

A Fresh Approach to Culture

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The simple proposition that human behavior is shaped by cultural factors is widely acknowledged. Yet in contemporary debates on poverty, the proposition is deeply controversial, because a potent mix of theoretical miscues and political controversies has equated this idea with blaming the poor for their poverty. It is time for a change.

Cultural theories about poverty that blame the victim are often scientifically flawed, beset by conceptual muddiness, and inconsistent with available data. Yet rejecting all cultural models because of the sins of the few will lead us to ignore important research and to propose bad policies. We need not forget what we know about social science to examine how cultural factors shape people's responses to poverty.

An important first step is to declare dead, once and for all, the flawed theory of the "culture of poverty."

Proposed by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in 1966, the theory argued that when families and communities experienced sustained poverty, they developed a "way of life" consisting of "strong feelings of marginality, of helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority," a "high incidence of maternal deprivation," a "weak ego structure," a "confusion of sexual identification," and a "provincial orientation," among many other traits.

According to the theory, this culture of poverty was likely to perpetuate itself even if the structural conditions that initially gave rise to it changed.

This model was flawed in many ways. Some propositions defy reason, and even border on the preposterous, while others have been easily debunked by evidence. Taken as a whole, the theory cannot be tested, since the conditions defining this "culture" include beliefs, values, practices, attitudes, and psychological states—with no clear relationship among them.

Finally, as many have argued, some elements of the model clearly blame the victim.

But the flaws of Lewis' "culture of poverty" model are not typical of all research on this topic. A new, diverse generation of politically and academically conscientious scholars has produced a growing body of work that avoids using "culture" as a catchall term. This new research builds on important conceptual work on culture over the last thirty years, and rests solidly on a foundation of either qualitative or quantitative data.

These scholars pursue different kinds of questions. Instead of asking whether culture engenders poverty, they inquire whether cultural factors shape how people understand, experience, and respond to poverty. They eschew overarching theories of culture, relying instead on more narrowly targeted concepts to analyze belief, behavior, and decision making.

One of the authors of this column examined the cultural environment to which children are exposed based on U.S. survey data and in-depth interviews with adolescents.. He found that children in poor neighborhoods are exposed to a broader and more discordant array of cultural frames than those in non-poor neighborhoods, frustrating their attempts to make effective choices about schooling, work, and romantic relationships.

Other research has examined cultural identity. Economists George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton, drawing on a review of qualitative research, proposed that students' effort in school depends in part on their identity, since the value of staying in school varies among "jocks," "nerds," or "burnouts."

There are at least two reasons to pay attention to this recent scholarship on culture.

First, this research helps separate fact from fiction in a national conversation filled with persistent myths about the culture of the poor. For example, many argued that poor black students, presumed to feel that society provides few opportunities for them to succeed, have developed an oppositional culture that devalues schoolwork as “acting white.” But in a series of recent studies, scholars testing the theory against nationally representative data found little support for it.

Second, ignoring this research can lead to ineffective anti-poverty policy.

Take the example of child support. In a recent issue of *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* devoted to current scholarship on culture and poverty, Sociologist Maureen Waller presented her findings on low-income parents’ understanding of responsible fatherhood. One of the purposes of strongly enforcing child support is to increase how involved fathers are in their children’s lives, economically and emotionally. Yet many believed that child enforcement policies undermined responsible fatherhood by ignoring a father’s emotional, social, and in-kind material support for his children and created an inherent conflict between unwed parents. Policymakers armed with this knowledge would likely develop better child enforcement policies.

While Waller’s study is but one example, it suggests that our thinking about poverty in the twenty-first century should not be held hostage by the flawed theories and acrimonious politics of the twentieth. A new generation of scholars, reared in a different political era and schooled in the need for research-based policy, promises to offer a different kind of conversation.

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