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- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Centre for Development Studies, Kerala 1999 *Gender, Poverty and Well-Being: Indicators and Strategies*. Report of the UNRISD, UNDP and CDS International Workshop, November 1997. UNRISD, Geneva
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Poverty, Culture of

The culture of poverty concept was developed in the USA during the 1960s primarily through the best-selling ethnographic realist publications of the cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who tape-recorded eloquent life histories of the urban poor. He reprinted numerous versions of his definition of the term 'culture of poverty' in short journal articles and also in the introductions to his books on family life among Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans living in shanty towns and ghettos (Lewis 1961, 1966a, 1966b, 1967). Lewis's culture of poverty struck an academic identity politics nerve, and at the turn of the millennium the concept remained enmeshed in a bitter polemic over how to analyze and engage politically the persistence of poverty in the midst of postindustrial plenty.

1. Ideological Backdrop to the Culture of Poverty

In the USA, irrespective of the theoretical orientation of researchers, most discussions on poverty polarize around value judgments concerning individual self-worth or around racial/ethnic stereotypes. US attitudes towards poverty are rooted in the country's colonial Calvinist/Puritanical heritage and are exacerbated by the historical importance of racialized hierarchies that have legitimized genocide, slavery, colonization, and immigration control. This helps explain why the culture of poverty concept continues to generate so much emotional heat while shedding so little conceptual light. The uses and misuses of the concept offer a fascinating case study in the sociology of knowledge illustrating the political interfaces between theory, empiricism, art, and ethnocentric moralizing in the social sciences.

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Poverty research throughout history has been more successful at reflecting the biases of an investigator's society than at analyzing the experience of poverty. The state of poverty research in any given country emerges almost as a litmus for gauging contemporary social attitudes toward inequality and marginalization. For example, while Lewis's books are read by a US public as an individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty that blames victims, in France his work is interpreted as a critique of society's failure to remedy the injuries of class-based inequality under free market capitalism.

2. Defining the Culture of Poverty

The socialist sociologist Michael Harrington was the first prominent academic to use the phrase 'culture of poverty' in a major publication. His book, *The Other America*, documented rural poverty in Appalachia and represented a moral call to action that anticipated the War on Poverty initiated by President Johnson in 1964 (Harrington 1962). As a first-generation son of impoverished Jewish immigrants who was influenced by Marxism in his youth, Lewis shared Harrington's social democratic commitment to combating poverty (Rigdon 1988, Harvey and Reed 1996). Ironically, however, Lewis's popularization of the culture of poverty concept is said to have tolled an intellectual death knell to the optimistic idealism of the mid-1960s that advocated eradicating poverty through direct state intervention (Katz 1989). This is because Lewis's definition of the culture of poverty stressed that a significant minority of the poor (approximately 20 percent) were trapped in self-perpetuating cycles of dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes: 'By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities' (Lewis 1965a, p. xlv).

This kind of psychological reductionist and individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty resonated with US popular blame-the-victim discourse. Ironically, in the same articles or book introductions in which he defined the culture of poverty, Lewis also included radical political statements contradictory to the implication that poverty is caused by self-perpetuating deficient value systems. For example, in his *Scientific American* version of 'The Culture of Poverty' he quotes Frantz Fanon, praises Castro's Cuba, and criticizes 'free-enterprise, pre-welfare-state stage capitalism' for spawning the culture of poverty (Lewis 1966b). At the same time he states that 'it is much more difficult to undo the culture of poverty than to cure poverty itself,' and advocates 'psychiatric treatment' for poverty in the USA (Lewis 1966b, p. 25).

In other words, the culture of poverty concept was confused theoretically at its inception. Unfortunately, Lewis never managed to clarify what he intended to mean. His published correspondence reveals that he was profoundly disturbed by the blame-the-victim interpretation of the causes of poverty that he triggered in the USA: 'There is nothing in the concept that puts the onus of poverty on the character of the poor' (Lewis 1967, p. 499).

The notion of a culture of poverty, consequently, should not be treated as a full-blown theory. As presented by Lewis, it was merely a bundle of some 70 traits which he did not link to a particular processual or dynamic logic. In fact, he never even listed all 70 of the traits that he claimed existed. The theoretical sloppiness of the culture of poverty concept may well be a product of the McCarthyist anticommunism in US academia that impinged on Lewis during his formative years in the 1950s. Four decades after their inception, his lists of culture of poverty character traits appear embarrassingly arbitrary, ethnocentric, and psychologically reductionist (Lewis 1966a, p. xlviii):

... a high incidence of maternal deprivation, of orality, of weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism ... male superiority, and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.

3. *The Policy Implications of the Culture of Poverty*

In the late 1960s and 1970s Lewis's culture of poverty concept produced an outpouring of political and academic reactions, primarily in the USA but also in Mexico and Puerto Rico (Leacock 1971, *Alteridades* 1994). Despite conceiving of his work as a call for the expansion of public-sector intervention on behalf of the poor, his concept took the popular intellectual spotlight off the need for structural economic reform, and glossed over the social power dynamics revolving around class, ethnic, gender, and colonial inequalities. Policy makers, if they paid any attention to the culture of poverty concept, interpreted it as advocating the need to rehabilitate the deficient cultural value systems of poor children through the agency of psychiatric social workers. For example, in the applied policy realm Lewis consulted in the development of the Head Start Program in the USA (Rigdon 1988), which has been criticized retrospectively as an attempt to 'take inner-city preschoolers who live in lead-painted, rat-infested tenements without steady heat or hot water, and metamorphose them into bright-eyed, upper-middle-class overachievers' (Bourgeois 1995, p. 325). Significantly, in the year 2001, Head Start was still

identified by both liberals and conservatives as one of the only successful antipoverty programs of the 1960s.

4. *The Theoretical Implications of the Culture of Poverty*

Unfortunately, most of the hostile academic responses to Lewis's culture of poverty concept have limited themselves to contradicting Lewis's empirical assertions, rather than to critiquing theoretically his psychological reductionism, his sloppy use of the culture concept, and his failure to link in a dynamic manner macrostructural political and economic forces—including gender power relations—to ideology, culture, and individual values (Valentine 1968, Stack 1974; for a political economy exception, see Katz 1989; for a feminist literary criticism exception, see Franco 1989). The bulk of the negative reaction hinges on a political concern for replacing the negative imagery of Lewis's painful but expressive ethnographic portraits of the everyday suffering of urbanized families, with positive images of the worthy poor, struggling for upward mobility against all odds. A late 1990s rehabilitating of the culture of poverty concept from a Marxist perspective dismissed the virulence of the US progressive reaction against the culture of poverty concept as a sectarian 'ultra Bolshevism' that swept the New Left when the general public was drifting ideologically to the Right following the War on Poverty. This precipitated a 'fruitless game of radical one-upmanship' among frustrated intellectuals, who were completely marginal to public political discourse, and who chose instead to devote their energies to proving their dedication to protecting the image of the poor (Harvey and Reed 1996). More importantly, the urgent righteousness of the anti-culture of poverty social science literature is comparable to the polemics against Moynihan's 1967 patriarchal attribution of the 'tangle of pathology' in the black family as being the central cause for the persistence of poverty among urban African-Americans (Rainwater and Yancey 1967).

The angry denial by academics of the existence of the types of violence and self-destructive behaviors described ethnographically by Lewis among the vulnerable families that he tape-recorded and described reveals how far removed intellectuals can be from the inner-city street. Although Lewis's writing deserves criticism for presenting his subjects in a decontextualized pornography of violence, sexuality, and emotional brutality, none of the behaviors or personalities described by Lewis should shock anyone who is familiar with everyday life in the US inner city or Latin-American shanty towns. On the contrary, Lewis's ethnographic realist descriptions, unfortunately, still ring true four decades after they were written. His disturbing material, however, demands

theoretical explanation and political contextualization, and that is where both Lewis and his critics and admirers have largely failed. By confining the debate to a worthy vs. unworthy poor dichotomy, the internecine squabbles between leftist, liberal, and conservative academics mimetically reproduce the right-wing hegemony in popular US culture that equates poverty with sinfulness.

Arguably, the polemics of righteousness that the culture of poverty prompted scared a generation of social scientists away from ethnographic analyses of inner-city poverty in the USA and, to a lesser extent, around the world (Wilson 1987, pp. 13–16). Indeed, accusations of supporting a ‘culture of poverty interpretation’ are still frequently invoked in polemical identity politics attacks between academics over any representation of poverty that is not flattering to poverty’s victims (cf. Lassalle and O’Dougherty 1997). Hence the virulence of the ‘underclass debate’ in sociology spawned by William Julius Wilson’s book *The Truly Disadvantaged* during the late 1980s through the 1990s (Katz 1989, Wacquant 1997).

From a theoretical perspective, the legacy of the culture of poverty debate has impoverished research in the social sciences on the phenomenon of social suffering, everyday violence, and the intimate experience of structural oppression in industrialized nations. Most importantly, by remaining mired in debates driven by identity politics, researchers have minimized the painful experience of day-to-day survival among the persistently poor. Epidemiological data on the associations between social class interpersonal violence, domestic violence, health outcomes, education outcomes, substance abuse, etc. are simply ignored by most poverty researchers in the USA.

The vacuum of critical intellectual engagement with the phenomenological experience of poverty has allowed right-wing academics subscribing to facile neoliberal blame-the-victim interpretations to capture popular imagination and policy debates—especially in the USA. Social or cultural reproduction theory, which emerged out of studies of poor youth at the intersection of the disciplines of education, sociology, and anthropology during the 1980s and early 1990s, offered a critical theoretical alternative. By focusing on the power dynamics of the interface between culture and social inequality, social/cultural reproduction theorists address the empirical reality of the existence of patterns of interpersonal self-destruction without obscuring structural political forces. Although vulnerable to critique for being overly functionalist, these theories allow for the reinscription of agency among the poor, as well as an autonomous role for culture in political economy (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Willis 1981).

Few serious social science researchers, if any, at the dawn of the twenty-first century would dare utilize the term ‘culture of poverty’ in their analysis, despite the fact that their empirical and theoretical work addresses

cultural expressions of social suffering due to the entrenchment of urban poverty in industrialized and postindustrialized societies. The problematic analytical and political utility of the culture of poverty concept demonstrates how dangerously essentializing the phrase ‘culture of ...’ can become with respect to any concept. Indeed, anthropologists cannot agree upon a useful definition for culture; nor do they understand how it operates without turning it into a black box of totalizing essences (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The culture of poverty furore reminds us that academics fight so hard over so little especially when marginalized political perspectives are at stake. At the turn of the millennium, much of the world’s population survives precariously in shanty towns, housing projects, tenements, and homeless encampments where mind-numbing, bone-crushing experiences of poverty engulf the socially vulnerable. Meanwhile, concerned academics continue to fiddle in their ivory towers, arguing over how to talk correctly about the structural violence of poverty.

See also: Class: Social; Conflict Sociology; Income Distribution; Inequality; Poverty: Measurement and Analysis; Poverty Policy; Poverty, Sociology of; Racism, History of; Racism, Sociology of; Underclass; Urban Poverty in Neighborhoods; Wealth Distribution

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P. Bourgois

Poverty in History

1. The Concept of Poverty

There is no universal concept of poverty which can be applied to all cultures, societies, or times. Nowadays, poverty is usually defined in relation to the medium-income level of a society, and the poverty line is drawn where a family has less than 50 percent of this medium income available. Such seemingly 'exact' definitions are not possible before general income statistics were generated by statistical offices in the twentieth century (with forerunners in some of the most developed countries in the nineteenth century, and even earlier in some cities).

Some researchers have sought to define an absolute level of poverty by drawing the borderline at the minimum input of calories which a person needs to survive. But even this definition cannot be used as a universal measure since this minimum differs with age, sex, climate, the individual body, health, and the kind of work a person does. Moreover, poverty certainly begins before a person dies of hunger. Therefore, 'poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation' (Townsend 1979, p. 31). But what is relative deprivation?

2. The Size of Poverty

If we were to take present standards of living in advanced societies as a yardstick, most people, probably more than 90 percent, in all cultures and ages, would have to be defined as paupers. Only rulers, their

immediate entourage, and some large landholders and merchants were free of poverty. Most people working in handicrafts or on the land whom we would term today as the middle classes lived at least at the borderline of poverty. When the harvest failed, epidemics arrived, or war devastated a region—and this occurred frequently even in Europe up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—they could be driven into misery. In other regions of the world, where periods of drought or torrential rains recur regularly, it is even today difficult for the majority of people to work themselves out of poverty.

For Western Europe we have sporadic estimates of the size of poverty for single cities and smaller regions since the later middle ages, and by Gregory King for a whole country, England, in 1688. They vary considerably, partly because the criteria used often remained vague and depended on the prejudice and the purpose of the author or institution taking the numbers. In some relatively well-to-do cities like Toledo, Lyons, Verona, Augsburg, Amsterdam, and Norwich in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the poor numbered between 5 and 10 percent of the population in 'normal' times, rising to between 20 and 30 percent in times of wars, epidemics, or harvest failures. Similar figures have been found for some rural hinterlands of such cities, e.g., around Nuremberg or Zurich. (Jütte 1994, p. 53).

According to Gregory King, however, paupers constituted the majority of the population of England at the end of the seventeenth century. While half a million families (comprising about 2.7 million persons) increased the wealth of the country, about 850,000 families (comprising more than 2.8 million persons) decreased it by depending on others for their livelihood (Mathias 1983, p. 24). Other contemporaries give, however, different figures.

In eighteenth century France estimates of the size of poverty vary according to the definition between one-third and half of the population. When, during the French Revolution, the definition of poverty was sharpened by excluding beggars, vagabonds, and others, 'unwilling to work' the Comité de Mendicité stated that 39 percent of the working men were not able to support a family of five persons (Hufton 1974, p. 22).

One can distinguish at least three different measures used by officials in Western Europe in early modern times to count their paupers. The first was to count the recipients of welfare in one way or the other. This depended, of course, on the welfare policy applied at a particular location. Known figures vary from 2 percent for the city of Berlin in 1665 (but 7.2 percent in 1799) to 14.8 percent in Trier in 1623. But it is also known that in nearly all cities, the majority of people who applied for welfare were refuted. (In Amsterdam in 1799 37,500 received help, while 81,080 were refuted.) The second measure were censuses of the poor. These were rare, and the few available figures vary between

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