



## Glenn Loury and the Great Partisan Divide

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I.

When poor kids do three simple things—graduate from high school, work full-time, and wait until after marriage to have children—they have a 75 percent chance of escaping poverty. Millennials have even better odds, the data suggests. Members of the generation born between 1981 and 1996 who follow this simple anti-poverty formula have a 97 percent chance of escaping poverty. These are compelling statistics, even if they tend to obscure the particular challenges facing these kids. If young black men and women want to escape poverty—and, incidentally, reduce racial inequality in the process—all they have to do is follow a simple anti-poverty formula.

This all-American highway to financial security is what conservative scholars call the “success sequence,” and its basic logic makes perfect sense. No one doubts the economic benefits of a good education or the financial advantages of working full-time, and few would deny that households with two incomes are generally more economically secure than households with one.

The basic logic of the success sequence is so clear and attractive, in fact, that many inner-city boys and girls who are unlikely to follow it to its final destination will nevertheless tell researchers that they intend to graduate high school, work full-time, and refrain from having children until after they are married. As Isabel Sawhill, a Brookings scholar who popularized the term “success sequence” reports in her 2014 book *Generation Unbound*, “less advantaged children are having more children, and having them earlier, than they say they prefer.” They want to be ready for parenthood, and for most teenagers and young adults this means “completing their education, securing a steady job, and having a committed partner with whom to share the tasks of both earning a living and raising children.”

Eve Tushnet, writing for the Institute of Family Studies, arrived at a similar conclusion after 15 years of working with low-income women and families: “I’ve never met anyone who doubts that getting a high-school diploma can help you exit poverty.

I've never met anyone who thought that not having a job was just as likely to bring success as having a job. And a large majority of my clients, while reluctant to judge others' lives, believe marriage would be best for their own babies." Michael Tanner, in a symposium on the success sequence hosted by the Cato Institute, also has no doubts about what the majority of low-income people want: "Surveys of the poor regularly show that they want a job, marriage, and an education." Though they have never consulted with population-level statistics and are not versed in think-tank terminology, young people know that following the success sequence is, if not a guarantee of making it into the middle-class, a pretty reliable way to improve their lives.

It is always difficult to ascertain exactly what people want, since we are social creatures and we present different sides of our characters and personalities to different audiences. This is especially true of teenagers. But we do know that a majority of low-income kids place a high value on education. Among the key findings from a United Negro College Fund survey of the educational aspirations of low-income black youth were that two-thirds of respondents identified success in school as their top priority, and that 89 percent thought that it was important to get an education beyond high school. We also know that among teens aged 15–19, according to the CDC, 75 percent of pregnancies were unintended, and that unintended pregnancy rates are highest among low-income minority women.

It is because inner-city kids do in fact prioritize education and postponing pregnancy that Isabel Sawhill argues that if we could reduce unplanned childbearing outside of marriage, "more women would be able to continue their education, gain valuable skills in the job market, and form stable relationships leading to marriage." In addition to worryingly high rates of high school dropouts and unwanted pregnancies, another one of the most pressing problems in the inner-city today, as it was in the 1990s when Elijah Anderson was conducting his ethnographic research in Philadelphia, is interpersonal violence and aggression. But we need to keep in mind that the most powerful force that can counteract these negative influences is being a member of a "strong, loving, 'decent' (as inner-city residents put it) family committed to middle-class values," and that these families represent a "majority of homes in the community."

And therein lies a largely unexamined paradox. How do we explain that inner-city teenagers generally want exactly what researchers counsel, and yet their lives tend not to unfold as either would prefer? If scholars know what poor inner-city kids should do to escape poverty, and these same kids know what they should do to escape poverty, why do we still have such a problem with multi-generational poverty?

How we answer this question—and our answer hinges largely on whether we privilege structure or agency in our analysis, as I will explain shortly—says a great deal about our politics (as well as a great deal about the kind of data researchers highlight in their papers

and PowerPoint presentations). I would go so far as to suggest that how we answer this question is more predictive of our politics than the success sequence is of our future socioeconomic status.

## II.

In October of last year, conservative Andrew Sullivan interviewed progressive commentator Briahna Joy Gray on his podcast. How do we reduce violent crime and incentivize two-parent households in poor and working-class black communities? he asked his guest, hoping to get her to cede some intellectual ground to his conservative principles.

Gray responded, unsurprisingly, with a set of progressive policy prescriptions. Housing and healthcare are basic human rights that should be available to everyone. We haven't had a hike in the minimum wage in 12 years. We need free community college, and we need to end the war on drugs, which disproportionately impacts black people. If our goal is to reduce crime and support families, she argued, we need to address the root causes of these problems.

But you're depriving these people of agency! Sullivan protested. The implication of your policy-centric approach to these issues is that you're removing any and all agency from these people. Everything is structurally caused. What your fixation on "root causes" really means is that you think people are automatons who just react to stuff that's done to them.

This exchange is a wonderful example of our conflicting intuitions. Gray is convinced that external forces largely determine individual behavior. Sullivan, in contrast, insists that individuals can resist external social forces, including the cultural milieu in which they are raised, if they put their minds to it. Most of us are sensitive to both points of view. External forces may not determine all of our behavior, but they certainly influence what we can and cannot do, even what we do or do not believe.

Just look at how many of us support the same political parties, belong to the same religions, and cheer for the same sports teams as our parents. We certainly do not build our ideational worlds from scratch. At the same time, there is no shortage of evidence to suggest that we reject some of the ideas our parents try to impose on us and that we can accomplish all kinds of things if we put our minds to it, even when the odds—the weight of external forces—are stacked against us. External forces may constrain our paths in life, but they are not wholly deterministic.

What makes the debate between Sullivan and Gray particularly illuminating for our purposes is that neither the pro-agency conservative nor the pro-structure progressive is entirely clear in his or her own mind what they mean by agency and structure. As the

discussion unfolds, Sullivan zeroes in on the interrelated problems of violent crime and absent fathers. You don't think there is an extreme crisis with young black men, and that black culture is a big part of the problem? This question signals an unexpected—and seemingly unintentional—shift away from his defense of individual agency. Is culture something that individuals or communities can choose for themselves, or is it an external force—a structural force—that encroaches upon individual agency?

Gray, in turn, when accused of denying individuals of their agency, and thus undermining their dignity as human beings, insists that she, too, believes in agency. “A lot of people make it out of horrible life situations and they still succeed. Some people come out of single parent households, low-income households, abusive households, and they succeed. Other people have every privilege and benefit in the world and they fail. Of course people have agency. Of course individual ability, merit, agency, will, and grit, all of these are also factors.”

The problem with Gray's response is that she unwittingly conflates agency and individual variation. Some disadvantaged people will make it into the middle-class not because they exercise greater agency than their peers, but because they are either particularly gifted academically or particularly stubborn in the face of setbacks (or just plain lucky). Likewise, some extremely advantaged people will struggle to remain in the middle class not because they fail to exercise their agency, but because they are not particularly gifted academically or particularly stubborn in the face of setbacks (or just plain unlucky). The fact that individuals develop different cognitive and noncognitive skills over the course of their lives, as neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky reminds us in his most recent book, tells us very little about how structure and agency influence life trajectories.

So, where does this uncertainty leave us? Sullivan and his fellow conservatives, I would argue, overestimate the transformative power of individual agency, while Gray and her fellow progressives fail to realize that one of the main reasons we need an effective social welfare state is to make it more likely that disadvantaged youth exercise their agency in a productive manner.

### III.

The weight of the evidence in the social sciences is rarely so lopsided that scholars on both sides of the political spectrum cannot construct reasonable arguments to support their positions. Picture the most lavish and abundant salad bar you can imagine, and then triple or quadruple its offerings. As a result of this buffet-style cornucopia of data, most social scientists end up refining a familiar set of ideologically driven arguments over the course of their careers, rather than adopting, mid-career, a new set of arguments.

Glenn Loury is an economist and social critic who has written a great deal about the persistence of racial inequality. Though he leans decidedly conservative these days, his

work deserves to be studied with care by anyone interested in improving opportunities and outcomes for low-income black people for two fundamental reasons. First, because he is a serious multidisciplinary scholar with a healthy contrarian streak who has been studying racial inequality for the last 50 years (he has been through—been enlightened and disillusioned by—multiple iterations of the racial inequality debate.) Second, and even more important for our purposes, he is the only scholar with whom I am familiar—conservative or progressive, black or white, male or female—who has grappled with the issue of racial inequality from both sides of the structure-agency divide. Lounsbury never quite manages to hold these two opposing ideas in mind at the same time—it is nearly impossible for anyone to do so, I would argue—but he deserves a great deal of credit for analyzing racial inequality from both perspectives over the course of his career.

It should not be controversial to point out that the stories we tell ourselves influence how we understand and engage with our worlds. Americans who supported the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq harbored a set of beliefs about what American military power could accomplish and how our soldiers and diplomats would be received as members of an occupying force. The Muslim men who hijacked four commercial aircraft on 9/11 and flew them into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were deeply influenced by two interconnected narratives: that America is a fundamentally malignant power, and that, as religious martyrs, they would be abundantly rewarded in the afterlife. We do not need graduate degrees in history to appreciate the power of narratives to inspire, enlighten, mislead, enrage, and seduce.

This idea is central to Lounsbury's current anti-structuralist explanation for the persistence of racial inequality. The danger of powerful narrative frameworks is that they often command ideological fidelity even when new or existing evidence supports a different interpretation of events. Lounsbury is convinced that a particular narrative framework—what he calls the “bias narrative”—has sunk its roots so deeply into the collective mind of black America that educators and public intellectuals are no longer able to engage in the kind of rational and dispassionate analysis of the causes of racial inequality that the black community so desperately needs. The belief that all racially disparate outcomes are a reflection of structural racism is the essence of the bias narrative.

Lounsbury's alternative to the bias narrative is what he calls the “development narrative.” Here is the difficult and unpopular question that Lounsbury insists we must confront: Do some patterns of behavior in the black community have the consequence of “inhibiting the development of human potential among their members?” This is more of a rhetorical question than a genuine inquiry, since Lounsbury has made it clear over the last decade that he believes too many black people living in low-income communities engage in behaviors that actively undermine not only their own personal development but the development of their children.

Loury is understandably frustrated with the way progressives deploy “structural racism” as a catch-all concept to explain any and all racial inequalities. This concept does indeed lack the kind of clarity and precision that most social scientists crave, and the danger of relying on such imprecise framing mechanisms is that we end up connecting some dots that should not be connected, and ignoring others that would contribute a great deal to our understanding of complex social and political problems (it is by connecting dots wisely or unwisely that we construct more or less accurate narratives).

If all disparate outcomes today are attributed to structural racism—which Loury defines as a “complex system of social interaction embodying morally suspect historical practices, the consequences of which persist”—then differences between white and black people today, and for the foreseeable future, can only be attributed to a history of prejudice and persecution. History, in this reading, ends up as a destructive force akin to a bull in a China shop: high school dropouts and pregnant teenagers are the delicate cups and dishes that parents and community leaders can do little to protect.

Why would the black community benefit from jettisoning the bias narrative and adopting the development narrative in its place? What reason do we have to believe that the development narrative would give us a better understanding of the persistence of racial inequality? In a handful of recent papers and talks, Loury has used the example of school discipline to make his point. School districts in our country have for many years reported a disparity in the frequency with which white and black students face disciplinary actions. Though black students only make up approximately 16 percent of public school enrollment, they receive roughly 40 percent of school suspensions. These basic disparities are not in dispute. Conservatives and progressives agree that exclusionary discipline rates are much higher for black students than white students. The challenge for scholars—less so for pundits—is how to explain these discrepancies.

Progressives tend to attribute this racial disparity to the attitudes of school teachers, administrators, and security guards. They insist that black students are not any more disruptive or confrontational than their white peers, and that biased adults are responsible for the imbalance in suspensions and expulsions. Disparate treatment—suspensions, expulsions, school arrests, and law enforcement referrals are three times higher for black students—leads to disparate outcomes, which include higher dropout and incarceration rates (the school-to-prison pipeline). Subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism, they argue, are alive and well in our public-school systems.

Loury is unconvinced by this interpretation. Sanctioning school districts for racial disparities in punishment rates, if they did in fact reflect adult bias or institutional racism, would be appropriate (assuming the right incentives were put in place to change people’s behavior). But what if black students are being punished more frequently than white students because there are genuine differences in how these two populations behave in

the classroom? If so—and Lounsbury is convinced this is largely the case—federal investigations, and any sanctions that might follow, would be futile at best, and likely counterproductive.

The best way to address this disparity would be to identify the reasons why black students are behaving in ways that provoke disciplinary interventions. This is the logic of the development narrative. These kids don't need more federal investigators, civil rights lawyers, and antiracist activists, they need a multifaceted "human development" program that elevates their social and cognitive skills so that their behavior in the classroom is more conducive to learning.

Why are black students disciplined at higher rates than white students if it is not a reflection of antiblack bias? Lounsbury puts it bluntly: "Family organization matters for human development." It is not a coincidence that black students are disciplined at a higher rate than their white peers when a much higher percentage grow up in homes without fathers or father-like figures. A higher percentage of poor black children are raised by single mothers who were themselves raised in poverty by single mothers. It should not surprise us to learn that kids raised in challenging circumstances would be more likely to have disciplinary problems than their less-challenged peers.

Instead of asking ourselves what schools, standardized tests, and employers are doing wrong—what structural impediments must be lifted before we will see a decline in various measures of racial inequality—the development narrative encourages us to ask "which behaviors observable in certain children of color have the consequence of inhibiting the development of human potential among its members?"

Exasperation with the near-universal acceptance of the bias narrative has driven Lounsbury to defend his alternative narrative with a combination of analytical rigor and podcaster combativeness. The exasperation is understandable. At a minimum, we cannot afford to ignore the development narrative. But would a narrative swap, from the bias narrative to the development narrative, even if widely adopted, solve the problem he thinks it would?

#### IV.

In the late 1990s, Lounsbury was a regular columnist for the left-leaning *New Republic*. "Procedural fairness," he wrote in one essay, "is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the attainment of substantive justice in a racially divided democracy." Procedural fairness alone, he was convinced at the time, cannot deliver justice for a long-persecuted racial minority. In another piece, he wrote that even though black people had made "stunning progress" since the Civil Rights movement, the poverty rate for black children has remained unchanged for decades. A third or so of the black population remained "locked in ghettos," and "shut out from access to the engine of social mobility."



As a consequence of these *structural* constraints—laws and institutions that trapped a disproportionate number of black people in poverty—too many black men and women have never had the opportunity to fully develop their natural talents and are unable to compete successfully with their more advantaged peers. Lorde quotes from a famous speech that President Lyndon Johnson delivered in 1965: “You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.” Only a *structuralist* would praise President Johnson for his “moral clarity and vision” in this speech.

We are social creatures embedded in very specific kinds of social networks, Lorde wrote in a *third column*, and these networks largely determine our future level of academic and economic success. Teenagers who ace standardized tests and gain admittance to elite colleges and universities are products of these social networks, and less “bearers of merit” than the beneficiaries of “structures of opportunity.” The implication here is that teenagers who turn to other sources of self-respect are less bearers of demerit than young people navigating worlds shaped by very different *structures* of opportunity. Adults may have the ability to create new social networks for themselves, but kids largely inherit their social networks and exercise little if any control over the structures that will ultimately shape their lives.

In a *2001 essay for the Atlantic*, using logic that might be employed by a contemporary antiracist or social-justice activist, Lorde argued that unwed, unemployed, and uneducated young mothers were not entirely or even primarily responsible for their circumstances, that society owed a particular debt to them, and that state and federal governments were capable of spending tax revenues wisely enough to make significant improvements in the lives of these women and their dependants. “That middle-class taxpayers resent the giving of public money to unwed, unemployed, uneducated young mothers,” he added, “does not mean that such resentment is justified in the richest country on earth.”

At juncture in Lorde’s long struggle with the competing logics of structure and agency, his thinking on racial inequality aligned with liberals such as William Julius Wilson, a prominent figure in sociology and the author of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Why did conditions in the ghetto decline in the years *after* the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement? Why was the inner city more violent and crime-ridden in the 1980s than the 1950s? According to Wilson, the key explanatory variables include a population explosion among black youth, changes in the nature of our economy that put unskilled



workers at a particular disadvantage, and the shifting class structure in ghetto neighborhoods (the exodus of middle- and working-class blacks).

Unlike scholars who argue that the problems of the inner city are the product of black culture, Wilson insisted that “cultural values emerge from specific circumstances and life chances and reflect an individual’s position in the class structure.” The social ills that deeply troubled conservatives then, and continue to trouble them today—crime, violence, graduation rates, joblessness, out-of-wedlock births, welfare dependency—should be understood not as “cultural aberrations but as symptoms of racial-class inequality.”

Loury published an essay in *Daedalus* in 2010—at the tail end of his structuralist phase—that summed up years of research he had conducted on mass incarceration. What perturbed him was the decoupling of crime and incarceration rates: for over a decade they had not moved in lockstep, as they had in previous decades (and as cases, hospitalizations, and deaths did in the first year of the pandemic, before the arrival of vaccines). Incarceration does not protect or stabilize communities when most ex-offenders return to their old neighborhoods after serving their sentences and are now less likely than ever to qualify for a conventional job, he argued.

The spatial concentration of imprisonment and ex-offenders impacts everyone in a community, even people who did nothing wrong. Most families have a son, uncle, or father who has done time in prison: “This ubiquity of a prison experience in poor, minority urban neighborhoods has left families in these places less effective at inculcating in their children the kinds of delinquency resistant self controls and pro-social attitudes that typically insulate youths against lawbreaking.” Mass incarceration—a set of interrelated public policies—has created structures that negatively impact the opportunities and development paths of each new generation of ghetto residents.

Mass incarceration was a “punishment binge,” Loury wrote, and the consequences of over-incarceration hit a subset of our population particularly hard. “The prisoners come from the most disadvantaged corners of our unequal society,” and mass incarceration exacerbates this inequality (in the sense that, in practice, mass incarceration is a form of collective punishment). Yes, there are racial disparities in crime rates, but the “subordinate status of African American ghetto-dwellers—their social deprivation and spatial isolation in America’s cities—puts their residents at great risk of embracing the dysfunctional behaviors that lead to incarceration.” The structure of our cities, he argued, is “implicated in the production of deviance among those living there.”

V.

Loury did not swing abruptly from a pro-agency conservative to a pro-structure progressive, and his return to the conservative side of the structure-agency dilemma was similarly gradual. Perhaps he was radicalized by the one-sidedness of the current public

debate over racial inequality, as he has speculated. Perhaps, deep down, as I suspect, he is an old-school moralist who needs to hold specific individuals responsible for particular behaviors and outcomes, and structuralism was never a very good fit with his temperament and moral beliefs. Either way, he is again standing firmly on the conservative side of the structure-agency divide, and his arguments today are very similar to the arguments he was making back in the 1980s.

In a series of recent papers and lectures, Loury now expresses support for a middle course: we need to “acknowledge antiblack biases that should be remedied while insisting on addressing and reversing the patterns of behavior that impede black people from seizing newly opened opportunities to prosper,” he wrote in [a 2019 essay](#) for the Manhattan Institute. And what could anyone find objectionable about encouraging members of the black community to work hard to eliminate antiblack bias and simultaneously doing everything they can to “acquire those skills, traits, habits, and orientations that foster successful participation in American society”?

The controversy hidden in this seemingly innocuous endorsement of a two-track approach to addressing racial inequality is that he builds a switch in the tracks and merges them into a development-only approach that places the burden of responsibility for racial inequality almost entirely on the black community. Black youngsters fail to achieve their full human potential because they “do not have the experiences, are not exposed to the influences, and do not benefit from the resources that foster and facilitate their human development.”

Why do they lack these invaluable experiences, connections, and non-material resources? It is no longer partly about antiblack bias and the cumulative effect of past discrimination. Cognitive and noncognitive skills are “by-products of social processes mediated by networks of affiliation.” These networks function at the *family* and *community* level, and this means we no longer need to trouble ourselves with *societal-level* analyses.

## VI.

The debate about the limits of human agency remains hotly contested. Nevertheless, most people will agree that we are able to follow our thoughts, question them, and interrogate them, at least when we are not under too much stress or have been put on the defensive. This suggests that our actions—not all the time, of course, but more often than not—follow from a reasonable if imperfect assessment of how we can achieve our goals. We are not mere automatons who respond in predictable, knee-jerk fashion to external stimuli. We may not be quite as free as we sometimes assume, but surely one of the unique aspects of being human is that we can use this very knowledge to carefully assess how external forces impact our daily lives and identify which we consider beneficial, and

therefore worthy of keeping in place, and which we deem counterproductive, and therefore in need of banishment or restraint.

Sociologists generally doubt that this kind of sophisticated deliberation is all that common. As students of the social causes of group behavior, it is hard for them to ignore the many patterns they encounter as they observe and collect data on people who believe they are thinking and acting independently of broader social and economic forces. If we know a person's class, gender, and race, for example, we can predict with surprising accuracy a great deal about his political and religious beliefs. The existence and durability of such patterns does not refute the idea of individual agency. It should, however, lead us to question our intuitions about the extent to which we are free to exercise it.

Is the concept of structure any less complicated? William Sewell, a sociologist who spent his career trying to make sense of the structure-agency debate, began an important paper on the subject by pointing out that structure is "one of the most important and elusive terms in the vocabulary of current social science." Important and elusive, which means a source of both clarity and confusion. Part of the allure of the concept is its authoritative, case-closed, slam-dunk nature. We know that each generation of human beings has a rather disconcerting way of repeating a wide range of behaviors popular with the previous generation—disconcerting if you are looking for evidence of individual agency—and structure captures the almost deterministic nature of this continuity. Whatever aspect of social life we designate as structure—class, race, gender, means of production—is consequently imbued with a near-transcendent power to mold other aspects of our social lives. We need the concept of structure—what Sewell calls an "epistemic metaphor"—because we need a term for those key variables that appear responsible for the patterns we observe in human behavior.

The problem with many structural arguments is that they presume a causal determinism that is easy to refute. Quite simply, there is lots of evidence to suggest that human behavior is not as stable and predictable as structuralists claim. "What tends to get lost in the language of structure is the efficacy of human action," Sewell writes. "A social science trapped in an unexamined metaphor of structure tends to reduce actors to cleverly programmed automatons." Our predicament is as follows: we need structural explanations to explain intergenerational patterns of behavior, but we cannot explain change at the individual or societal level if we are structural ideologues and dismiss the role of individual agency. Which is to say that conservatives are right to accuse progressives of being overly reliant on structural arguments, and progressives are right to accuse conservatives of insisting on a degree of agency that the empirical evidence does not support.

The fundamental question remains: Are we ultimately in control of our fates, artisans of our own destinies, free-thinkers in the most literal sense of the word—or are our beliefs and behaviors mostly determined by external forces that are outside our control, and often our very comprehension? Put differently: Are we primarily social creatures who learn about ourselves and the world around us through decades of socialization—or are we individuals who, though we are thoroughly socialized in our early years, nevertheless develop over time into agents who can largely chart our own course in life? Only hardcore ideologues, I would argue, can answer these kinds of questions without triggering a barrage of second thoughts.

The politics of structure-agency—the politics of responsibility—is less ambiguous than the science. Conservatives—including the early- and late-career Loury—generally hold people responsible for the choices they make, including those that either lead them into poverty or prevent them from escaping it. Usually lost in this agent-centric view of causation are the wider social and economic forces that steer people toward some opportunities and away from others. Progressives—and mid-career Loury—tend to fixate almost exclusively on the structural forces that can trap people in poverty. Usually lost in this structure-centric view of causation is our ability as individuals to either personally defy the odds or to work with others to change the way structural forces impact our lives and communities.

Let me provide another example of the real-world tension between these two concepts, the difficult balancing act we must conduct when trying to weigh the respective influence of structure and agency. If a small town is flooded with cheap heroin, methamphetamines, or synthetic opioids, we will see a spike in drug use, crime, domestic violence, and mortality, irrespective of the character of the town's residents. A small town with strong civil institutions and great leadership will fare better than a town without these assets, but even the picture-perfect small town will buckle under the pressure of cheap and powerful drugs. And as we know from the current opioid crisis, the human toll will be immeasurably greater in small towns that have suffered from deindustrialization and an exodus of manufacturing jobs. The *structural* impacts here are well documented.

Where is human agency in this equation? Drug addicts, when sober, often loathe their addiction, and tend to be acutely aware of the destructive impact it has on their lives. Knowledge of these adverse consequences may provide some people with the power to resist shooting up the next time their body craves a foreign substance, or to enroll in a treatment program as soon as possible, but many addicts are unable to break their habit or stay clean after going through drug treatment programs even when they are painfully aware of the damage they are doing to themselves and their families. Why is the power to act differently—to exercise our agency—seemingly so elusive?

Even if we think that the availability of cheap drugs and the lack of meaningful jobs are the most important causal variables in understanding the opioid crisis, it would be a mistake to think of individual agency only in the context of the vulnerable addict. Dedicated parents, teachers, drug counselors, police officers, and civic leaders can make an enormous difference in the lives of their fellow community members. Former addicts might be inspired by their own profound struggles to start organizations with the purpose of helping vulnerable people find meaning in their lives before they succumb to addiction. It may be hard to scale up successful social programs, but this unfortunate reality and well-documented phenomenon is actually a testament to the ability of certain individuals and communities to overcome the seemingly deterministic nature of structural forces. Behavioral patterns exist, but exceptions abound. This dynamic points to the influence of both structure *and* agency.

## VII.

What kind of policy interventions would conservatives and progressives support if *both* sides approached the structure-agency debate with greater intellectual humility? I am convinced that we cannot understand the persistence of racial inequality if we privilege agency over structure, as most conservatives do, and that we are similarly handicapped if we assume, along with the majority of progressives, that agency has no bearing on the values and norms of a community, and that the poor choices individuals make are almost entirely a reflection of broader structural forces.

In a podcast last year, Loury offered a concise summary of his current position on the structure-agency debate. “Blame structural racism?” he asked rhetorically, brows furrowed. “Put down the ducky,” he answered sternly. “Give it up. You have to perform without a net. You have to stop whining. You have to grow up. You have to take responsibility for your life.” Even if we think this judgment is a bit harsh, there is a sense in which he is right to promote a tough-love version of self-help. Adults do dodge responsibility, as we all know from personal experience. We do make all kinds of excuses for ourselves. And it may well be the case that if we want to improve our lives, the best way to do so is to discount—perhaps even treat with disdain—the structural forces aligned against us.

But if our objective is to advance human development, which is indeed the thrust of Loury’s most recent work, we must shift our attention from excuse-making adults to highly impressionable young boys and girls. The two-year-old sitting in front of the TV for multiple hours a day is not dodging responsibility. The five-year-old who storms angrily out of his kindergarten classroom is not playing the victim. Urban poverty, especially multigenerational urban poverty, presents kids of all ages with an extraordinary set of challenges, and the evidence suggests—along with common sense—

that only a small fraction of them will successfully navigate these challenges without outside help.

Even if conservatives are right about the deleterious impacts a robust welfare state has on the agency of poor *adults*—that it discourages work, undermines individual initiative, and destabilizes families—it is a grave error to conclude that social programs that target poor *children* would be similarly counterproductive. If conservatives want stronger families, greater financial independence among adults, and kids who grow up to be genuine role models for their own children—if they are serious about the success sequence, in other words—they should support government-funded programs that promote the development of our most disadvantaged kids, even though this would mean supporting traditionally progressive programs such as subsidized daycare and universal pre-kindergarten (we can debate the public-private issue on another occasion).

Conservatism's own principles and internal logic lead to the conclusion that governments should do everything in their power to increase the odds that, when today's newborns become young adults, they will be more likely to resist the allure of the street, graduate high school, and postpone having children until they are financially independent.

It may be too late to help today's low-income adults (progressives would obviously disagree). It may even be too late to help today's low-income teenagers (progressives would disagree even more vehemently). But even if we make these two painful concessions, I am not aware of any coherent conservative arguments against programs that would help prepare poor children to thrive as productive and independent adults. The only way to blunt the effect of structural racism *and* promote human development—an agenda that would make early-, mid-, and late-career Loury proud—is through government support for programs that promote childhood development.