

# Culture of Poverty, Beyond the

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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, the actions of others, and the environment that surrounds 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 since the 1980s to understand the role of meaning making in basic social processes: concepts such as frames, narratives, institutions, repertoires, and boundaries. 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. This entry 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 entry 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 the 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. 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 (Moynihan 1965) argued that family structure was a central explanation for the ongoing educational and economic disadvantages facing low-income American blacks: “The 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.” Other research from the 1960s and early 1970s underscored Lewis’s and Moynihan’s perspective that cultural differences in family organization and gender attitudes between the poor and nonpoor perpetuate disadvantages in housing, education, crime, and the labor market. 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 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 macrostructural explanations for persistent poverty. The other line of research has aimed to debunk the idea that there are major cultural differences between poor and nonpoor families and has attempted to explain the social context driving apparent cultural differences. Again, this research almost invariably focuses on African American families. 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., Gibson-Davis 2007). Yet others use standard concepts inspired by cultural sociology, emphasizing repertoires, frames, cultural capital, symbolic boundaries, narratives, and so on. This entry summarizes 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. However, mistrust and expected infidelity—cultural factors—feature prominently in low-income men’s and women’s descriptions of their reasons for delaying marriage.

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 develops, and the ways in which it manifests within relationships. In a thirty-year study of low-income African American families in Baltimore, Furstenberg (2001) documented 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 nonmarital birth and marital delay have been rapidly increasing. Thus, marital delay among the poor may not necessarily

be 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 (Cherlin 2009).

Particularly in the late twentieth century, one concern for researchers of family, culture, and poverty among African Americans was the extent to which antebellum US slavery has impacted 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, Orlando Patterson 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 (see Patterson 2010 on mechanisms of cultural persistence). 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 United States a few decades after the Civil War, other researchers, most famously Gutman (1976), emphasize the stability and resilience of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century African American families. Second, scholars have questioned whether there is adequate evidence to prove that slavery, as opposed to more recent economic factors such as male joblessness or more recent changes in norms and attitudes about marriage, accounts for the sharp increase in nonmarital births in the mid to late twentieth century (see 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 US chattel slavery.

#### FAMILY FORMATION AND PARENTING IDENTITIES

Nonmarital births, particularly among adolescents and very young adults, have been an issue of scholarly interest to family and poverty researchers since at least the 1980s. Much of this work has employed the lens of culture in direct and indirect ways. Elijah Anderson (1999), for example, has argued that early and casual sexual activity is part of the “code of the street.” 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.

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, but a small but growing literature explores the meaning of fatherhood to poor men (see, e.g., Edin and Nelson 2013). Both mothers and fathers of low income tend to describe “being there” as a central element of parenthood. Some low-income mothers describe developing a purpose in life or feeling “rescued” by having children. Researchers have found that poor men’s and women’s cultural ideals about parenting differ at least somewhat by race and ethnicity, with African Americans, for example, tending to emphasize parental

authority. 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 multipartner fertility) (Burton and Hardaway 2012).

#### 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. 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 operates 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, though among different ethnic groups and under different spatial circumstances kinship networks may remain hypersalient.

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 such as schools and workplaces. These distinct cultural logics of parenting reproduce class distinctions. Lareau’s research has spawned studies exploring the idea of class reproduction through parenting strategies in more detail (see, e.g., Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012). 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. Researchers have also found that parenting strategies may differ between low-income parents by ethnic group. 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. 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 intergenerationally and throughout society through law and institutions. 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.

### NEIGHBORHOOD

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 as 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: 144).

More recent scholarship builds on this idea that neighborhood structural conditions often give rise to certain cultural adaptations but suggests 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. 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: 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: 244). Thus, appropriate scripts for action are more “diluted,” and when one does not work it is easy to take an available and socially supported alternative route, a process that Harding calls “model shifting” (Harding 2010: 242–43). 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, which harkens back to Shaw and McKay’s suggestion that we must consider the substantial heterogeneity within neighborhoods.

### 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. 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. In response to violence, children may retreat or they may become tougher. Parents may react by preventing them from getting to know other neighborhood children or they may be overinvolved in their children's 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 and differences in *vulnerability* to the neighborhood context.

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 nonmarital childbearing. 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. 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). 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, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002: 457). Further, Sampson demonstrates that neighborhoods with higher rates of collective efficacy also have lower rates of violent crime.

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. 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 (2004) also links residents' cultural framing of their neighborhood with subsequent heterogeneity in organizational involvement. 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. 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. Spatial assimilation theory posited that, as immigrants acquired the language skills, social capital, and economic status to depart from the ethnic enclave, they did so; the ethnic enclave was thus theorized as a fundamentally transitory space. 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 (1963) 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.

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 (1993) 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. Telles and Ortiz (2008) study Mexican Americans, showing that their incorporation has been far from complete on measures of residential segregation. Waters (2001) 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.

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 (2015) 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. 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: 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 and the educational realm. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) 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.

#### 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 and Chicago. 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—while a number of recent works have focused on minority male joblessness in particular. Research on employment discrimination has implicated subjective meaning, often countering Wilson’s macroeconomic account of employment inequalities. While this research shows that discrimination matters, as do 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 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 nonworking 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 interviewed Chicago-area employers and found they believed most African Americans lacked the requisite characteristics of “good” workers, perceiving them to have a “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 African Americans 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 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, expressing concern over the moral worth, work ethic, and reputation of individuals for whom they provided references. 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. In particular, Pager (2008: 73) 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. 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. 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 2008: 73).

Recent scholarship on discrimination has largely used audit studies to examine how the names of job candidates lead to diminished likelihood of response by employers (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 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) found that employers discriminated against candidates with criminal records regardless of what employers themselves professed. Such research perhaps suggests that implicit bias is a core mechanism of discrimination.

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 respond to the effects of racism or of incarceration (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 has 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 from those outside these categories; 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 (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998; Willis 1977). While Bowles and Gintis (2013) have argued that the role of schools is to create a compliant lower class, Willis (1977) argued that schools engendered lower-class disobedience and that pervasive lower-class sentiments among working-class boys led them into working-class jobs. Ferguson (2001) 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.

Ogbu (2008) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have argued that antiachievement 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.” Subsequent research, however, has failed to show significant race-based differences in attitudes toward achievement (Downey 2008), though evidence supports differences in academic behavior and engagement (Ferguson 2008). There is evidence suggesting that prior skill deficits among minority youth before they enter high school account for differences in academic performance; other research points to differences in the quality of schools and teachers. For their part, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) 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. Adding to the complexity, other scholars point to the substantial cultural diversity within ethnic groups that are masked by comparing group averages exclusively. Carter argues that educational inequalities can be overcome through a school’s “cultural flexibility”—its capacity to “embrace multiple cultural codes, practices, or currencies” (2012: 9).

Moving from the educational system to the transition to adulthood, research has documented the increasingly complex ways in which adolescents transition to adulthood, with social class exhibiting the strongest effect on college attainment (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. Young (2006) provides a compelling case that African American men in their late teens and early twenties maintain high aspirations in part because they are excluded from the labor market and lack knowledge regarding the opportunities that exist for them—high aspirations are at least a consequence of segregation from the labor market. MacLeod (2009) shows that race has a significant impact on educational aspirations and expectations, with African American men he studied expressing greater optimism toward the future than their predecessors, largely because of their evaluation of advances made during the civil rights movement. 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 decades and that a majority of young adults maintain high aspirations for themselves. 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. While work on educational aspirations and expectations reveals considerable variability over the life course, it also suggests 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” (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, not all of the poor are unemployed or jobless. Moreover, boundaries between poverty and nonpoverty are complex and transitory, consisting of multiple “exits” and “entries.” A substantial portion of the poor work in low-wage jobs but are relatively invisible in America in part because they do not figure heavily in policy debates. Research on the working poor or “near poor” shows that these groups struggle with chronic stress and feelings of economic precariousness. In addition, often because the working poor live with and among the unemployed, and also because they are often precariously employed themselves, they sometimes take pains to distinguish themselves morally from the unemployed.

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. In contrast, researchers of urban street gangs point out that they fulfill social, economic, and cultural roles in low-income communities. Ethnographic research has consistently shown that urban street gangs provide social membership and connections with the wider community even if gang members are adherents to a distinct “culture of poverty.” 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 and its role in the community as a social institution.

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, and the ways that day laborers construct a sense of self-worth in the job-search process (Purser 2009). Gowan (1997) similarly 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.

Much of the early research on the lives of the poor focused exclusively on men, and research has only recently begun to pay 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. Rosen and Venkatesh (2008) examine the understudied world of sex work as a supplement to or replacement for 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 individuals seek. It has also been shown how prostitution in New York City has evolved in part because of the response from law enforcement: as sex workers have been 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. 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 areas remain. 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 well-being and employment (Fleming, Lamont, and Welburn 2012; Hall and Lamont 2012).

#### CONCLUSION

As this 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, and 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, as well as a sensitivity to the interaction between contexts and outcomes that moves us far beyond stereotypical views of the poor that fed controversies around the study of the place of culture in the production of poverty in the 1960s.

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 of 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 the family context. For its part, the study

of poverty and culture in the neighborhood 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 critiques 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, the latter of which more explicitly incorporates subjective meaning and symbolic boundaries into inequalities processes. Moreover, as Lamont points out, “considering responses to discrimination is crucial because individuals cannot be presumed to be passive recipients of discrimination” (2009: 153). Thus, a more targeted focus on “situated agency” of marginalized groups would likely reveal the cultural mechanisms underlying employment discrimination.

Beyond these recommendations, 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 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.

SEE ALSO: Racism; Social Work and Race; Underclass; Welfare Queen

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