

# Poverty, Culture of

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## Abstract

The 'culture of poverty' is a concept popularized by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis during the 1960s in his best-selling ethnographic realist books on family life among the urban poor. Drawing from Freudian culture and personality theory, which dominated US anthropology in the post-World War II period, Lewis listed over 50 traits that he claimed were shared by approximately 20% of the poor, including 'orality,' 'strong present-time orientation,' and a 'high tolerance for psychological pathology.' These traits were said to be transmitted cross-generationally within families and prevented individuals from taking advantage of economic opportunities. Despite Lewis's social democratic politics, his culture of poverty concept resonated with the moralistic condemnation of the unworthy poor deeply ingrained in US popular ideology. It spawned a polemical response from social scientists who criticized its blame-the-victim and psychological reductionist implications. Lewis himself was not concerned with theory, and did not particularly believe that his ethnographic work documented the culture of poverty. The vituperative debates during the 1970s through to the 1990s over whether or not a culture of poverty really exists were not fruitful theoretically. They tend to degenerate into political name calling or into an empirical denial of the lived experience of social suffering among the persistently poor. The uses and misuses of the culture of poverty illustrate how research on social inequality reflects societal biases. They also demonstrate the inadequacy of the culture concept when it is used to explain hierarchy in an essentializing, atheoretical vacuum that ignores history and structural power dynamics.

The culture of poverty concept was developed in the USA during the 1960s primarily through the best-selling ethnographic realist publications of the cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who tape-recorded eloquent life histories of the urban poor. He reprinted numerous versions of his definition of the term 'culture of poverty' in short journal articles and also in the introductions to his books on family life among Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans living in shanty towns and ghettos (Lewis, 1961, 1966a,b, 1967). Lewis's culture of poverty struck an academic identity politics nerve, and at the turn of the millennium the concept remained enmired in a bitter polemic over how to analyze and engage politically the persistence of poverty in the midst of postindustrial plenty.

## Ideological Backdrop to the Culture of Poverty

In the USA, irrespective of the theoretical orientation of researchers, most discussions on poverty polarize around value judgments concerning individual self-worth or around racial/ethnic stereotypes. US attitudes towards poverty are rooted in the country's colonial Calvinist/Puritanical heritage and are exacerbated by the historical importance of racialized hierarchies that have legitimized genocide, slavery, colonization, and immigration control. This helps explain why the culture of poverty concept continues to generate so much emotional heat while shedding so little conceptual light. The uses and misuses of the concept offer a fascinating case study in the sociology of knowledge illustrating the political interfaces between theory, empiricism, art, and ethnocentric moralizing in the social sciences.

Poverty research throughout history has been more successful at reflecting the biases of an investigator's society than at analyzing the experience of poverty. The state of poverty research in any given country emerges almost as a litmus for gauging contemporary social attitudes toward inequality and

marginalization. For example, while Lewis's books are read by a US public as an individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty that blames victims, in France his work is interpreted as a critique of society's failure to remedy the injuries of class-based inequality under free market capitalism.

## Defining the Culture of Poverty

The socialist sociologist Michael Harrington was the first prominent academic to use the phrase 'culture of poverty' in a major publication. His book, *The Other America*, documented rural poverty in Appalachia and represented a moral call to action that anticipated the War on Poverty initiated by President Johnson in 1964 (Harrington, 1962). As a first-generation son of impoverished Jewish immigrants who was influenced by Marxism in his youth, Lewis shared Harrington's social democratic commitment to combating poverty (Rigdon, 1988; Harvey and Reed, 1996). Ironically, however, Lewis's popularization of the culture of poverty concept is said to have tolled an intellectual death knell to the optimistic idealism of the mid-1960s that advocated eradicating poverty through direct state intervention (Katz, 1989). This is because Lewis's definition of the culture of poverty stressed that a significant minority of the poor (approximately 20%) were trapped in self-perpetuating cycles of dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes: 'By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities' (Lewis, 1965a: p. xlv).

This kind of psychological reductionist and individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty resonated with US popular blame-the-victim discourse. Ironically, in the same articles or book introductions in which he defined the culture of poverty, Lewis also included radical political statements

contradictory to the implication that poverty is caused by self-perpetuating deficient value systems. For example, in his *Scientific American* version of 'The Culture of Poverty' he quotes Frantz Fanon, praises Castro's Cuba, and criticizes 'free-enterprise, pre-welfare-state stage capitalism' for spawning the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966b). At the same time he states that 'it is much more difficult to undo the culture of poverty than to cure poverty itself,' and advocates 'psychiatric treatment' for poverty in the USA (Lewis, 1966b: p. 25).

In other words, the culture of poverty concept was confused theoretically at its inception. Unfortunately, Lewis never managed to clarify what he intended to mean. His published correspondence reveals that he was profoundly disturbed by the blame-the-victim interpretation of the causes of poverty that he triggered in the USA: 'There is nothing in the concept that puts the onus of poverty on the character of the poor' (Lewis, 1967: p. 499).

The notion of a culture of poverty, consequently, should not be treated as a full-blown theory. As presented by Lewis, it was merely a bundle of some 70 traits which he did not link to a particular processual or dynamic logic. In fact, he never even listed all 70 of the traits that he claimed existed. The theoretical sloppiness of the culture of poverty concept may well be a product of the McCarthyist anticommunism in US academia that impinged on Lewis during his formative years in the 1950s. Four decades after their inception, his lists of culture of poverty character traits appear embarrassingly arbitrary, ethnocentric, and psychologically reductionist (Lewis, 1966a: p. xlviii):

... a high incidence of maternal deprivation, of orality, of weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism ... male superiority, and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.

### The Policy Implications of the Culture of Poverty

In the late 1960s and 1970s Lewis's culture of poverty concept produced an outpouring of political and academic reactions, primarily in the USA but also in Mexico and Puerto Rico (Leacock, 1971; *Alteridades*, 1994). Despite conceiving of his work as a call for the expansion of public-sector intervention on behalf of the poor, his concept took the popular intellectual spotlight off the need for structural economic reform, and glossed over the social power dynamics revolving around class, ethnic, gender, and colonial inequalities. Policy makers, if they paid any attention to the culture of poverty concept, interpreted it as advocating the need to rehabilitate the deficient cultural value systems of poor children through the agency of psychiatric social workers. For example, in the applied policy realm Lewis consulted in the development of the Head Start Program in the USA (Rigdon, 1988), which has been criticized retrospectively as an attempt to 'take inner-city preschoolers who live in lead-painted, rat-infested tenements without steady heat or hot water, and metamorphose them into bright-eyed, upper-middle-class overachievers' (Bourgeois, 1995: p. 325). Significantly, in the year 2001, Head Start was still identified by both

liberals and conservatives as one of the only successful anti-poverty programs of the 1960s.

### The Theoretical Implications of the Culture of Poverty

Unfortunately, most of the hostile academic responses to Lewis's culture of poverty concept have limited themselves to contradicting Lewis's empirical assertions, rather than to critiquing theoretically his psychological reductionism, his sloppy use of the culture concept, and his failure to link in a dynamic manner macrostructural political and economic forces – including gender power relations – to ideology, culture, and individual values (Valentine, 1968; Stack, 1974; for a political economy exception, see Katz, 1989; for a feminist literary criticism exception, see Franco, 1989). The bulk of the negative reaction hinges on a political concern for replacing the negative imagery of Lewis's painful but expressive ethnographic portraits of the everyday suffering of urbanized families, with positive images of the worthy poor, struggling for upward mobility against all odds. A late 1990s rehabilitating of the culture of poverty concept from a Marxist perspective dismissed the virulence of the US progressive reaction against the culture of poverty concept as a sectarian 'ultra Bolshevism' that swept the New Left when the general public was drifting ideologically to the Right following the War on Poverty. This precipitated a 'fruitless game of radical one-upmanship' among frustrated intellectuals, who were completely marginal to public political discourse, and who chose instead to devote their energies to proving their dedication to protecting the image of the poor (Harvey and Reed, 1996). More importantly, the urgent righteousness of the anti-culture of poverty social science literature is comparable to the polemics against Moynihan's 1967 patriarchal attribution of the 'tangle of pathology' in the black family as being the central cause for the persistence of poverty among urban African-Americans (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967).

The angry denial by academics of the existence of the types of violence and self-destructive behaviors described ethnographically by Lewis among the vulnerable families that he tape-recorded and described reveals how far removed intellectuals can be from the inner-city street. Although Lewis's writing deserves criticism for presenting his subjects in a decontextualized pornography of violence, sexuality, and emotional brutality, none of the behaviors or personalities described by Lewis should shock anyone who is familiar with everyday life in the US inner city or Latin-American shanty towns. On the contrary, Lewis's ethnographic realist descriptions, unfortunately, still ring true four decades after they were written. His disturbing material, however, demands theoretical explanation and political contextualization, and that is where both Lewis and his critics and admirers have largely failed. By confining the debate to a worthy versus unworthy poor dichotomy, the internecine squabbles between leftist, liberal, and conservative academics mimetically reproduce the right-wing hegemony in popular US culture that equates poverty with sinfulness.

Arguably, the polemics of righteousness that the culture of poverty prompted scared a generation of social scientists away from ethnographic analyses of inner-city poverty in the USA and, to a lesser extent, around the world (Wilson, 1987: pp. 13–16).

Indeed, accusations of supporting a 'culture of poverty interpretation' are still frequently invoked in polemical identity politics attacks between academics over any representation of poverty that is not flattering to poverty's victims (cf [Lassalle and O'Dougherty, 1997](#)). Hence the virulence of the 'underclass debate' in sociology spawned by William Julius Wilson's book *The Truly Disadvantaged* during the late 1980s through the 1990s ([Katz, 1989](#); [Wacquant, 1997](#)).

From a theoretical perspective, the legacy of the culture of poverty debate has impoverished research in the social sciences on the phenomenon of social suffering, everyday violence, and the intimate experience of structural oppression in industrialized nations. Most importantly, by remaining mired in debates driven by identity politics, researchers have minimized the painful experience of day-to-day survival among the persistently poor. Epidemiological data on the associations between social class interpersonal violence, domestic violence, health outcomes, education outcomes, substance abuse, etc. are simply ignored by most poverty researchers in the USA.

The vacuum of critical intellectual engagement with the phenomenological experience of poverty has allowed right-wing academics subscribing to facile neoliberal blame-the-victim interpretations to capture popular imagination and policy debates – especially in the USA. Social or cultural reproduction theory, which emerged out of studies of poor youth at the intersection of the disciplines of education, sociology, and anthropology during the 1980s and early 1990s, offered a critical theoretical alternative. By focusing on the power dynamics of the interface between culture and social inequality, social/cultural reproduction theorists address the empirical reality of the existence of patterns of interpersonal self-destruction without obscuring structural political forces. Although vulnerable to critique for being overly functionalist, these theories allow for the reinscription of agency among the poor, as well as an autonomous role for culture in political economy ([Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977](#); [Willis, 1981](#)).

Few serious social science researchers, if any, at the dawn of the twenty-first century would dare utilize the term 'culture of poverty' in their analysis, despite the fact that their empirical and theoretical work addresses cultural expressions of social suffering due to the entrenchment of urban poverty in industrialized and postindustrialized societies. The problematic analytical and political utility of the culture of poverty concept demonstrates how dangerously essentializing the phrase 'culture of ...' can become with respect to any concept. Indeed, anthropologists cannot agree upon a useful definition for culture; nor do they understand how it operates without turning it into a black box of totalizing essences ([Gupta and Ferguson, 1997](#)).

The culture of poverty furore reminds us that academics fight so hard over so little especially when marginalized

political perspectives are at stake. At the turn of the millennium, much of the world's population survives precariously in shanty towns, housing projects, tenements, and homeless encampments where mind-numbing, bone-crushing experiences of poverty engulf the socially vulnerable. Meanwhile, concerned academics continue to fiddle in their ivory towers, arguing over how to talk correctly about the structural violence of poverty.

*See also:* Class: Social; Income Distribution and Inequality; Measurement Issues; Income Inequality; Poverty Policy; Poverty, Sociology of; Poverty: Measurement and Analysis; Racism, History of; Racism, Sociology of; Underclass; Urban Poverty in Neighborhoods; Wealth Distribution.

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