

“Beyond the Culture of Poverty: Meaning-making among Low-Income Population around Family, Neighborhood, and Work.” By Monica Bell, Nathan Fosse, Michèle Lamont and Eva Rosen

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Meaning-making is an essential feature of social life: as humans make their way through their daily lives, they inevitably interpret themselves, their actions, those of others, and the environment that surround them. Thus, understanding social life requires attending to the cultural dimension of reality. Yet, when it comes to the study of low-income populations, factoring in culture has often been a contentious project. This is because explaining poverty through culture has been equated with blaming the poor for their predicaments. Lamont and Small (2008) and Harding, Lamont and Small (2010) have tried to move the debate forward by making a case for integrating culture in explanations of poverty. They have suggested that this requires going beyond the “culture of poverty” debate to incorporate concepts that cultural sociologists have developed and used over the last thirty years to understand the role of meaning making in basic social processes: concepts such as frames, narratives, institutions, repertoires, and boundaries.¹ These concepts are analytical devices typically used to capture intersubjective definitions of reality, as opposed to normative positions. They have been useful for identifying a diversity of frameworks through which low-income populations understand their reality and develop paths for mobility. The present paper builds on these contributions by exploring the place of culture in studies of American low-income populations in three important areas of social life: family, neighborhood, and work. The three core sections of this paper describe scholarship that has incorporated culture concepts from cultural sociology, as well as other approaches to culture, to illuminate crucial aspects of social processes related to poverty considered as an explanans or an explanandum. Each section concludes with a few proposals for future research.

FAMILY

Family relations and family structure were central to 1960s culture of poverty literature. Lewis’ (1959; 1966) located the culture of poverty within family, focusing on the culture of machismo among Mexican and Puerto Rican men, children’s emotional ties with their mothers, and the impact of migration on family dynamics (Mirandé 1977). Lewis argued that these features contributed to the reproduction of a culture of poverty from which poor populations were unable to abstract themselves. Similarly, the Moynihan Report argued that family structure was a central explanation for the ongoing educational and economic disadvantages facing low-income American blacks: “[T]he Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole. . . .” (N.p.). Other research from the 1960s and early 1970s underscored Lewis’ and Moynihan’s perspective that cultural differences in family organization and gender attitudes between the poor and non-poor perpetuated disadvantages in housing, education, crime, and the labor market (*see, e.g.*, Rainwater 1966, 1970: 362-97, 401; Hannerz 2004 [1969]:70-104; *cf.* Frazier 1939). Much of that literature focused on urban low-income African-American populations.

Although these scholars described black family organization primarily as an outgrowth of racial discrimination and economic disadvantage, their characterizations of the fragmented family as a cultural

¹ Note in particular Swidler’s conception of culture as a *toolkit* from which we construct *strategies of action* (1986), Bourdieu’s notion of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1977, Lamont and Lareau 1988), as well as the concepts of *institutions* (Berger and Luckman 1967), *frames* (Benford and Snow 2000, Goffman 1974), and *narratives* (Somers 1994).

aspect of poverty implied that culture, not economic or social structure, was the main explanation for why African-American families were perceived as “disorganized.” There have been two main responses to this implication in more recent research on poor families. One line of research has mostly moved away from cultural analysis of family structure, instead concentrating on macro-structural explanations for persistent poverty (*see, e.g.*, Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Jargowsky 1997). The other line of research aimed to debunk the idea that there are major cultural differences between poor and non-poor families or to explain the social context driving apparent cultural differences (*see, e.g.*, Hill 2001; Hays 2003; Young 2004; Burton and Tucker 2009). Again, this research almost invariably focuses on African-American families (*but see* Mirandé 1977; Martínez 1999). A segment of this literature avoided using the word “culture” and instead framed arguments in terms of “costs,” “expectations,” “barriers,” “aspirations,” and other somewhat less fraught language (*see, e.g.*, Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis 2007; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). Yet others use standard concepts inspired by cultural sociology, emphasizing repertoires, frames, cultural capital, symbolic boundaries, narratives, and so on (*e.g.*, Harding 2010; Carter 2005; Lareau 2003; Waller 2002; also Lamont and Small 2008 and Wilson 2009). We summarize these literatures by focusing on marriage and relationship formation, family formation and parenting identities, and parenting strategies and kinship networks.

Marriage and Relationship Formation

Scholars who study poverty and marriage often seek explanations for the lower propensity of low-income women to get married and for why, in such large numbers, poor women have children before or in lieu of marriage. Current research on delayed marriage among low-income populations emphasizes two factors: perceived economic barriers to marriage and lack of trust between men and women. The importance of feeling economically stable before marriage is prevalent among low-income families, with some work suggesting that economic concerns are the most important reason for marital delay (Wilson and Neckerman 1986; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005;² Gibson-Davis 2007). However, mistrust and expected infidelity—cultural factors—feature prominently in low-income men’s and women’s descriptions of their reasons for delaying marriage (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis 2007).

Sociologists of culture, poverty, and the family have sought to understand the nature of and reasons for prevalent mistrust and concerns about infidelity among low-income men and women. Some of the most recent research has emphasized the situational and contextual characteristics of relationship mistrust, pointing out that although repertoires of mistrust are frequently drawn upon in these relationships, there is also great heterogeneity within low-income populations in the degree to which mistrust exists, the reasons it developed, and the ways in which it manifests within relationships (*see, e.g.*, Cherlin et al. 2004; Burton et al. 2009; Fosse 2010). In a thirty-year study of low-income African-American families in Baltimore, Furstenberg (2001) documents a generational difference in women’s cultural scripts about marriage, with the older cohort of women eventually marrying their child’s father and the younger cohort, mostly because of gender distrust, never marrying. Other scholars call into question whether relationship mistrust and other cultural aspects of marriage planning are distinctive features of relationship formation among the poor; they note that changes to relationships and family structure among the poor have taken place in a broader cultural context in which non-marital birth and marital delay have been rapidly increasing. Thus, marital delay among the poor may not necessarily be

² The Fragile Families Study, a longitudinal survey dataset following a cohort of 5,000 children born between 1998-2000, is currently the best source of nationally representative quantitative data on “fragile families,” or couples with children who are unmarried at the time of the child’s birth. Fragile Families deliberately oversampled Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and lower-income families who receive government benefits. Sara McLanahan, Princeton University, is the study’s primary investigator.

the result of a distinctive subcultural perspective on marriage but rather a reaction to widespread cultural evolution in the meaning, timing, and perceived necessity of marriage (Jencks 1992; Cherlin 2009).

Particularly in the late 20th century, one concern for researchers of family, culture, and poverty among African Americans was the extent to which antebellum U.S. slavery impacts gender and marital relations among black Americans—especially low-income black Americans—in the present. Although this idea of cultural continuity is traceable to the early writings of Chicago sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1939), Orlando Patterson (1998) has more recently and most thoroughly articulated the argument that conditions of slavery, specifically the forced separation of slave children from their parents and the emasculation of male slaves, has led to culturally embedded gender tension and family fragmentation among African-Americans today (Moynihan 1965; Frazier 1939:108-09; also Patterson 2010 on mechanisms of cultural persistence).³ Scholars have criticized this view for at least three reasons. First, there is disagreement over the empirical story that black family structure was highly fragmented during and immediately after slavery. Although most research on this topic has found statistically significant differences between black and white family structure in the US a few decades after the Civil War (*see* Gordon and McLanahan 1991⁴; Preston, Lim, and Morgan 1992; Morgan et al. 1993; Ruggles 1994); others, most famously Gutman (1977), emphasize the stability and resilience of late 18th- and early 19th-century African-American families. Second, scholars have questioned whether there is adequate evidence to prove that slavery, as opposed to more recent economic factors like male joblessness or more recent changes in norms and attitudes about marriage, accounts for the sharp increase in non-marital births in the mid- to late-20th century (*see* Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Wilson 2009). These scholars attack the cultural continuity thesis less on its description of culturally rooted gender dynamics within the black community than its attribution of these dynamics to U.S. chattel slavery.

Family Formation and Parenting Identities

Non-marital birth, particularly among adolescents and very young adults, has been an issue of scholarly interest to family and poverty researchers for at least three decades. Much of this work has employed the lens of culture in direct and indirect ways. Elijah Anderson, for example, has argued that early and casual sexual activity is part of the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999; *see also* Anderson 1990). Anderson uses a strong conception of culture with focus on broadly held norms and values and with less attention to heterogeneity, though he does explain in detail the structural conditions under which these cultural codes about sex, relationships, and pregnancy emerge. More recent treatments of the culture of sexual behavior among disadvantaged adolescents have emphasized heterogeneity and the multiple, often competing repertoires that poor adolescents draw upon in negotiating sexual activity (*e.g.*, Harding 2007).

Researchers have also sought to uncover how poor parents make meaning about parenting and their identity as parents. Most of this research is on mothers; a small but growing literature explores the meaning of fatherhood to poor men (*see, e.g.*, Edin and Nelson 2013; Furstenberg 1992, 2001; Haney and March 2003). Both low-income mothers and fathers tend to describe “being there” as a central element of parenthood (Allen and Doherty 2008; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Waller 2002; *see also* Nelson 2004: 445). Some low-income mothers describe developing a purpose in life or feeling “rescued” by having children (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Researchers have found that poor men’s and women’s cultural ideals about

³ Although most of the debate over cultural continuity has taken North American chattel slavery as the starting point of historical analysis, others have emphasized centuries-old African family organization patterns rather than chattel slavery in explaining modern-day African-American complex family structures (*see, e.g.*, Sudarkasa 1988; Herskovits 1990 [1941]; DuBois 1908).

⁴ Gordon and McLanahan find racial differences in family structure in 1900, but find no difference between immigrants, migrants, and non-migrants.

parenting differ at least somewhat by race and ethnicity, with African-Americans, for example, tending to emphasize parental authority (e.g., Roche, Ensminger, and Cherlin 2007; Toth and Xu 1999). Recognizing that low-income parents are rarely stably single, the most recent literature on poor families and culture has moved away from exploring the cultural conditions and consequences of “single” parenthood to researching family instability and family complexity (the presence of more than two adults and many half-siblings because of multi-partner fertility) (Burton and Hardaway 2012; Edin and Nelson 2013; *see also* Fomby and Cherlin 2007).

Parenting Repertoires and Kinship Networks

A century-old line of research has explored how extended kinship networks—thought to be part of the cultural fabric of low-income families—shape the strategies that low-income parents use to raise their children and negotiate survival (DuBois 1996 [1899]; Drake and Cayton 1945; Gans 1965; Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1990; Stack 1974; *cf.* Edin and Lein 1997). Most exhaustively, Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin* describes rich networks of extended family that engage in “child-keeping” and fostering of children through a “folk system” that operated alongside but separately from the legal system (1974: 46, 62). Yet more recent literature has emphasized tension and distrust among families and social networks rather than cohesiveness (e.g., Burton et al. 2009; Burton and Hardaway 2012; Desmond 2012; Roy 2004), though among different ethnic groups and under different spatial circumstances, kinship networks may remain hyper-salient (*see* Domínguez and Watkins 2003).

Family and culture researchers have also studied cultural logics of parenting within poor families separately from the literature on kinship networks. For example, Lareau (2003) describes two class-based cultural logics that parents draw upon to raise their children. Middle-class parents engage in “concerted cultivation,” or close management of a child’s time through organized activity and development of middle-class styles of interaction, which creates valued forms of cultural capital that promote success in conventional institutional settings. Working-class and poor parents, in contrast, value the “accomplishment of natural growth,” a style of parenting that values sharp boundaries between adults and children yet gives children a certain amount of autonomy. While these parents are creating stocks of cultural capital that are valuable in predominantly working-class settings, these forms of capital do not tend to lead to success in middle-class dominant institutions like schools and workplaces (*see also* Carter 2005). These distinct cultural logics of parenting reproduce class distinctions. Her research has spawned studies exploring the idea of class reproduction through parenting strategies in more detail (*see, e.g.,* Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012; Bodovski and Farkas 2008; Cheadle 2009). Researchers have found that many low-income mothers tend to emphasize protecting children from bad influences, a response to the challenges of living in low-income neighborhoods that in some cases fosters cultural resources for resilience (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Jarrett 1997). Researchers have also found that parenting strategies may differ between low-income parents by ethno-racial group (*see, e.g.,* Leavell et al. 2012). Such differences generate a considerable amount of boundary work between groups, which deserves to be studied more systematically (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

More empirical work is needed on culture and family among a broader range of ethnic groups and family types. First, family and poverty researchers have, on the whole, been slower to use cultural concepts such as frames, repertoires, scripts, and so forth than poverty researchers who focus on other areas, such as the workplace. Second, most current literature on culture and poor families has focused on white, African-American, and to a lesser extent Mexican-American families. Research exists, but more is needed, applying new cultural concepts to poor families of other groups (*see, e.g.,* McAdoo 1999; *see also* Lin and Harris 2008). Third, the study of culture and poverty in the family should explore the mechanisms through which family cultures and cultural beliefs about family are transmitted inter-generationally and throughout society through law and institutions (*see* Roberts 2002; Waller 2002). Finally, to date, nearly all scholarly research on culture, poverty, and the family has focused on

heterosexual relationships (but *see* Moore 2011). As social and legal contexts around LGBTQ relationships and families evolve, more research will be needed on LGBTQ-led families.

NEIGHBORHOODS

The neighborhood is an essential spatial arena in which culture plays a role in the reproduction of poverty. Scholars of the older conception of the “culture of poverty” posited that cultural adaptations to poverty persisted beyond the structural conditions that created them, thus placing the locus of responsibility for negative life outcomes on poor residents themselves. Researchers now understand cultural adaptations to poverty as heterogeneous and variable, rather than monolithic, inherent, and immutable traits.

Social Isolation

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson famously proposed that living in the bounded geographic context of the ghetto shaped life outcomes, independent of individual characteristics. He posited that due to the departure of manufacturing jobs from the inner cities and the out-migration of the black middle class, increasing social isolation was the structural condition that gave rise to cultural adaptations and orientations perpetuating poverty. With the departure of middle class social institutions came the decline of social organization, contributing to the community’s inability to realize its collective goals and resulting in disorder and a consequent rise in crime (Wilson 1987, p.144).

More recent scholarship builds on this idea that neighborhood structural conditions often give rise to certain cultural adaptations, but suggests that that disadvantaged neighborhoods are not necessarily cut off from mainstream institutions and social networks. Some have called for a more nuanced understanding of how neighborhood context may be experienced by residents, which would help researchers to account for diverging outcomes within the same neighborhood (Harding 2010). Small finds that “many people in poor neighborhoods do the opposite of what they would theoretically be expected to do” in a given set of structural conditions (2004, p.12). Similarly, Harding points out that despite what social isolation theory might predict, not all young people in the disadvantaged communities he studied are “getting pregnant and dropping out of school.” He argues that youth in poor neighborhoods have more frames and scripts for behavior at their disposal, and “neither “oppositional” nor “mainstream” is dominant” (Harding 2010, p.244). Thus, appropriate scripts for action are more “diluted,” and when one doesn’t work it is easy to take an available and socially supported alternative route, a process which he calls “model shifting” (Harding 2010, pp.242–3). This multiplicity of strategies within the same set of structural conditions points to the principle of *effect heterogeneity*: neighborhood effects may have a different direction or magnitude for different residents (Harding et al 2010), which harkens back to Shaw and McKay’s suggestion that we must consider the substantial heterogeneity within neighborhoods (1969).

Heterogeneity in Behavior

The consideration of culture is essential to understanding the heterogeneous behavioral adaptations that residents employ to cope with the neighborhood environment, resulting in different “doses” or levels of “exposure” to the neighborhood (Harding 2010, Sharkey 2006). Sharkey (2006) argues that residents determine their level of *exposure* to different neighborhood conditions through the decisions they make about where, how, and with whom to spend their time; residents living in the same neighborhood may select very different social environments (2006). In response to violence, kids may retreat, or they may become tougher. Parents may react by preventing them from getting to know other neighborhood kids, or they may be overinvolved in their kids’ interactions. These choices determine the level of exposure to the neighborhood conditions, thereby mediating or exacerbating the effects of the

neighborhood. Thus, according to Harding and Sharkey, heterogeneity is driven by both *exposure* to the people, places, and activities that drive neighborhood effects as well as differences in the *vulnerability* to the neighborhood context (2010, 2006).

Some neighborhood scholars have charged that previous research has used compositional measures of neighborhood characteristics as proxies for emergent cultural characteristics, including poverty rate, unemployment rate, welfare receipt, and the percentage of single-mother families as a measure of cultural norms regarding non-marital childbearing (Harding 2010). This practice assumes a tight connection between culture and behavior, exposure, networks and interactions. Many propose that researchers need to shift focus away from broad theories of neighborhood effects and examine the specific mechanisms, especially the cultural processes that create associations between the compositional or demographic characteristics of neighborhoods, such as neighborhood poverty, and individual outcomes (Harding 2010, Sampson 2002). Researchers increasingly agree that in order to better understand the mechanisms through which neighborhoods transmit their effects, we need to think about how culture plays a role (Small 2004, Lamont and Small 1999, Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Rather than trying to assess the overall effect of living in a particular type of neighborhood, researchers should strive to examine discrete mechanisms in ways that account for effect heterogeneity.

Culture Shapes the Neighborhood

Cultural processes also work to shape the neighborhood itself through processes including community participation, collective efficacy and social control. Sampson and Wilson (1995) describe community contexts as “cognitive landscapes” concerning behavioral norms. The concept of *collective efficacy*, defined as the “social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good,” suggests that “one is unlikely to intervene [on behalf of one’s neighbors] in a neighborhood context where the rules are unclear and people mistrust or fear one another” (Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson et al. 2002, p.457). Further, Sampson demonstrates that neighborhoods with higher rates of collective efficacy also have lower rates of violent crime (Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson & Raudenbush 1999).

Scholars have examined the ways in which cultural processes such as framing of the neighborhood context affect outcomes including social organization and community engagement; perceptions, interpretations, and framing of neighborhood conditions may be key mediators in predicting whether changes in neighborhood structural characteristics will translate into changes in social dynamics (Tach 2009). For example, Tach examines whether social isolation and social organization in a Boston public housing project were affected by the redevelopment into a HOPE VI mixed-income community (2009). She argues that variation in neighborhood engagement stemmed from the frames through which residents interpreted their neighborhood surroundings, generated by current and past environments and reputations. Small also links residents’ cultural framing of their neighborhood with subsequent heterogeneity in organizational involvement (Small 2004). He finds that differences in neighborhood participation in a Latino housing project in Boston had little to do with expressed values; rather, participation was strongly correlated with respondents’ framing of the history of political and social activism in the neighborhood (Small 2004).

Immigrant Incorporation

As research on culture and poverty begins to expand beyond the black/white color line, scholars increasingly consider how the neighborhood context shapes outcomes related to the incorporation of immigrant groups (Lee & Bean 2004). Theories of incorporation began with a view of culture as uniform, where the integration process was theorized to occur in a linear fashion, with each generation progressively incorporating more into American society, beginning with language acquisition and

continuing with cultural assimilation, culminating with a “melting” into the cultural pot (Gordon 1964; Gans 1979; Kasinitz et al. 2009). The spatial assimilation theory posited that as immigrants acquired the language skills, social capital, economic status to depart from the ethnic enclave, they did so, theorizing the ethnic enclave as a fundamentally transitory space (Massey & Denton 1985). But this idea of incorporation of immigrants as a consistent upward progression has been deeply criticized over the years for inaccurately portraying the process for many immigrant groups. Glazer and Moynihan contended that even earlier groups had not “melted” at all; they argued that ethnicity constituted a distinct social identity, characterized by a sense of persistent cultural difference (Glazer & Moynihan 1963).

Increasingly, scholarship on immigration and ethnic diversity has posited that – as it has for African Americans – the neighborhood serves as a vector for geographic and social isolation of immigrant groups, often giving rise to cultural adaptations related to important outcomes for these groups. In their theory of segmented assimilation, Portes and Zhou allow for the fact that incorporation is not necessarily linear or upward; though many immigrants assimilate to the American middle class, others may remain isolated in an ethnic enclave, or “downwardly assimilate,” joining the “underclass” in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (1993). Telles and Ortiz study Mexican Americans, showing that their incorporation has been far from complete on measures of residential segregation (2008). Waters finds that West Indian immigrants who differentiate themselves from African Americans by retaining their ethnic identities experience positive outcomes, though the second generation often experiences downward mobility due to forces of structural racism (2001).

Though the neighborhood has not always been central to immigration research, scholars are increasingly bringing these two fields together to consider how the neighborhood interacts with cultural strategies that have a bearing on outcomes for a range of immigrant and ethnic groups. For example, Tran brings together studies of poor black neighborhoods with immigration theories to examine socioeconomic outcomes for second generation West Indian youth residing in predominantly black neighborhoods (forthcoming). New ethnographic research that integrates tools from cultural sociology challenges a fundamental premise of the theory of segmented assimilation, namely, that the “contaminating effect” of living in a neighborhood of ghetto poverty necessarily leads to downward assimilation for immigrants (Warikoo 2011, p.5). Warikoo provides a sophisticated explanation of how cultural processes intervene to produce educational achievement outcomes for immigrant youth, arguing that youth engage in precarious “balancing acts” in order to maintain status in both the social subculture of their peers, as well as the educational realm (2011). Neckerman, Carter, and Lee argue that immigrant groups also draw on a “minority culture of mobility” consisting of distinct cultural strategies for economic mobility in the face of discrimination and intergroup conflict, which help them attain and navigate the ranks of the middle class (1999).

WORK AND JOBLESSNESS

The cultural analysis of poverty stems from a rich tradition in the ethnographic study of men in low-income neighborhoods and communities, particularly in Boston (Whyte 1943a; Miller 1958; Gans 1965) and in Chicago (Park, Burgess et al. 1925; Cressey 1932). Much of the work on poverty in the early 1990s subsequently focused on the so-called “urban underclass,” that segment of the poor in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods (Jencks and Peterson 1991; Marks 1991; Mingione 2008), while a number of recent works have focused on minority male joblessness in particular (Levitan 2004; Freeman and Holzer 2008; West and Anderson 2011). Research on employment discrimination has implicated subjective meaning, often countering Wilson’s macroeconomic account of employment inequalities (Wilson 1991; Wilson 1996). While this research shows that discrimination matters, and by extension the meanings ascribed to marginalized groups, much less work in this area has explicitly drawn from cultural sociology for theoretical insight. Two other areas of research are drawn from the earlier urban ethnographic

tradition. First, research on human capital development addresses on the experiences and the worldviews of marginalized youth in school, their attitudes, aspirations, and expectations regarding their education and employment, and the kinds of labels and meanings that teachers apply to low-income students. Second, research on the multifarious forms of work among the poor reveals how the working poor distinguish themselves morally from the non-working poor as well as how the poor relate to their employment activity, whether legal or illegal.

Discrimination

Scholars have emphasized discrimination as a continual barrier to employment for marginalized groups, particularly for African-Americans in low-income neighborhoods. While this research is not extensively drawn from cultural sociology, it reveals how subjective meaning is central to employment discrimination. For example, in dialogue with Wilson's neighborhood research, Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) interviewed Chicago-area employers and found they believed most African-Americans lacked the requisite characteristics of "good" workers, perceiving them to have "bad attitude" toward work, to create social tensions in the workplace, and to be "lazy and unreliable" (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991: 213). Such blatantly articulated statements revealed that employment discrimination, particularly against the poor, worked against them in the job seeking process.

While some discrimination research reveals how employers view marginalized groups, less research has examined the dynamics of social capital activation in the job referral process. Smith, in particular, provides new evidence that it is social capital activation, rather than access, that varies differentially among by race and by class. In other words, "even when information is available and contacts can influence hires, they often do not" (Smith 2005: 44). The interviewees in Smith's study sound surprisingly like employers unwilling to hire inner-city minorities, with expressed concern over the potential referees' moral worth, work ethic, and reputation. Smith found that low-income respondents were unwilling or hesitant to refer others in part because they were concerned over managing their own reputation. This research augments social capital theory, showing how meaning making plays a key role in the hiring process.

In addition to social capital activation, another mechanism for male joblessness per se is the mark of a criminal record (Pager 2008a). In particular, Pager argues that "disproportionate growth of criminal justice intervention in the lives of young black men and the corresponding media coverage" reinforce preexisting and deep-seated prejudice against young black men in the hiring process (Pager 2008b: 72). Indeed, research shows that nearly one-third of African-American men, and over one-half of African-American high school dropouts experience incarceration at some point in their lives (Western and Pettit 2005). Pager argues that incarceration serves as a state-sanctioned "credentialing institution," in which the power of such credentialing "lies in its recognition as an official and legitimate means of evaluating and classifying individuals" (Pager 2008b: 73).

Recent studies of discrimination have largely used audit studies examine how the names of job candidates lead to diminished likelihood of response by employers (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003; Pager, Western et al. 2009). While field experiments allow the identification of racial markers such as race-specific names, much less research has examined the dynamics of the hiring process itself. Evidence suggests, however, that employers' stated beliefs offer little insight into their actual practices. In particular, when considering discrimination against incarcerated men, Pager and Quillian (2005) find that employers' discriminated against candidates with criminal records regardless of what employers themselves profess. Such research suggests perhaps that implicit bias is a core mechanism of discrimination (Pager and Shepherd 2008).

Research on discrimination reveals a complex process involving implicit bias against certain cultural markers, overt or blatant aversion to hiring poor minorities, and reluctance among the poor to refer peers. This research typically does not distinguish between social psychological and cultural processes that lead to employment disparities, yet it opens the door to a close examination of the place of cultural processes (e.g. evaluation and classification) in generating outcomes. Furthermore, while these findings show that discrimination matters, much less research has examined how the poor response to the effects of racism or of incarceration (Maruna 2001; Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). More research examining the resilience of marginalized groups may provide insight into the heterogeneity of employment outcomes among stigmatized groups experiencing discrimination.

Human Capital Development

Cultural analysis also focused on human capital development, specifically, how schools generate inequality in their disparate treatment of low-income youth, how low-income and minority youth may have different attitudes toward educational achievement, and how aspirations and expectations vary by race, ethnicity and class in the transition to adulthood. Foundational work by classical cultural theorists emphasized the role of schools in shaping different educational trajectories for impoverished youth (Willis 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998). While Bowles and Gintis (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Bowles and Gintis 2013) have argued that the role of schools was to create a compliant lower-class, Willis argued that schools engendered lower-class disobedience, and that pervasive lower-class sentiments among working class boys led them into working-class jobs (Willis 1977). Ferguson complicates this dynamic by emphasizing how schools tend to categorize some African-American youth as “bad boys” needing management, while at times neglecting the needs of African-American girls (Ferguson 2001).

Ogbu and Fordham have argued that anti-achievement attitudes among minority youth in particular are in part to blame for ethnic disparities in academic achievement, since, as they put it, African-American youth who perform well academically and engage in school are accused by their peers of “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 2008). Subsequent research, however, has failed to show significant race-based differences in attitudes toward achievement (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2006; Downey 2008), though evidence supports differences in academic behavior and engagement (Ferguson 2008). Harris provides evidence suggesting that prior skill deficits among minority youth before they enter high school account for differences in academic performance, while others point to differences in the quality of schools and teachers (Jencks and Phillips 1998). For their part, Tyson et al. argue that devaluation of schooling is not necessarily race-based, but class based, with white and minority youth using different language to devalue academic achievement (Tyson, Darity Jr et al. 2005). Adding to the complexity, other scholars point to the substantial cultural diversity within ethnic groups that are masked by comparing group averages exclusively (Carter 2005; Carter 2006; Warikoo and Carter 2009). Carter argues that educational inequalities can be overcome through a school’s *cultural flexibility*, its capacity to “embrace multiple cultural codes, practices, or currencies” (Carter 2012: 9).

Moving from the educational system to the transition to adulthood, research has documented the increasingly complex ways that adolescents transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000), with social class exhibiting the strongest effect on college attainment (Grotsky 2007; Hoxby and Avery 2013). Nevertheless, research suggests that educational and career aspirations remain high in young adulthood, though there is some “cooling off” of these beliefs and behaviors (Bozick, Alexander et al. 2010). Young provides a compelling case that, among African-American men, high aspirations are at least a consequence of segregation from the labor market (Young 2004; Young 2006). MacLeod shows that race has a significant impact on educational aspirations and expectations, with African-American men he studied expressing greater optimism toward the future, largely because they compare their own circumstances in light of advances made during the civil rights movement (MacLeod 2009). In short,

research on the cultural analysis of aspirations and expectations shows how beliefs diminish in the transition to adulthood, as well as how they are shaped by collective memory and by racial segregation.

Finally, research has examined cohort changes in educational aspirations. This work reveals that aspirations have risen in recent decade, and that a majority of young adults maintain high aspirations for themselves (Reynolds, Stewart et al. 2006; Uno, Mortimer et al. 2010). Longitudinal surveys, however, have failed to show any negative mental health effects of unrealized adolescent educational expectations, suggesting a process of “adaptive resilience” in young adulthood, where aspirations are diminished or altered according to one’s circumstances (Reynolds and Baird 2010). Possible mechanisms accounting for resilience include the incorporation of leisure pursuits, such as arts and athletic participation, as alternative sources of work-related identity (Fosse 2013). While work on educational aspirations and expectations reveal considerable variability over the life course, they also suggest that low-income groups have a variety of means of buffering personal setbacks, an avenue for further exploration.

Forms of Work

A third area of research in the cultural analysis of poverty concerns the diverse forms of work, as well as what people do when they are not engaged in formal labor. As Wilson points out, “joblessness” is not identical to “non-work,” since, “to be officially unemployed or officially outside the labor market does not mean that one is totally removed from all forms of work activity” (Wilson 1996: 74). Subsequent research has focused on what these forms of diverse work are in the informal economy, as well as what people do when they are chronically unemployed. Taken together, these analyses show how the poor actively construct meaning in challenging circumstances.

While much of the urban poverty debate in the 1990s focused on the concept of the urban “underclass,” debating its relevance and existence, scholars have been quick to point out that, consistent with earlier research (Whyte 1943a; Whyte 1943b; Gans 1965), not all of the poor are unemployed or jobless. Moreover, boundaries between poverty and non-poverty are complex and transitory, consisting of multiple “exits” and “entries” (Bane and Ellwood 1986; Stevens 1994). A substantial portion of the poor works in low-wage jobs, but are relatively “invisible in America” in part because they do not figure heavily into policy debates (Shipler 2008). Research on the working poor or “near poor” shows that these groups struggle with chronic stress and feelings of economic precariousness (Dohan 2003; Newman and Chen 2007). In addition, often because the working poor live with and among the unemployed, and also because they are often precariously employed themselves, the working poor sometimes take pains to distinguish themselves morally from the unemployed (Newman 1999; Sherman 2009).

Work on the informal economy has often focused on the street gang, starting with early neighborhood research, much of which counters social disorganization theory, which posits that delinquency is a consequence of the lack of community norms (Shaw and McKay 1969; Kornhauser 1978). In contrast, researchers of the urban street gang point out that it fulfills social, economic, and cultural roles in low-income communities. Ethnographic research has consistently shown that urban street gangs provide social membership (Miller 1958) and connections with the wider community (Jankowski 1991) even if gang members are adherents to a distinct “culture of poverty” (Miller 1971). Venkatesh updated much of this research (for a review, see Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003), documenting both the economic activities of the inner-city street gang (Venkatesh 2000), as well as its role in the community as a social institution (Venkatesh 1997).

Other research has similarly shown how informal labor is at times monotonous, routine, and ordered, even if the structure of work and payment is precarious. In general, this research emphasizes the efforts of workers to maintain their sense of self-worth in light of such circumstances. Research on day laborers has documented their experiences of social suffering and of the management of on-the-job

injuries (Walter, Bourgois et al. 2002; Walter, Bourgois et al. 2004), and the ways that day laborers construct a sense of self-worth in the job search process (Purser 2009). Gowan similar finds that homeless scavengers in San Francisco structure their lives in orderly ways, viewing the dangerous and monotonous task of collecting as a way of proving their moral worth to society (Gowan 1997).

While much of the early research on the lives of the poor have focused exclusively on men, research has only recently paid more attention to gendered worlds of work among the poor (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Low-wage domestic workers find themselves in jobs that demand long hours and rules of behavior that make it difficult to distinguish between intimate and professional life (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). Rosen and Venkatesh examine the understudied world of sex work as a supplement or replacement to low-wage labor. Within a certain context, they find sex work to serve as a rational strategy to make ends meet, which can also offer the stability, autonomy, and even professional satisfaction that they seek (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Venkatesh and Murphy also show how prostitution in New York City has evolved in part due to response from law enforcement: as sex workers were banned from city streets since the 1970s, they have begun to conceive of sex work as a long-term “vice career” rather than as a short-term means to get by (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006). Research on female-dominated work reveals the unique challenges facing domestic and sex workers when they construct meaning around intimate spheres of social life.

Lingering Questions in the Cultural Analysis of Work and Joblessness

The cultural analysis of work and joblessness reveals how discrimination is a complex process involving meaning-making among employers and job referrers, with incarceration playing a significant role as a “credentialing institution” for a significant proportion of low-income African-American men. Research in human capital development underscores the place of peers, schools, and shared ethnic identity in generating gaps in aspirations and expectations. Finally, a wealth of studies on the forms of work among the poor reveals the diversity and heterogeneity of culture, as well as the agency of the poor in constructing meaning around all forms of employment activity.

Such analyses have improved our understanding of the forms of work among the poor, as well as their barriers to more stable employment, yet much interesting research remains. The research on poverty has primarily focused on low-income inner-city neighborhoods, and much less is known about the forms of poverty in suburban and rural communities. In addition, the literature on poverty in the United States operates without much dialogue with international poverty researchers. Finally, when understanding processes of employment stratification, how victims of discrimination respond to their situation may matter for their wellbeing and employment (Fleming, Lamont et al. 2012; Hall and Lamont 2012).

CONCLUSION

As this short review reveals, sociologists have already paid considerable attention to how cultural frames and cultural practices contribute to the production and reproduction of poverty in the realms of the family, neighborhoods, or work. While there is a certain heterogeneity in the analytical concepts researchers have used, the literature reveals a widely spread concern for understanding the place of culture in explaining at least in part experiences and outcomes for low-income populations. Much of this research demonstrates cultural diversity in low-income populations, and a sensitivity to the interaction between contexts and outcomes that moves us far beyond stereotypical views of the poor that had fed controversies around the study of the place of culture in the production of poverty in the sixties.

Each of the sections concluded with recommendations for future research. For instance, the study of meaning-making among poor families could benefit from more explicit engagement with concepts from cultural sociology, which might better specify the presence cultural mechanisms while, at the same time,

recognizing heterogeneity that the “norms and values” literature does not contemplate. Family scholarship could benefit from examining a more diverse array of ethnic groups and family types, which would perhaps lead to a more precise and nuanced understanding of how culture operates in family context. For its part, the study of poverty and culture in the neighborhood context is often limited in its conceptualization of culture as norms or local subcultures that do not vary internally. The field would benefit from building on the critique of Harding, Small, and others to consider how cultural mechanisms operate within neighborhoods to produce heterogeneous outcomes. Finally, while cultural analysis of work has examined the meaning of employment activity and of human capital development, much discrimination research has largely concerned itself with whether or not discrimination exerts a causal impact on employment outcomes. This work could benefit from distinguishing discrimination and stigmatization (Goffman 1986), the latter of which more explicitly incorporates subjective meaning and symbolic boundaries into inequalities processes. Moreover, as Lamont (2009) points out, “considering responses to discrimination is crucial because individuals cannot be presumed to be passive recipients of discrimination” (153). Thus, a more targeted focus on “situated agency” of marginalized groups (Wacquant 1997: 347) would likely reveal the cultural mechanisms underlying employment discrimination.

Beyond these recommendations, we want to suggest that poverty researchers should be more explicit about the conceptual tools they mobilize to describe how culture contributes to the production and reproduction of poverty. A focus on the normative (e.g., “belief” and “norms”) illuminates different aspects of culture than a focus on the cognitive (e.g., “frames,” “narratives,” or “repertoires”). The literature often remains quite slippery about such distinctions. Moreover, it would be helpful to engage in a more purposeful reflection concerning the assumptions associated with various conceptual tools used for describing the place of culture in the production of poverty -- whether they imply a “risk and resilience” model (Panter-Bricks and Eggerman 2012) or an individualist “decision making” or “economic” model for instance. Finally, further theoretical development may be facilitated by a concern for systematically disentangling social psychological processes (often focused on perceptions) from cultural processes that involve intersubjectivity and shared meaning-making (e.g. symbolic boundaries, classification systems, and repertoires), in their interaction and articulation with social and institutional processes. These various levels should be examined in their interaction with access to a range of social, material, and other resources that act as determinants of poverty and inequality, and that have been amply documented in the literature. To consider a part of the equation will by definition result in an inadequate (because incomplete) understanding of crucial causal pathways.

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