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National Poverty Center

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Reconsidering Culture and Poverty

Highlights from *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 629, May 2010, David J. Harding, Michèle Lamont, and Mario Luis Small, eds.

The volume can be accessed in its entirety from: http://ann.sagepub.com/content/vol629/issue1/

New Thinking about Culture and Poverty

Culture is back on the poverty agenda. The last generation of scholarship on the poverty-culture relationship was primarily identified, for better or worse, with the "culture of poverty" model of Oscar Lewis[1] and the report on the Negro Family by Daniel Patrick Moynihan.[2] Lewis argued that sustained poverty generated a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices, and that this culture of poverty would tend to perpetuate itself over time, even if the economic conditions that originally gave rise to it were to change. Scholars in the 1970s were accused of "blaming the victims" for their problems because they seemed to imply that people might cease to be poor if they simply changed their culture. The heated political environment dissuaded many young scholars of the time from studying the connections between culture and poverty.

Scholars began to reconsider culture and poverty after the publication of Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). In recent years, a new generation of scholars of culture and poverty

Why Re-examine the Role of Culture in Poverty?

- **To debunk existing myths about the cultural orientations of the poor.** Developing a complete understanding of the conditions that produce and sustain poverty requires analyzing empirically how the poor make sense of and explain their current situations, options, and decisions, and what they do to improve their own prospects and those of their children. The authors emphasize that the poor share many of the same cultural views as the middle class and that there is considerable diversity in the cultural orientations of those living in poverty.

- **To understand better why people respond to poverty the way they do, both in how they cope with it and how they escape it.** A cultural lens helps us to understand why poor people living in the same high poverty neighborhoods make substantially different decisions regarding pregnancy, studying, community participation, job search and even crime. Exploring further how low-income populations make sense of their experiences and options is essential for developing stronger explanations of how some are able to escape poverty while others are not.

- **To improve the efficacy of social policy.** Ignoring culture can lead to misguided policies if the true motivations of poor people are misunderstood or ignored. In addition, the authors conclude that we need to better understand the cultural assumptions that guide policy decisions concerning the poor.

has *conceived* of culture in substantially different ways. It typically rejects the idea that whether people are poor can be explained by their values and questions the utility of the old distinction between "culture" and "structure." It generally does not define culture as comprehensively as Lewis did, instead distinguishing values from perceptions, and attitudes from behavior. It sets aside the ideas that most members of a group or nation share "a culture" or that a group's culture is more or less coherent or internally consistent. Its conceptions of culture tend to be more narrowly defined, easier to measure, and more plausibly falsifiable.

The objective of a recently published volume of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* is to demonstrate that the theoretically informed and empirically grounded study of culture can and should be part of the poverty research agenda. In their introduction, Small, Harding and Lamont describe seven cultural concepts now widely used by scholars—values, frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions. These concepts are employed in the volume's essays to illustrate the value of understanding the cultural perspectives of both individuals living in poverty and the policy elites who make poverty policy.

Culture and the Experience of Poverty

Persistent black joblessness has long been a core cause of poverty. In her examination of how Hispanic and black blue-collar workers decide whether or not to help co-ethnics in their search for jobs, **Sandra Susan Smith** finds that both groups apply plausible criteria in judging whether to help friends, family, and neighbors find jobs and in judging whether their support may tarnish their own reputations in the workplace. Smith concludes that, because of differences in perceptions regarding joblessness between black and Hispanic communities, there may be a greater reluctance on the part of black workers to provide support. Because of the importance of social networks in finding a job, this reluctance should be viewed, along with other factors, as part of the reason why persistent black joblessness has been so difficult to mitigate.

Young African-American men are at high risk of unemployment and poverty. How young unemployed African-American understand what makes for a good job is the focus of **Alford A. Young's** contribution. Young concludes that young men exhibited diverse perspectives in framing the attributes of an ideal job. Some focused on wages and benefits, while others focused on features of the work itself, such as autonomy and creativity. Both the extent of their prior work experience and their postsecondary educational experience contributed to these variations in how they characterized a good job. He concludes that greater attention to such variation, rather than attempts to broadly characterize a group's culture, can help us better understand the work orientation of low-income people.

Education is a proven pathway out of poverty, but why do some children achieve this goal while others do not? **Stephen Vaisey** investigates the role of "ideals" and "expectations" in educational success. Low-income young people, he finds, have lower ideals for higher education attainment than non-poor respondents and also have lower expectations for what they will actually attain. Stressing the importance of this connection, he concludes that scholars need to integrate values into their research and to work to understand the social and cultural sources of differences in values and motivations.

Child support and responsible parenthood have long been important policy topics. Yet as **Maureen Waller** points out, policy thinking has been largely dominated by economic considerations such as support payments and has not incorporated perceptions of the parents themselves about indicators of good parental involvement. Drawing on interviews with poor mothers and fathers, she identifies non-economic factors that parents find important in the father's role: caregiving, spending time, role modeling, and material support. Financial support, though important, did not overshadow non-economic factors, and parents often view informal financial support as signaling a greater commitment from fathers than coerced formal child support payments. The latter were often viewed as potentially damaging to the relationship between the father and child. Incorporation of these cultural perspectives, Waller concludes, will strengthen public child support and parenthood policies.

Poverty is more common among single-mother households. The prevailing view that unwed pregnancy in the inner city stems from men's unwillingness to commit to long-term monogamous relationships is challenged by **Nathan Fosse** in his study of low-income African-American men. He argues that three "cultural logics" underlie attitudes toward faithfulness and non-monogamy: doubt (the belief that one's partner may also be cheating); duty (obligations to male peers, family, or partners); and destiny ("life is short" justifications for cheating vs. future orientation monogamy). He stresses, though, that none of these logics produces clear-cut courses of action. His analysis shows that inner-city culture is far-more heterogeneous than traditionally thought.

Culture and Policymaking

Can political institutions increase the voice of the poor in policymaking? **Vijayendra Rao** and **Paromita Sanyal** examine a public policy implemented throughout India. "Gram sabhas," local public forums in some two million towns and villages, represent a "public sphere" where Indians of all income levels meet to discuss issues of local importance. They found that while the forums did indeed provide opportunity for participation, the proceedings tended to be dominated by competitive rather than deliberative interactions, and that class distinctions were regularly invoked. Yet they also found that the gram sabhas helped to create a new "political culture" that offers poor people avenues for engaging others and questioning decisions and that help to create a voice for the needs of India's poorest citizens.

How do the cultural lenses through which policy elites view poverty affect policymaking? **Joshua Guetzkow** compares two different conceptions of antipoverty policy from two periods in the United States. In the Great Society period (1964-1968), policy elites largely diagnosed the root causes of poverty as "community breakdown:" poor health, lack of education and job skills, discrimination, urban slums, and inadequate health care. In this conception, poor people themselves were largely held to be blameless victims "trapped" in poor neighborhoods. Public policy stressing income supports, job training and incentives for working were implemented. By the early 1980s, however, the diagnosis of policy elites had shifted and family breakdown (teen pregnancy,

drug abuse, lack of mainstream values) as well as dependence on public support systems constituted the diagnostic frame. This led to more restrictive welfare policies culminating in the 1996 welfare reform legislation, which emphasized work requirements and self-sufficiency. Guetzkow concludes that the policy frames of these different sets of policy elites contributed to the shift in policy toward a more punitive and less generous stance toward the poor.

Culture, Poverty and Effective Social Policy

The importance of both culture and structural factors in understanding poverty is the central thesis of **William Julius Wilson's** chapter. While both culture and structure matter, it is the structural impediments that have the largest negative effects on black inner-city neighborhoods. A significant policy challenge, he argues, is that despite the significant effects of structural factors in prolonging inner-city poverty, most Americans believe that the causes are rooted in the personal behaviors of the poor. Wilson argues that a holistic approach, one that appreciates both the structural challenges and the cultural dynamics, has greatest potential to address deep-rooted poverty problems. He discusses the potential of the Harlem Children's Zone as an exemplar of this approach.

What lessons should policymakers take from this volume? Representative **Lynn Woolsey** stresses the need for legislators to constantly reexamine the assumptions they use in framing problems, and to be aware of societal changes that make their

assumptions obsolete. She cites the shifting nature of the American family toward two-worker families, and the ways these changes have affected economic and social dynamics for families. She argues that policies that support modern families are essential. Representative **Raúl Grijalva** argues that poverty is far more complicated and "insidious" than policy makers often believe. Expanding perspectives on the causes and consequences of poverty is essential if appropriate solutions are to be envisioned and carried out.

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1. Lewis, Oscar. 1966. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York.* New York: Random House.

2. Moynihan, Daniel P. 1965. *The Negro family: The case for national action.* Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor.