Culture of Poverty: Critique

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Abstract

This article recounts the historical, theoretical, and empirical basis of the culture of poverty program as it was developed in the writings of Oscar Lewis and examines the anthropological critique of his work that developed immediately upon the heels of Lewis' final publications. Further, this article examines the recent emergence of the culture and poverty program and notes its confluences with and points of departure from the culture of poverty program.

In 1966, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis published an article titled 'The Culture of Poverty.' There, Lewis developed and systematized a way of analyzing what happens to people in poverty. He claimed that many poor people were poor because their parents had passed onto them various traits and habits that keep people in poverty. Also, he suggested that governmental policies might break what was also known as the 'cycle of poverty.' This way of looking at people in poverty, in its moral, intellectual, and political implications, has a very long history, but Lewis' formulation caught the attention of the public and remains as a kind of litmus test in all research on poverty. In 1966, policy makers in Washington were putting the final touches on the set of programs known as the 'Great Society.' They were driven by a complex political imperative. As John F. Kennedy put it in his inaugural address: "Man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty" (20 January 1961). This begged for an overarching narrative grounded in the behavioral sciences. Researchers from all disciplines proposed lists of traits that appeared to make the poor different, and suggested that those traits might be alleviated through various interventions. Lewis brought all this together under the heading of 'culture' taken in what was then the most common sense version of the concept. He appeared to offer a compassionate theory of poverty that confirmed the wisdom of the Great Society programs and suggested how they might be expanded and refined as the United States kept fighting what was also known as the 'War on Poverty.' The anthropological reaction against this theory was swift and severe – but, to this day, new versions keep appearing under new guises.

While the phrase 'culture of poverty' is firmly associated with Oscar Lewis' work, as well as with the policies of the Johnson era, it can easily be placed in a long tradition of conceptualizing the poor and imagining policies to help and control them. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Malthus and Mayhew had provided the intellectual justification for viewing poverty as a problem to be controlled (Himmelfarb, 1971, 1983). They developed many of the methods and starting points later embraced by Lewis. This included descriptive statistics of the distribution of 'traits' (rate of prostitution, alcoholism, unwed motherhood, etc.) across populations and correlations often interpreted as causations. This paralleled much nineteenth-century social theory purporting to explain other differences in human populations on biological or evolutionary bases.

Lewis' conception of culture also built on a long tradition and it made common sense in an American context heavily influenced by culture and personality studies, as well as by the Parsonian attempt to bring together sociology, anthropology, and psychology in a grand theory of action (Parsons and Shils, 1951). Talcott Parsons was at the time the most powerful sociologist in America who, as the founder of the interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard, trained many influential social scientists of the following generation. The Parsonian sense of culture as what is learned, valued, and transmitted from one generation to another may actually marked a significant departure from the Boasian origins of the use of the term in the anthropology he advocated. Boas founded at Columbia University the first modern academic Department of Anthropology in the United States, and he trained many of the most influential anthropologists of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. He had proposed 'culture' as a way to force attention to the processes that distinguish populations from each other even when living in very similar ecological environments with similar technologies (Trouillot, 2003: 91). But many of his students, and even more of his students' students, including Lewis, transformed 'culture' into the possession of a population. It was made to refer to whatever shapes personalities, that is then inscribed in the personality of most member of the population, psychologically, through internalization whether phrased as 'enculturation' or 'socialization.' Many argued that this process could be so complete as to render people unable to imagine other possibilities than those proposed by 'their' culture. The process would lead them to reproduce their conditions in future generations unless external forces intervened. This emphasis on internalization of social and cultural patterns was further systematized by Parsons who argued powerfully that culture is mostly a 'value' concept referring to internal states (Parsons and Shils, 1951: 159–160).

Soon after Lewis' synthesis was published, intellectual opposition to this systematization arose, particularly among cultural anthropologists (Valentine, 1968; Leacock, 1971). By using the preposition 'of' to link culture and poverty, and by arguing that the poor are caught in a culture that they reproduce in their children, Lewis encouraged those who imagined that alleviating poverty had to proceed through reforming the poor, and particularly their children. Soon, the opposition started to argue that accepting culture of poverty framework

amounted to 'blaming the victim' and, in a few years, the phrase became a mark of opprobrium.

The overall argumentation, however, did not disappear, though it is now sometimes couched in different terms. In recent years, William Julius Wilson (2009, 2012[1987]), among others (Furstenberg et al., 1999), has argued for a return to at least some of the lines of investigation Lewis had put forth. The critique of these lines of investigation is also being renewed particularly by anthropologists who have distanced themselves from the concept of culture, as well as by those who are working at recapturing the original Boasian concerns with establishing that, among human beings, like causes, such as 'poverty,' do not necessarily lead to like effects.

This article is organized into seven sections. Beginning with a historical overview of precursors to the 'culture of poverty' program, the sections move chronologically toward the contemporary state of research and critical engagement relating poverty to culture.

Poverty and Policy: Some Historical Background

The Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601, later carried from England to America (Katz, 2011: 11–16), divided the poor into three categories: those who could not work, those who could work but choose not to, and those who are willing to work. The Poor Laws mark the point at which religious duty toward the poor gave way to legally sanctioned relations. Two centuries later, in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (2003[1798]), Thomas Robert Malthus theorized that there was a relationship between population and economy, but social position between the two was static and thus, whatever happened in the broad economy, the poor would be left mired in 'misery and vice.' Malthus opposed Adam Smith's argument that the spread of capitalism would lead to an improvement in the well-being of all, as national wealth increased (Himmelfarb, 1983). Malthus countered that the population principle would prevent this from happening because population expands to fit available resources. This produces a stress on these resources so that poverty would remain and a class of people would occupy the position. Malthus also inquired into the mechanism by which the population is sorted into successes and failures. His answer is that those at the bottom of the economic ladder remained there because they lacked the qualities of economic superiors; namely moral restraint in the form of vice, drunkenness, and sexual promiscuity, as well as the inability to discipline themselves to foresee and save for the future (Himmelfarb, 1983: 119).

Malthus's work entered the world of nineteenth century public policy in various ways. Mayhew, a journalist, took to the streets of London to observe and describe the types of poor people then living on the streets of London. He did this through a variety of methodological tools such as maps, biographies, and observation. More importantly, he applied the tools of storytelling to exaggerate his observations toward evoking pathos in his readers. Mayhew's (1986[1850]) book is filled with ethnographic vignettes and statistics linked to area maps aimed at showing the intensity of crime, ignorance (illiteracy), and illegitimacy. He provided a further warrant to novelistic accounts of poverty by Dickens and others. All this led to new laws and programs. To quote Himmelfarb: "It is one of the many ironies of the period that just at the time the poor were finally relieved of the stigma of pauperism, when they seemed to be following the model laid down by Adam Smith rather than that of Malthus, Mayhew came along and, with the most laudable intentions and the most generous of sympathies, inflicted upon the poor a new stigma and saddled society with a new problem, the 'culture of poverty'" (Himmelfarb, 1984: 370). Karl Marx himself, if one accepts Rancière's interpretation (2004[1983]), may have contributed to this view of the poor as caught in their position. On the one hand, Marx was suspicious of the labor unions emerging from the poor in England. On the other hand, he reserved for intellectuals a particular place in the enlightenment of the proletariat.

The Culture Concept from Boas to Lewis

The nineteenth century also saw the first definitions of the culture concept as it came to be used by anthropologists. As Edward Tylor put it: "Culture … is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (2004[1871]: 1). A century later, Lewis issued a definition of culture somewhat consistent with Tylor's definition – though slanted in a more psychological direction. As Lewis put it: "The culture of poverty is not just a matter of deprivation or disorganization, a term signifying the absence of something. It is a culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a readymade set of solutions for human problems, and so serves a significant adaptive function" (Lewis, 1966). At about the same time, the most powerful anthropologist of his generation, Clifford Geertz, wrote that 'culture' is both 'model of' and 'model for' behavior (Geertz, 1973[1966]: 93).

This view of culture has now been thoroughly critiqued (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Ortner, 1999) but, even at the time, it represented a significant departure from an earlier version developed by Franz Boas. Boas was trained in physics and geography but moved away from these fields when he started working with the people of the Pacific Northwest and curated ethnographic collections at the Smithsonian and the Museum of Natural History. There, he began to debate with others over the display of ethnographic artifacts and, indirectly, about the human activities that produced these artifacts. J.W. Powell, McGee, and Mason were convinced that primitive people came to adopt more evolved ideas, materials, and processes through a process of social evolution in which the environment strictly determined social development. Following this principle led Mason to argue for the display of ethnographic artifacts in term of evolutionary phases following the logic that, in human affairs, as in nature, like-causes lead to like-events. Boas opposed this. He argued that "due to the intricacy of the acting causes" (Boas, 1887: 485) in human action, it was unlikely that like causes could be established and used for drawing broad generalizations and "the disposition of men to act suitably can be the only general cause." This led him to argue, successfully, for the display of artifacts in the context of their use among a particular people, at a particular time in their history.

After Boas moved to Columbia University, he developed this perspective in his research and argued forcefully and systematically against all those who interpreted culture as the inevitable properties of people caught in various conditions. For him, culture referred to processes of ongoing adaptation to local conditions. Boas emphasized that people of all backgrounds can adapt to any setting if they must, or allowed to (1938[1911]). He demonstrated that people could adapt differently to very similar conditions. This style of argumentation was echoed in a letter, Conrad Arensberg wrote to Oscar Lewis. Lewis had written to Arensberg that "poverty, and all that goes with it, is literally stable, persistent, and passed down along family lines. Can all the many cross cultural similarities I have mentioned been the result of accident or coincidence?" Arensberg answered: "The reactions to poverty are many: Middle Eastern, Arab austerity, Puritan frugality, Chassidism, the lazzaroni of Naples, etc. This shows that poverty, even with urbanization, does not produce similarities of culture …" (Rigdon, 1988: 226) In other words, very similar causes (material deprivation, political discrimination, disease, etc.) lead to very different kinds of adaptations.

Lewis' Intellectual Milieu

Lewis was a product of Columbia's anthropology department, at a time when the department was in transition from the Boasian paradigm as it had evolved to concerns with cultural ecology and multilineal evolution. At Columbia, Lewis studied with Ruth Benedict but also took courses on technology, archaeology, etc. (Rigdon, 1988: 12). In 1939 Lewis, and his wife and frequent collaborator Ruth, were one of four field teams organized by Benedict to carry out a comparative and historical study in the Blackfoot Reservation. This led to Lewis' dissertation on "The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Effects of the Fur Trade" (1943). The dissertation was not based on field research but rather on the analysis of historical documents. But it does echo the tension that characterized Lewis' work throughout his career: the concern with economic interaction between unequal groups, and the consequences of this interaction.

In 1944, and again in 1947, Lewis spent several months in Tepoztlán, a large village in Mexico, the beginning of a series of field investigations in the country. Lewis' subsequent work came to focus more on the psychological consequences of life in difficult economic conditions, and less on the social and political processes that produced difficult conditions. In his first book (1960[1951]), Lewis distinguishes his work from earlier work by Robert Redfield on the same village (1930), emphasizing that life in the village could not be understood except in terms of the political history of the village through the Mexican revolution, the Spanish colonization, and back to pre-Columbian. He lists the governmental agencies that controlled the village, expands on its political organization, and traces differences in wealth and land ownership. He also wrote about the impact of all this on interpersonal relationships, particularly in families. He concludes with comments on the relationship of his work to the discussions of 'culture and personality' that most concerned many influential anthropologists at the time and notes that "I have not written about *the* Tepoztecan personality" (1951: 426). But his interest in the issue remained and led him to focus on families as the unit of analyses and entry point for gaining "greater insight into both the culture and the people" (Lewis cited in Rigdon, 1988: 34). This turn, as well as his admiration for such major figures in the late versions of culture and personality theorizing as Erik Erickson and Jules Henry, took him to the formulation of the culture of poverty for which he remains best known.

The Policy Context of the 'Culture of Poverty'

When Lewis wrote his paper in the Scientific American, a still somewhat obscure Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel P. Moynihan, was asked to write a report making the case for federal policies to 'resolve a problem' he summarized as follows: "Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American. At this point, the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world. The cycle can be broken on if these distortions are set right [through a national effort directed toward the question of family structure]" (Moynihan, 1965: 47).

This report quoted extensively from E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1966[1939]) and used the book as justification. The foreword to the third edition, also published in 1966, was written by the famous sociologist Nathan Glazer who dismissed what he called the "cultural relativism and anthropological romanticization" associated with Allison Davis who had also written about black life in the postreconstruction South (1941). Glazer writes: "Frazier I think was more hardheaded, … as was W.E.B. Du Bois: It was all bad – the abandoned mothers, the roving men, the sexually experienced youth" (1966: xi). Glazer emphasized that much of what Frazier had written was supported by contemporary social science, including anthropology: "The family itself was the support of the social structure. Children were socialized into certain values … and they maintained a society" (Glazer, 1966: ix). This statement may be closer to Parsons than to the anthropologists, Glazer mentions. And he does not mention the Chicago sociologists who had trained Frazier and who would also have encouraged him toward social psychological explanations of individual behavior.

The statement was also close to statements by others hailing from other disciplines. In 1962, Michael Harrington's published a book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, an examination of poverty in the Appalachian region of the United States. Stylistically, Harrington shared with Lewis and Mayhew a depiction of the poor as being both structurally and culturally deprived. Like Lewis, Harrington was moved by a moral and political concern with changing the conditions of the poor that had to proceed through the political activities of the more privileged. Social psychologists (Deutsch, 1960) came to the issue from slightly different perspectives. Linguists also provided evidence (Bereiter and Engelmann, 1966; Bernstein, 1962, 1965). All talked about deprivation, developmental delays, etc., and wrote about the effect of all this on school success, which could then be used as a proxy for the evaluation of the social costs of poverty and the effectiveness of various policies. The method was systematized in the *Equality of*

Educational Opportunity Study (2007[1966]), generally known as the 'Coleman Study,' commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1966 and parallels the Moynihan report by also emphasizing the role of families over the role of schools in the measure of schooling success. To this day, this method remains the main entry point in the operationalization of poverty and its effects, as well as the means to measure the effectiveness of government policies. The ensemble of political concerns crystalized through the Civil Rights movement, given an opportunity by Lyndon Johnson and the Congressional majorities in the 1960s, and supported by all the most respectable of behavioral scientific theorizing – including by black intellectuals like Frazier – produced a perfect storm.

The Critique

Within a few years, in the mid-1960s, those who hoped that the federal government would get involved in the problems of poverty were encouraged by the creation of programs like *Head Start*, the expansion of older programs like *Aid to Dependent Children*, the funding of such things as *Sesame Street*, etc. But soon, all this slowed down as the mood in Washington changed and the intellectual grounding of these efforts, as well as a reinterpretation of the political motivations that may have made these programs popular, came under withering criticism. In 1967, Lee Rainwater and William Yancey edited a volume summarizing the first wave of reactions to the Moynihan Report. In 1968, Charles Valentine published a critique that remains the best and most systematic presentation of the anthropological response to Lewis.

Lewis' biographer Rigdon (1988: 109–110), in taking a historical look at Lewis' work and the ensuing critiques has summarized the six flaws most often mentioned:

1. Sampling was not from low-income people, but rather from those Lewis believed would exhibit the traits constituting the culture of poverty.
2. Lewis relied on the concept of 'culture trait,' but his departure deviated from common academic usage of the term and he failed to elucidate a definition to illuminate his idiosyncratic use.
3. Lewis put forward no standard to measure the traits typical of the culture of poverty.
4. Lewis assumed that the culture of poverty was a 'way of life' handed down from generation to generation, but conducted no longitudinal studies to demonstrate this point. Instead, he relied upon interviews with consecutive generations of the same family.
5. Lewis' claims about the transmission of the culture of poverty rely upon a causal connection that his data cannot supply.
6. Lewis, much like Mayhew before him, skewed his sample with exceptional cases and eschewed less dramatic cases that might have challenged his assumptions.

Valentine addressed all these matters, and he also emphasized that Lewis' own data, as presented in *La Vida*, for example, did not support his generalizations (1968: 50–66). This interview data actually provides rich portraits of people who are aware of and engaged with concerns and politics beyond their immediate concerns with the problems of family and friends. The empirical Lewis, in contrast to the theoretical Lewis, demonstrates political involvement and activism as well as a cosmopolitanism his theoretical stance denies.

Valentine also criticized Frazier and, by implication, most research in sociology, psychology, linguistics. First, Valentine (1968: 122) argues that Frazier's depictions of the poor are drawn from second-hand case studies and writings made by policemen, social workers, and other observers with their own professional concerns, not from Frazier's first-hand study. Second, Frazier uses census data and other statistical abstracts as evidence of social disorganization, ignoring the effects of the statistical technique in shaping the data.

Alternatives and Follow-Up

Lewis, like his teachers at Columbia University, was concerned with the relationship of individuals to each other and to the institutions they faced. But there were other ways of conceptualizing this relationship that did not veer into studying psychological internalization of 'cultural traits.' The first came directly out of the initial version of the Boasian tradition. The second had its roots in British social anthropology.

Solon Kimball and Alfred Kroeber, at the 1954 Stanford conference on Anthropology and Education, spoke from the Boasian tradition. They called for a powerful turn in the work of the first generation of anthropologists: that any form of human behavior must be seen in its context of use, and approached in a comparative manner.

The second direction was taken by a group of anthropologists working in England. Most notable were Barnes, who studied social like in a Norwegian fishing village (1954), and Bott who wrote about working-class families in London (1958). Both used social network analysis as the means to study the relation of individual to society. Barnes found that individuals were enmeshed in multiple, overlapping networks of social relations stretching into and out of their respective families. The poor in Barnes' study were neither isolated, nor disorganized, nor uninterested in large issues. Similarly, Bott found that the composition of married couples' external social networks in London influenced their roles within the family, and that these networks offered emotional support not offered within the family roles. Hence, Bott found that poor families were not at all isolated. Neither Barnes nor Bott found the lives of the poor or working class to be any less complex or well organized than those of their wealthier contemporaries.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a surge of such studies, mostly by anthropologists, in various settings, through various methodologies, and from the point of view of different theoretical frameworks. Some of the most notable are Carol Stack (1975), Holloman and Lewis (1978), Shimkin et al. (1978) on black families, Ray McDermott's work on the organization of classroom interaction (1977), Paul Willis on working-class youth (1977), Luis Moll on 'funds of knowledge' (1994). Together, they demonstrated more systematically that there are many ways to being poor, that these ways are tied to matters not under the control of the poor, that the poor can strategize in

order to survive, and that they always 'make sense' if one understood the full context of their actions.

A Continuing Debate

It is not the case, however, that all concerned with the poor were convinced by these demonstrations. Glazer's critique of some initial work on blacks in the South by Davis and Havighurst was taken up by sociologists and social pyschologists, who charged anthropologists with romanticization and broad generalization on the basis of very small and nonrandom samples analyzed in unreliable ways that could not be replicated. While many anthropologists criticize the use of statistics, many in the other disciplines criticized their unwillingness to deal with well-established correlations in large data sets. The clarion call may have been sounded by the sociologist William Julius Wilson who, in 1987, affirmed that "liberals will have to propose thoughtful explanations of the rise in inner-city dislocations. Such explanations should emphasize the dynamic interplay between ghetto-specific cultural characteristics and social and economic opportunities" (1987: 18). By casting the debate as one of liberals versus conservatives, Wilson also reaffirmed the moral imperative behind work on the poor that emphasize dislocation.

From a different, though related point of view, the powerful French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977[1972]) wrote many very influential books about what he called the *habitus* that characterize individuals as they are shaped by their conditions ('structured structures') they keep reproducing in themselves and their children ('structuring structures'), as they misunderstand the mechanisms involved in the reproduction of their social positions, particularly those proceeding through schooling and the media. Bourdieu's work has had a major impact on the American social sciences and remains an inescapable reference point when looking at class inequalities and poverty.

In short order, behavioral scientists from a variety of disciplines presented evidence of the dangers a child face when raised in a household led by a single woman with or without step-parents, people like Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) presented the kind of evidence that led to a reprise of Frazier and Moynihan's take. Linguists presented again the same kind of evidence used in the 1960s to build a case for child deprivation: some children hear more words, in more complex settings, and are thus better prepared for school (Hart and Risley, 2004). This research is once again the foundation of new policies from the 'No Child Left Behind' act to the call for universal preschools, comprehensive education programs, and other broad interventions. Recent research from alternative perspectives points out deficiencies in the use of concepts like 'cultural characteristics,' 'dislocation,' 'deprivation,' by bringing out the evidence that the poor, in the worst of economic circumstances, can still organize themselves to face what is their actual conditions. Evidence has been brought out about the enslaved Africans in the American South who taught themselves how to read (Gundaker, 2007), the Mexican migrant workers who taught themselves English (Kalmar, 2000), fishermen who learn to fish through the experience of catching, or not catching, fish (Pálsson and Helgason, 1998), illiterate parents who teach their children to read (Ranciere, 1991), and the near ubiquitous experience of teaching oneself how to use a computer.

In the long run, it might make the most sense to consider these controversies as a long conversation among mostly well-meaning people seeking to help people in difficulty. The imperative to help will remain, as will the uncertainties of how to do it in such a way that it does not make matters worse. Debates will be continually waged on how to provide the analytic frameworks and empirical studies that might explain the conditions of poverty, and contribute to an assessment of the efficacy of various policies.

See also: Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Education: The United States and Beyond; Boas, Franz (1858–1942); Early Emotional Development and Cultural Variability; First Language Acquisition, Developmental Psychology of; Poverty Law: United States; Poverty Policy; Poverty in History; Poverty: Measurement and Analysis; Special Education in the United States: Legal History; Urban Poverty in Neighborhoods; Values Across Cultures, Development of; Welfare and Education.

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