

# How Intellectuals Train the Underclass to Feel Helpless

Recently a psychologist friend was singing a familiar refrain: “My clients want their problematical circumstances alleviated, but few want to change how they see the world.”

Most intransigent among his clients are those with government benefits and mandated weekly therapy. Some have been coming to him for years. Their mindsets are characterized by hopelessness, but they have shelter and food and seem to be averse to change.

Going to therapy is a big event in their week. Qualifying for benefits is important to them. An oft-repeated question is, “Can you get me eligible for more benefits?” They were unlikely to take steps to hold a steady job, since doing so is at odds with keeping their benefits.

My friend’s caring for his clients and concern over the waste of human lives is palpable. “People aren’t meant to do nothing,” he laments.

With a defensive tone, he adds, “and the poverty mindset I see has absolutely nothing to do with race.”

## A Poverty Mindset Is a Choice

Dr. Anthony Daniels corroborates the observations of my psychologist friend. In his many books and essays, Daniels, writing as Theodore Dalrymple, describes the mindset of the underclass in England.

Dalrymple is no armchair theorist. He is a retired English physician who spent his career working in the inner-cities and prisons of England and also in sub-Saharan Africa. His hard-hitting observations of the poverty mindset are not without

respect for the humanity of those he sought to help.

Having truly known the plight of the poor, he reflects upon what he learned about poverty mindsets. [Dalrymple describes English poverty](#):

*I never saw the loss of dignity, the self-centeredness, the spiritual and emotional vacuity, or the sheer ignorance of how to live, that I see daily in England... the worst poverty is in England—and it is not material poverty but poverty of soul.*

This poverty of the soul is by choice. Dalrymple observes, of the English underclass, in his book, [Life At The Bottom](#), “It could scarcely occur to you that they are other than fully conscious agents, in essence no different from yourself.”

Capable of making choices, those mired in poverty choose self-destructive patterns. “Day after day I hear of the same violence, the same neglect and abuse of children, the same broken relationships, the same victimisation by crime, the same nihilism, the same dumb despair,” he recounts. Dalrymple then seeks to understand, “If everyone is a unique individual, how do patterns such as this emerge?”

Dalrymple rejects “Economic determinism, of the vicious cycle-of-poverty variety” as an explanation for ruinous choices made over and over again. Escape from poverty is possible. He writes, “Untold millions of people who were very much poorer have emerged from poverty within living memory in South Korea, for example. If being poor really entailed a vicious cycle, man would still be living in the caves.”

What about racism? Dalrymple again says no, writing, “It will come as a surprise to American readers, perhaps, to learn that the majority of the British underclass is white and that it demonstrates all the same social pathology as the black underclass in America—for very similar reasons, of course.

Genetics, moreover, can hardly explain such phenomena as the rise of mass illegitimacy, unprecedented in recorded history, since the late 1950s."

Dalrymple agrees that the "welfare state" is destructive, but he also believes the welfare state made the underclass "possible, not inevitable." "An added ingredient," he writes, "is obviously necessary."

That "added ingredient," Dalrymple believes, "is to be found in the realm of ideas" in other words, in the mindset of the underclass.

## Mindset Is the Source of Misery

If racism, a cycle of poverty, or welfare are not enough to account for the plight of the underclass, their poverty mindset is. Dalrymple writes:

*Human behavior cannot be explained without reference to the meaning and intentions people give to their acts and omissions; and everyone has a...worldview, whether he knows it or not. It is the ideas my patients have that fascinate—and, to be honest, appall me: for they are the source of their misery.*

In everyday conversations, Dalrymple came to understand the poverty mindset as he heard his patients dodge responsibility while describing themselves in relation to the actions they take:

*Their ideas make themselves manifest even in the language they use. The frequency of locutions of passivity is a striking example. An alcoholic, explaining his misconduct while drunk, will say, 'The beer went mad.' A heroin addict, explaining his resort to the needle, will say, 'Heroin's everywhere.' It is as if the beer drank the alcoholic and the heroin injected the addict.*

*Other locutions plainly serve an exculpatory function and represent a denial of agency and therefore of personal responsibility. The murderer claims the knife went in or the gun went off.*

*The man who attacks his sexual consort claims that he 'went into one' or 'lost it,' as if he were the victim of a kind of epilepsy of which it is the doctor's duty to cure him. Until the cure, of course, he can continue to abuse his consort—for such abuse has certain advantages for him—safe in the knowledge that he, not his consort, is its true victim.*

[Visiting doctors from India and the Philippines](#) toured poverty neighborhoods with Dalrymple. Walking past yards and sidewalks full of trash, a doctor from Bombay asked, "Why don't they tidy up their gardens?" Dalrymple explains that the tenants feel cleaning is the job of the landlord or the council (the local government); tenants would rather "wade through garbage" than clean.

Observing the items of trash, the visiting doctors formed "the impression that no Briton is able to walk farther than ten yards or so without consuming junk food. Every bush, every lawn, even every tree, is festooned with chocolate wrappers or fast-food packaging. Empty cans of beer and soft drinks lie in the gutter, on the flower beds, or on top of the hedges."

## **Everyone Doesn't Do It**

"Why," asks Dalrymple in his book [Second Opinion](#), "do people do the things they do, especially when they are so bad for them?" Revealing is a conversation Dalrymple had with a patient who had taken heroin for the last eight years (except for the time he was in prison). The doctor asks the patient, "Why do you take heroin?" This exchange followed:

*Patient: Everyone does it*

*Dalrymple: I don't*

*Patient: Everyone I know*

*Dalrymple: Do you have brothers and sisters?*

*Patient: Yes, two brothers and two sisters.*

*Dalrymple: Do any of them take heroin?*

*Patient: No*

*Dalrymple: So it's not quite true, then, that everyone you know takes heroin?*

Dalrymple points out that his patient “did not greet my exposure of the contradiction between what he said and the truth with the pleasure that a disinterested searcher after knowledge might have expressed.” Like my psychologist friend, Dalrymple describes opening the door for change only to find patients eager to avoid disturbing their destructive mindsets.

Yet, for all of us, a pathway to change—a path to resiliency in adverse circumstances—is to realize that a convenient lie you have been telling yourself is not true.

## **The Self-Deception of the Underclass Is Aided by Intellectuals**

Dalrymple points out that there are advantages to the underclass to pretend that they are innocent victims:

*When a man tells me, in explanation of his anti-social behaviour, that he is easily led, I ask him whether he was ever easily led to study mathematics or the subjunctives of French verbs. Invariably the man begins to laugh: the absurdity of what he has said is immediately apparent to him.*

*Indeed, he will acknowledge that he knew how absurd it was all along, but that certain advantages, both psychological and social, accrued by keeping up the pretence.*

Pretending to not have the power of choice is not natural and has to be taught.

Dalrymple writes:

*The idea that one is not an agent but the helpless victim of circumstances, or of large occult sociological or economic forces, does not come naturally.... On the contrary, only in extreme circumstances is helplessness directly experienced in the way the blueness of the sky is experienced. Agency, by contrast, is the common experience of us all.*

Dalrymple heaps scorn on academics and intellectuals who theorize that the underclass doesn't have agency. He writes, "In fact most of the social pathology exhibited by the underclass has its origin in ideas that have filtered down from the intelligentsia." One example is the use of "the term 'addiction,'... to cover any undesirable but nonetheless gratifying behavior."

These academic ideas have pernicious consequences:

*Not long after academic criminologists propounded the theory that recidivists were addicted to crime... a car thief...asked me for treatment of his addiction to stealing cars—failing receipt of which, of course, he felt morally justified in continuing to relieve car owners of their property.*

Dalrymple's deep dive into the poverty mindset encourages us to challenge those who would assure us that poverty [has everything to do with capitalism](#) and [racism](#). Dalrymple would tell us those theories are wrong and to rely on them will not alleviate poverty. What is essential is for the poor to

experience a mindset shift towards taking more responsibility for their lives. Is it not time to approach the poverty problem believing that the poor are able to make this essential change?

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