

Sierra Murphy

Dr. Young

Composition 101

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War on Poverty: An Annotated Bibliography



Anderson, Lane. "Worried Sick: The High Price of Poverty." *Deseret News National Edition*.

Deseret Digital Media, 11 Mar. 2015. Web. 12 Mar. 2015.



Anderson's article in the *Deseret News National Edition* is an abbreviated presentation of several research studies, all supporting the thesis that poverty (here defined as making \$2,000 or less per month for a family of four) has a negative impact on physical and emotional health. Conversely, those making \$75,000 or more, according to more than one study, are more likely to report good health and mental stability. One researcher explains that sadness, depression, chronic pain, and mental distress are all more likely to visit the poor than the well-off. Anderson also includes a study from SUNY Albany, in which researchers found that losing a job can dramatically increase an individual's risk of disease. The poor also lack the ability to find purpose in their lives overall because they are distracted by daily suffering. The last study Anderson includes shows that women from minorities and low-income brackets have higher levels of cortisol (the stress hormone), which they may be passing on to their offspring.



Anderson's article visits a number of studies and other writings in rapid succession, and this level of abbreviation may alter the quality of the piece overall. For example, he

touches in his first four sentences on a well-known Princeton study that put \$75,000 on the map as the income level at which contentment and happiness are most easily achieved. While this synthesis is not inaccurate, it is incomplete, as the original study looked at both daily well-being *and* an individual's reflective feelings about his or her life, in addition to accounting for other lifestyle factors such as interpersonal relationships and addictive behavior. Anderson also cites many pieces of research that rely heavily on self-reporting to create statistics like, "[P]oor people are reporting [depression] at three times the rate of higher incomes." Anderson's information may be correct, but a reader will not get all of the contextual details from this article.

Anderson published "Worried sick" in the *Deseret News National Edition*, a paper that brands itself as "rigorous journalism for family-and-faith-oriented audiences" and makes strong statements on their "About Us" page to the effect of "we help warn families about media that erode the fundamental character traits of compassion, courage and virtue" and "spending beyond our means is a moral issue." The *Deseret* has an open bias in favor of religion, which changes the *ethos* of the reports they publish. A religious angle may convince one population with no need for additional argument, or it might alienate another portion of the population just as quickly. The paper devotes an entire section of their website to poverty, and while the articles may read objectively, they serve the stated purpose of "[empowering] people to meet their own needs, help others and improve lives." The *ethos*, then, changes the logic.



In my paper, I will use this article as a starting point for background statistics and perspective. I will then find some of the studies cited by Anderson and compare the abbreviated report to the original findings to expand my argument about how income and mental health are related.

Fessler, Pam. "The Changing Picture of Poverty: Hard Work Is 'Just Not Enough.'" *NPR*. NPR, 7 May 2014. Web. 13 Jan. 2015.

Fessler's *NPR* article features profiles of three impoverished families from western New York in an attempt to answer her guiding research question, "What does it mean to be poor in America?" Her first portrait is of a single mother with custody of her child who at first appears to have the basic necessities, but after closer examination, works a minimum wage job and is constantly anxious that one unexpected expense or situation will destroy the precarious foundation she has created. The second portrait is of another single mother who has lost custody of her son because of drugs and the father's violent behavior. The final portrait is of a couple, both of whom are recovering drug addicts, who are struggling to stay sober and regain custody of their seven children. Experts and researchers note that middle-class jobs are decreasing in the area and that these adults often feel isolated, overwhelmed, and out of control. They also lack childcare skills, creating a cocktail of circumstances that is detrimental to the welfare of their children.

One of Fessler's main points contends that poverty is no longer simply about access to material goods. Rather, the truly debilitating part of poverty is the lack of emotional or

interpersonal connection and stability. This perspective may be alienating to those who believe the poor do not need help or empathy because they have cellphones and other apparent “luxuries” or those who believe they have accomplished all of their goals without outside assistance. Such individuals may be inclined to view Fessler’s sympathetic case study as liberal propaganda put forth by socialist public radio. Conversely, regular NPR listeners may be inclined to agree with Fessler’s experts easily. Its simple, non-combative presentation may not change pre-established opinions but, rather, may simply enforce dichotomies.

Fessler is an established journalist with an impressive résumé of work for NPR and other well-respected national media outlets. She is a respected force at NPR, having previously covered National politics in several capacities. Poverty is now her area of focus and  expertise, lending to her *ethos* in the piece. Her article focuses heavily on anecdotal evidence in response to her research question, a feature to which die-hard statisticians and readers accustomed to articles heavily padded with numbers might object, but it is important to note that this report is only a piece of an entire series called “war on poverty, 50 years later.” Fessler is not relying on three examples in isolation to draw conclusions about poverty as a whole, but she is using them to add to a larger understanding. A contextual understanding of “The Changing Picture of Poverty” is important to comprehending its *logos*. Her synthesis of the perspectives of several experts also bolsters the piece. The small-scale scope of this piece creates a sense of intimacy that may evoke *pathos* in a reader. The featured persons may resemble people with whom a reader has interacted in his or her own community, leaving the reader open to Fessler’s

conclusions. The lives she examines are hard, and even folks who live lives further up the economic ladder may be able to recall times when they too have experienced scarcity.

In my paper, this article will serve to bolster two fundamental points about poverty that run in contrast to popular perception: first, children are often the biggest victims in families hounded by scarcity; and second, leaving poverty behind is not simple, especially when isolation, addiction, and lack of outside support abound. Fessler also quotes one expert who notes that the impoverished will continue to struggle with instability and fear until they have access to jobs and opportunities that make them feel empowered, a point that correlates with Maura Kelly's points about the relationship between perceived merit and anxiety and the way the upper class deprives the lower class of chances to advance.

Kahneman, Daniel, and Angus Deaton. "High Income Improves Evaluation of Life But Not Emotional Well-being." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 107.38 (2010): n. pag. Web. 13 Jan. 2015.

In their research article published by Princeton University, Kahneman and Deaton begin with the following research question: does money buy happiness? They ask this question in relation to "emotional well-being"—an individual's day-to-day experience—and "life evaluation"—an individual's metacognitive perception of his or her existence—together constituting two kinds of "subjective well-being." Kahneman and Deaton found that Americans on the whole (about 85% of respondents) report daily experiences associated

with happiness (e.g. laughter) but also report high levels of stress, somewhat



counterbalancing emotional well-being (16490). They surmise that emotional well-being

steadily increases in relation to income up until the \$75,000 mark, at which daily

experiences of happiness plateau. Life evaluation, conversely, continues to rise, as the

researches say, “[underscoring] . . . the distinction between the judgments individuals

make when they think about their life and the feelings that they experience as they live it”

(16492). Low incomes (less the \$3000 per month/per household) are associated with low

emotional well-being (16491). Kahneman and Deaton also report on a number of

affecting factors, including religion, children, age, addictive behavior, and education. For

example, higher educational levels improve life evaluation but not necessarily emotional

well-being.

Kahneman and Deaton’s study is original, at least by their own report, in that it looks at

happiness *and* satisfaction as separate results, while most other studies on the topic of

money and well-being simply ask how satisfied an individual is with his or her existence.

Additionally, they eschew a simple conflation of how many dollars an individual brings

home and well-being. Instead, they use logarithms and account for the economic climate

of location, qualifying factors such as education, and the importance of percentages rather

than concrete amounts (for example, the ratio of a raise to starting income is more telling

than the dollar amount in predicting happiness). They carefully note that they are

focused on the differences between incomes rather than how a change in income might

impact individual happiness (i.e. someone who receives a raise to \$100,000 a year might

experience more emotional happiness than someone who has always made \$100,000 a

year). These details indicate an attempt by Kahneman and Deaton to refine earlier research, while still noting that one piece of research cannot paint a complete picture. Perhaps the only limitation of the study is the plethora of synonyms being used (happiness, joy, laughter, smiling, emotional well-being, etc.), which could cause misunderstanding of the study's results if they are interchanged incorrectly.

Kahneman and Deaton are both well-established researchers and academics, which in addition to being endorsed by Princeton, lends incredible *ethos* to this research. Daniel Kahneman is a winner of the Noble Memorial Prize in Economics and a retired Princeton professor of psychology. Angus Deaton is also an award-winning professor from Princeton (in economics) and has focused much of his auspicious research on economics and well-being. Together, these men are a formidable pair. The distinguishing features of this piece of research mentioned in the above paragraph add significantly to the *logos*. Kahneman and Deaton are very carefully adding to the understanding of how money affects psychological health by highlighting nuances, exceptions, and differences in situation. They are, at the same time, unafraid to hypothesize about concrete financial thresholds for well-being and to encourage further research. Their findings contain an implicit appeal to *pathos* in that \$75,000 is a relatively high level of income, and, assuming it is the happiness threshold and happiness decreases as income declines below that figure, many American families are at risk for high stress levels and emotional struggles related to finances.

The significant findings and solid methods in this study, along with the prestige



associated with this research since its 2010 publication, make it an excellent foundational piece for my argument that poverty is more than insufficient funds and, thus, much harder to escape than might be thought.

Kelly, Maura. “Trickle-Down Distress: How America’s Broken Meritocracy Drives Our National Anxiety Epidemic.” *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic Monthly Group, 3 Jul. 2012. Web. 13 Jan. 2015.

In her article “Trickle-Down Distress,” Maura Kelly explores the impact of meritocracy on Americans’ anxieties and related perceptions of income inequality. She explains that 40 million Americans suffer from anxiety disorders, more in terms of population size than any other country in the world, in part because of the popular belief that “individuals ‘get what they deserve’ based on their merit” (Stephen McNamee qtd. in Kelly). As a result, Americans believe that every decision—big or small—reflects something about who they are at their core. Furthermore, they suffer increased amounts of guilt and distress when they fail to live up to their expectations about their abilities. Poverty, for example, is viewed as the failing of someone who did not work hard enough or was not smart enough, when in reality, economic status is often static and largely determined by the status of our parents and a good dose of luck. Kelly also emphasizes that the opportunities a person encounters vary by economic status, with the wealthy receiving the most access and having the power to create beneficial situations for themselves and for their children.

Kelly's argument is strong. She pulls liberally from well-respected and familiar sources—such as popular books, including Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice*—and presents examples and scenarios likely to resonate with middle-class America. For example, she debunks the idea that President Obama rose from nothing on merit alone, showing how strong genetics, good looks, and a supportive family increased his odds dramatically. *Atlantic* readers are likely to be educated and intellectually curious, making them used to conversations about gender and poverty. Kelly hints at her target demographic when she quotes author Chris Hayes as saying, “The idea that we are a meritocracy is a vast oversimplification, a self-serving and self-justifying one.” Her readers, who are among the privileged, are also among those who may believe they have accomplished things according to their own merit rather than their opportunities. The argument is well presented, moving tidily from the establishing statistics about American anxiety to Kelly's dual thesis that meritocracy drives anxiety *and* promotes inequality because the comfortable do not feel inclined to help the poor. Due to this duality, a reader may lose sight of the article's point if he or she is not careful to connect the correct examples and evidence with the correct part of Kelly's argument.

Kelly's authorial *ethos* has been established by her numerous publications, although her bio on *The Atlantic*'s website fails to note her work for popular ladies' magazines, such as *glamour* and *Marie Claire*, as a dating and relationship columnist. A quick Google search exposes that she once famously came under fire for writing a derogatory blog post about the heavysset characters on the sitcom “Mike and Molly.” These truths may detract

from Kelly's *Atlantic* persona as a serious commentator on social and politic issues.

Kelly lays out the article in a tidy way, using section headings to transition between her points on anxiety, meritocracy, and income inequality. She also utilizes a great number of numerical statistics (especially early on in the article when she wants to establish the high anxiety levels experienced by Americans) and study results from a number of established researchers, all of which create a feeling of *logos*. She evokes *pathos* in her audience by delineating the ways that Americans experience anxiety in relation to merit. If one in five Americans experiences regular anxiety, then it is more than likely that many of Kelly's readers will feel like they are being described when Kelly explains, "Our decision-making anxiety is exacerbated by our tendency to imbue all sorts of decisions with vital importance," or when she describes the stress American kids are under to perform in school. Her topic is relatable, which likely brings out the emphatic head nods from her audience.

In my paper, this article will serve as a piece to show one of the pervasive and detrimental effects of income inequality in America: anxiety. Social inequality coupled with the view that the poor are lazy and unworthy adds to national anxiety *and* seems to insure that the middle and upper classes continue to enforce a status quo that increases a breach between rich and poor.

Smith, Megan V., et al. "Diaper Need and Its Impact on Child Health." *Pediatrics* 132. 2 (2013): 253-259. Web. 13 Jan. 2015.

In their quantitative study, Megan V. Smith, et al. probe the connection between a mother's access to diapers, children's health, and parental mental health (253). They  contend that their study is the first academic research study to “examine diaper need and its associated maternal characteristics” (256-257), which they imply is somewhat surprising as diapers are an “essential staple for the health of children” (254). They found that nearly 30% of mothers in their sample of 877 did not have a full week's supply of diapers (at a cost of about \$20/week or \$936/year) and that these women were more likely to self-report struggles with stress, depression, and anxiety (253, 255). Insufficient diaper changes are also associated with health problems (UTI, diaper dermatitis) in young children (254). Based on their research findings, the authors suggest that access to adequate diapers may be “a tangible way of reducing parenting stress and increasing parenting sense of competency, enabling parents to be more sensitive with their children, and thereby improving parenting quality and overall child outcomes” (258). Parents with access to diapers are also more likely to be able to leave their children in childcare and pursue opportunities to improve their situations (254).

The authors' suggestion of a link between “material hardship,” parental stress, and negative outcomes for children is not entirely revolutionary; however, they use their platform to look at one sliver of scarcity (diapers) and make practical suggestions for increasing access for low-income parents. For example, after finding that many children in their study had a primary-care pediatrician, the authors believe pediatricians could be a key resource for families experiencing diaper need by recommending diaper banks or other organizations where families can receive diapers (257). They also suggest that

national advocate programs might look more closely at diaper need in addition to other basic needs such as nutritious food. Importantly, the authors are not saying diaper need *causes* parental stress (258). Rather, they see a self-reported correlation, which could also mean diaper need is simply a drop in the bucket of psychological struggles associated with income, or diaper need and parental health are both results of other causes (257).

Ultimately, they believe the importance of diapers for low-income families is worth studying.

The authors are all well-credentialed doctors and professionals associated with renowned institutions such as Yale and the National Diaper Bank (253). The US Department of Health and Human Services funded their study, which was printed in *Pediatrics*, a prestigious, peer-reviewed research journal published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Such credentials lend significant *ethos* to the piece. Importantly, the authors include a financial disclosure on the first page of the piece, which notes that three of the four contributors are associated with the National Diaper Bank Network, an organization sponsored by Kimberly Clark, the parent company of *Huggies* (253). An affiliation like this could alter the study's findings, such as when the authors estimate the number of diapers needed per child per week; however, the authors are forthcoming with their connections and trust readers to account for the information. They present their study in concise, scientific language without being cryptic or using heavy jargon. At the end of the report, they list limiting factors in their findings, including their use of a cross-section and self-reporting surveys (258). Scientific reporting of this kind—with charts, statistics, and study details—is often associated with *logos*. Furthermore, a study that deals with hot-

button, often political *and* personal social issues like poverty, scarcity, mental health, and childcare is likely to appeal to *pathos* in the researchers and readers alike. For example, a female researcher with children may respond strongly to the report of diaper need in 30% of families studied because she understands the importance of this essential item. Such scarcity may be shocking to readers who are part of the middle-class public.

In my paper, this source will serve to highlight the plethora of concerns faced by low-income families beyond food and shelter and to emphasize how a combination of problems like this propagate poverty, anxiety, and social immobility.