well-being.

And flourishing also depends on experiencing happiness. Some people experience more happiness from wealth, and some do not. Researchers agree that, starting at a baseline of security, the capacity to experience happiness is learned, not earned.

One of the avenues for ending poverty is in reconnecting the disconnected, creating the bridges and skills required to participate. How exactly to participate and to flourish varies for each person and place, requiring different approaches and support.

Pillar 4: *An opportunity to pursue flourishing*

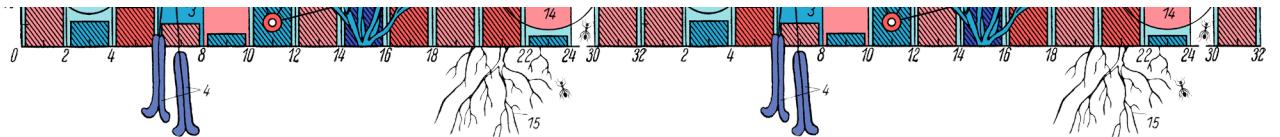
MOBILITY FROM POVERTY indeed encompasses economic success. But it is only achieved when an individual feels valued in community, and experiences power and autonomy. Furthermore, while money isn't

a direct component of flourishing itself, it serves as a vital tool for resilience, providing a buffer against hardship, and enabling individuals to achieve a baseline of stability from which genuine flourishing can then grow.

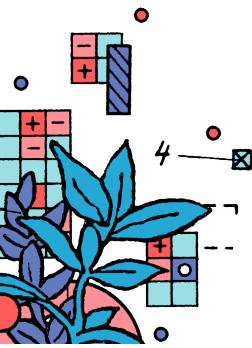


VISION:

Ending persistent poverty has positive benefits across society, insofar as everyone will be able to adapt in adversity, to decide the direction of their own lives, and to feel valued by others.



NARRATIVE AS A MEANS OF NAVIGATING COMPLEX SYSTEMS CHANGE



MEADOWS (1999) NAMES 12 LEVERAGE POINTS for change in a system, but her top two most important both concern the mental “paradigm” people use to feel whether a system is working correctly. She writes:

Paradigms are the sources of systems. From them, from shared social agreements about the nature of reality, come system goals and information flows, feedbacks, stocks, flows and everything else about systems. No one has ever said that better than Ralph Waldo Emerson: Every nation and every man instantly surround themselves with a material apparatus which exactly corresponds to ... their state of thought. Observe how every truth and every error, each a thought of some man's mind, clothes itself with societies, houses, cities, language, ceremonies, newspapers. Observe the ideas of the present day ... see how timber, brick, lime, and stone have flown into convenient shape, obedient to the master idea reigning in the minds of many persons.... It follows, of course, that the least enlargement of ideas ... would cause the most striking changes of external things.
(Emerson, 1838)

A story is one instance of a sequence in which something happens to someone. An early (2017) landscape analysis of the field by Narrative Initiative says:

In a story, to put it simply, something happens to someone or something. A story is discrete and contained; it has a beginning, middle and end.

The paradigmatic form of a story, the pattern that arises out of many individual instances of stories with shared characters, worlds, and plots is a narrative.

We need a new narrative about how the world should work to eliminate poverty and to maintain a zero-poverty state both to guide our strategies (since there may be many oblique and direct individual stories of change which may all share the common narrative form) and to achieve our objectives (since, as Meadows (1999) notes, everyone needs to share the narrative for the new system to persist).

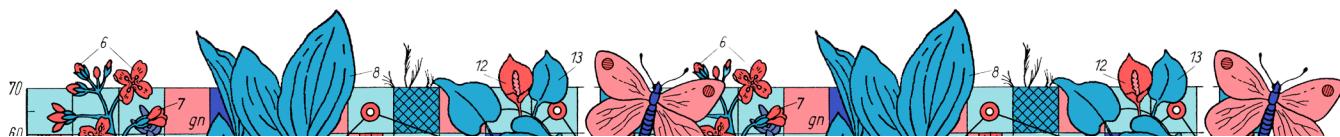
Barack Obama (2017) said:

Dr. King taught us that “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Although we do not face the same challenges that spurred the Civil Rights Movement, the fierce urgency of now—and the need for persistence, determination, and constant vigilance—is still required for us to meet the complex demands and defeat the injustices of our time. With the same iron will and hope in our hearts, it is our duty to secure economic opportunity, access to education, and equal treatment under the law for all. The arc of the moral universe may bend toward justice, but it only bends because of the strength and sacrifice of those who reject complacency and drive us forward.

Key to her definition of a paradigm here is that she doesn't name it as a static model but a representation we hold of how things should flow and change and where things should go (a goal). There is a naturally occurring system in the mind which captures and models cause and effect; it is the system we use to tell ourselves the stories that give our lives meaning (Beach, 2024).

BASED ON THE REVIEW of the literature here regarding the nature of systems and state of economic mobility in the US today,

here is the narrative arc we propose to bend the U.S. economy toward justice.



PROBLEM:

People in the U.S. experience poverty because they are disconnected from the opportunity network others have access to, not because of their own personal shortcomings.

APPROACH:

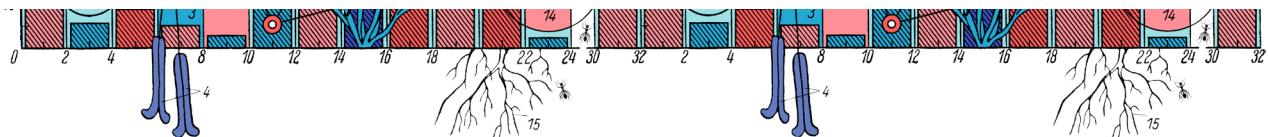
Ending persistent poverty requires the transformation of both the interconnected systems that sustain it and the individuals inside those systems.

POTENTIAL:

Connecting people to the opportunity network can make poverty rare, brief, and non-reoccurring for everyone, if it arises.

VISION:

Ending persistent poverty has positive benefits across society, insofar as everyone will be able to adapt in adversity, to decide the direction of their own lives, and to feel valued by others.

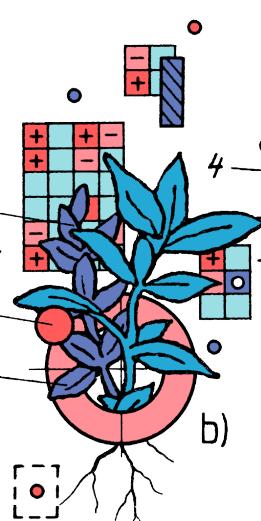


AGAIN, SYSTEMS DYNAMICS EXPERTS caution that pursuing some emergent systemic goal like “eliminate poverty” by trying to get there linearly or by assuming the change in the individual agents will mirror the desired change in the system leads to failure. That’s because there needs to be room in the process of solving the problem for allowing solutions to emerge, especially distal solutions. For instance, a principle we could use to try to achieve linear, agent-based progress is “pursue policies which give poor people more money.” But that’s the kind of reasoning which leads to support for a growth-only model of economies which ultimately harms the poor (Meadows, 1999). And, perhaps worse, a laser focus on the most direct routes leave no opportunity to discover the indirect but immensely impactful routes (Kay 2012) like reweaving the overall social network. Further, when it comes to poverty—a highly localized phenomenon—the solutions will be myriad, changing across populations and geographies (Chetty, Friedman, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018).

So there isn’t just one solution, there are likely to be many. The most direct solutions may not be the most effective. And the changes within individuals we need—like forming weak connections—will probably only appear obliquely related to poverty at first. So we do need a strategic framework for assessing whether we’re moving in the right direction. That framework is the narrative, which serves as our mental paradigm and represents the highest leverage point for transforming any system (Meadows, 1999).

By establishing a new narrative as our shared paradigm, we are operating at the deepest level of systems change. We consider any story in which someone connects people experiencing poverty more closely to the network of opportunity as progress toward ending poverty. This includes both intentional and unintentional connections that help people gain equal opportunity to pursue flourishing. And we consider any person who holds this narrative as their paradigm, with each of the four pillars for how our world should work, as heroes in stories about the work of ending poverty.

We consider any story in which someone connects people experiencing poverty more closely to the network of opportunity as progress toward ending poverty.



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ABOUT HARMONY LABS

HARMONY LABS IS A NONPROFIT MEDIA RESEARCH LAB on a mission to research and reshape society's relationship with media, using science, data, and creativity. For more than a decade, we have helped storytellers and strategists, decision makers and dreamers, harness the immense power of media to shape a positive, pluralistic future. With the Narrative Observatory, for the first time ever, we're harnessing industry relationships to deliver one-of-a-kind data infrastructure that empowers partners to find, reach, and resonate with the right audience in today's media minefield. The Narrative Observatory delivers audience-based insights, narrative and network analysis, and empirical validation of cultural strategy and content—all derived from the actual behavior of real people and true audiences, not survey results, demographic groups, or inauthentic online activity.

We work with a wide range of partners on issues of existential importance, like climate, democracy, equity, immigration, political violence, public education, identity, artificial intelligence, and more, using an approach to research that is rigorous, participatory, and public. One of the first papers we co-authored looked at fracking narratives in documentary film. The outputs we've created with our partners include websites, presentations, peer-reviewed publications, toolkits, blogposts, curriculum, interactives, white papers, and media. And our work has been covered in the press, like in this New York Times article.

Founded by John S. Johnson in 2008, Harmony Labs is a 501(c)3 incorporated in New York State. Funders include Atlantic Foundation, Gates Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, Meliore Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Google, and more.