Strategies for Conducting Post-Culture-of-Poverty Research on Poverty, Meaning, and Behavior

INTRODUCTION

The study of culture is central to understanding the lived experience of poverty. However, researchers risk stigmatizing people in poverty when studying culture. There is currently no general guide for studying of the lived experience of poverty in ways that reduce stigmatization and misrepresentation. Since the early twentieth century, American sociologists have debated the merits of studying culture among the poor, and the relative importance of structure and culture to understanding poverty and for guiding policy. This debate was amplified by Oscar Lewis's (1959) development of the culture of poverty perspective, involving the claim that there is a subculture among the poor that is transmitted intergenerationally and that serves to reinforce their position in society. The use of the concept "culture" in understanding people in poverty became distorted and misused, leading to the pathologization of poverty and the justification of a penal policy toward poverty and welfare. As a result, deep skepticism about the value of studying culture and poverty emerged among progressive scholars. Despite the widespread rejection of traditional culture of poverty arguments by sociologists, however, poverty researchers in the past thirty years have increasingly returned to addressing the role of culture (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Rao and Sanyal 2010; Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard 2017). They have done so with much greater methodological sophistication and awareness of the difficulty of the culture concept. However, concern about the stigmatizing people in poverty through the examination of culture remains.

The stigmatization of people in poverty in research remains a concern for several reasons. Misinterpretations easily occur with data that emerges from observations of the lives of people with lower

social status. Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) suggest that the conventional approaches to poverty research can reinforce othering of people in poverty, even when the intention is to do otherwise. The poor may be represented as diametrically different from the audience, as constituting a group of people who are Other, who are unlike "us" and therefore abnormal. While the risks of othering are not enough to dismiss empirical evidence of differences among the poor, too often, alleged differences are not adequately demonstrated in the first place. Harding (2011) argues for attention to social processes, including the role of culture as frames and scripts that guide the worldviews and behaviors of people in poverty. But he also voices worry that such study can reinforce a monolithic view of culture that fails to do justice to the lived experiences of people. Katz (2013) warns against conducting research that unintentionally supports the idea of the poor as the problem of poverty by scrutinizing their lives. It is all too easy for the public to interpret portrayals of people in poverty as evidence of being undeserving of assistance (Katz 2013). And most significantly, the notion of "poor people" who constitute some sort of homogenous social group is itself mistaken and misleading. In spite of this, there are compelling reasons to conduct critical social science research into the lives of people who are experiencing or have experienced poverty.

For one, culture of poverty (also referred to as CoP) remains influential for how people, including the general public, policymakers, and human services practitioners, think about poverty. CoP has an extensive relationship with social policy, although its intellectual history is more complex than is commonly recognized. The CoP approach also influenced other scholarly attempts to explain and pathologize inequality, which had direct effects for education, health, and social services. Cultural deprivation and oppositional culture theories, for instance, were applied to racial inequality as well as class inequality. As many researchers have documented (e.g., Quadagno 1995; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Schram 2006), welfare reforms of the 1980's and 90's were motivated by notions of the poor as lazy, irresponsible, and overly dependent on social services. Nationally representative survey research suggests that about half of the U.S. population believed that welfare recipients do not try very hard to find work and often have children for financial gain (Foster 2008).

Much of the recent research on poverty has adeptly avoided portraying people in poverty as generally undeserving. However, the field as a whole lacks a widely applicable set of guidelines for avoiding the mistakes of the culture of poverty and related perspectives. I focus on the practical issue of how to conduct research on culture and poverty without contributing to pathologization, oversimplification, or stigmatization. Studying the meanings that are important to people and that shape their behaviors is essentially the study of culture. Yet, culture as a concept is highly limited methodologically, and issues remain in terms of how to understand and characterize meaning and behavior of stigmatized categories like the poor. My aim is to reassert the relevance of culture for the study of people in poverty while providing guidelines for how to avoid the mis-operationalization[1] of culture and problems in data collection and analysis. These problems involve the tendency toward reductionism in explaining human behavior and in the interpretation of observations, which can be further influenced by racism and classism.

This essay is a move toward the development of a general agenda for examining the meanings or symbolic resources relevant for people in poverty. I develop guidelines or strategies for poverty researchers aimed toward the development of ethical research that avoids pathologizing, stigmatizing, or misrepresenting people in poverty and that contributes to their empowerment rather than their disempowerment. First, I summarize what we currently know about the study of culture and poverty to illustrate why this task is worthwhile. I reveal problems in the study of culture and poverty historically and in terms of contemporary challenges. I then offer solutions in the form of research strategies. This is not to redirect what scholars have already been doing, but to explicitly identify effective tactics. Thus, my purpose is to i) contribute to a more coherent methodological approach to the study of culture and poverty, whether qualitative or quantitative, and ii) to move forward the mutual incorporation of a

---

[1] I use the term operationalization broadly to refer to three research processes, including conceptualization (the defining of concepts), measurement of concepts (particularly in deductive or quantitative studies), and the interpretation of observations (particularly in inductive or qualitative studies).

relationality perspective and the study of culture and poverty by illustrating the advantages of such a move.

Specific recommendations reference the depth and breadth of observations collected by a researcher as well as the unit of analysis. I argue that to avoid problems of overgeneralization and what I call "unacknowledged comparison," we must engage with multiple points of observation and empirical comparisons. The problem of Unacknowledged Comparison applies to poverty and other research on deviant populations. Unacknowledged Comparison occurs when a researcher or the reader of a research report assumes that the population being studied is different than another population on some studied characteristic without the data to support that comparison. In addition, the heterogeneity of people in poverty is considerable, and we can better address that heterogeneity by recognizing the sets of circumstances that affect behavior rather than generalizing the behavior or the culture that influences that behavior. Finally, I argue that the unit of analysis should be at the relational level rather than the individual level. To analyze the unit at the relational level is to center the ways that actors are positioned relative to one another, culturally and structurally, including what happens in interaction. Explicit attention paid to how social relations reinforce outcomes of powerlessness (including poverty itself) versus empowerment will be of greater benefit to people in poverty.

A SUMMARY OF THE STUDY OF POVERTY AND CULTURE

Traditional Culture of Poverty

Early research on the impoverished can be roughly but usefully divided into that which posed culture as an explanation for the lower status of a group and that which considered culture but not as a critical explanatory factor. Much early research on the impoverished, especially on disadvantaged racial minority populations, involves considerable confusion between "problematic" lifestyles that were directly a product of external forces versus those that were part of an entire culture and way of life among certain populations. Certain kinds of behavior in such cases are taken to stand in for culture rather than as a

product of a combination of factors, cultural and structural. This confusion persists through the development of the culture of poverty notion.

Not every social scientist shared this confusion, however, and these early exceptions illustrate the advantage of separating behavior and behavioral outcomes conceptually from culture. W. E. B. DuBois (1899), for instance, views structural forces combined with continued racism in the culture as the main causes of impoverishment for African Americans. DuBois points to historical circumstance as the ultimate explanation for the poverty of groups of African Americans in late-nineteenth century Philadelphia. Problematic adaptations to conditions do feature. For instance, in mentioning the large number of "deserted wives", he suggests that the "causes of desertion are partly laxity in morals and partly the difficulty of supporting a family" (1899/1965: 67). But laxity in moral habits is not used as an explanation for the "Negro" condition overall; rather, it is portrayed as a result of their condition. Though DuBois perceives problem behavior among urban African Americans, he also couches such problems in a non-essentialist way, as a product of social conditions that any unfortunate group could endure, and as by no means describing all members. In his conclusions, DuBois (1899) prevails on both Black citizens and white citizens to change behavior to improve "the Negro condition." Jane Addams and the Chicago Hull House investigators identify causes of poverty in the larger economy and labor markets, and in the lack of political and social organization in working class neighborhoods. The Hull House initiative did attempt to change the lifeways of people in poverty and viewed the enrichment and easement of the lives of the poor as worth direct intervention, but avoided blaming the prevailing ways of life amidst poverty (Addams 1910). Addams generally views the prevailing lifeways of the poor as malleable and less indicative of cultural faults than of expediency. For DuBois and Addams, culture is not an explanation, but rather another symptom of the problems of poverty. And both view behavior of the poor as a function of a variety of factors that we can classify as both structural and cultural.

The Chicago School's human ecology approach to understanding inner city impoverishment references both structural and cultural elements as organizing the city and hence responsible for the disorganization of impoverished parts of the city. Transition from rural to urban life and from homeland

to American society in particular contributes to disorganization in city slums or ethnic enclaves (Wirth 1928). However, this approach departs from Addams and DuBois by identifying cultural features of the slum as consisting of deviant lifestyles. While less reductionist than other explanations of poverty and hardship, ultimately the Chicago School takes a structural functionalist approach that at least partly identified the problem in the lower classes' failure to adhere to mainstream cultural values and lifestyles. Deviant behaviors, like crime, are due to social disorganization, which is due to not having yet culturally assimilated, which seems to be indicated by the fact of deviant behavior (Wells and Weisheit 2012).

The mid-twentieth century brings more emphasis on the internal workings of communities that suffer high rates of poverty, especially African Americans. In O'Connor's (2001: 81) historical accounting, E. Franklin Frazier "more than anyone was responsible for the 'pathological' vision of black culture and family structure" later adopted by Gunnar Myrdal and Daniel P. Moynihan. The "Negro matriarch" is posed by Frazier as an effect of black male joblessness and slavery conditions (Frazier 1937). Moreover, Frazier views matriarchy as only one of four family formations among African Americans in U.S. cities (Frazier 1937). His focus is not on changing family structure directly so much as opening up opportunities, but Frazier does argue that whereas structure directly causes poverty, structure also causes family (dis)organization, which reinforces poverty. Practitioners and pundits then used Frazier's work to justify focus on dysfunction within poor families and communities. In addition, social disorganization and modernization theories arise during the early-to-mid twentieth century, sharing some of the same fascinations with inferior values and behavior as explanations for inequality. Although initially structural in nature, these approaches came to focus on culture (see Kornhauser 1978 and So 1990 for critiques).

Oscar Lewis's (1959) *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* introduces the notion of "culture of poverty". He does not define culture of poverty beyond listing sets of common traits, though he does write that "poverty becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a subculture of its own. One can speak to the culture of the poor, for it has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members" (2). While

it does not seem problematic to wonder about the effects of poverty for one's social and psychological life, the notion of a particular subculture that can be generalized is unwarranted by the evidence presented. Lewis writes, "It seems to me that the culture of poverty cuts across regional, rural-urban, and even national boundaries" (2), citing studies in London, Puerto Rico, his own work in Mexico, and mentions but does not provide a citation for "lower class Negroes" in the U.S. Traits held in common among the poor as described by Lewis include common-law marriage (although two of the families have formalized marriages), an emphasis on male dominance (but with exceptions, when the male head of the family does not meet all expectations for manhood), and poor relationships with fathers (stronger ties to the mother).

Lewis expands upon his definition and description of culture of poverty in *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (1965). Like *Five Families*, *La Vida* is primarily descriptive and narrative, with little analysis. Lewis does mention the danger in stereotyping a group, the danger of overgeneralizing, and the possibility of misrepresenting findings to justify some conception of the group. However, he indicates that he feels it is counterproductive to cover up the undesirable or distasteful. In choosing a bare portrayal of research subjects, then, he is sacrificing analysis to the false gods of objectivity. As I will discuss, this is a critical mistake. While few contemporary social scientists take *La Vida* seriously, the study starkly illustrates how failing to connect adaptations to conditions of poverty analytically to the larger context—including structural, cultural, and/or the micro-context of relational and situational factors—results in pathologization of research subjects. This is particularly easy for researchers to do with groups that are further marked by racial, ethnic, or other differences. When examining the adaptations people make under conditions of poverty, racism, or immigration, attention is easily directed to the behavior of individuals and then connected directly to outcomes, like poverty itself. The fixation on the adaptation itself encourages the view that it is the adaptation that needs to be changed rather than the conditions that produced it. Failing to contextualize findings further contributes to the impression that, as Green (2006: 1116) puts it, poverty is "a problem

that must be eliminated to maintain social functionality", as opposed to "the outcome of historical and social relations" that need to be questioned.

From the start, there were many critics who took issue with Lewis's (1959) problematizing of the behavior and lifeways of the poor, including his failure to address variation and the prematurity of generalizing CoP (Valentine 1968; Kochar 1969; Leacock 1971; Dickeman 1971; Gans 1967; Kornhauser 1978). Leacock (1969) notes the tendencies of CoP to polarize any differences, its ignoring of variation not only among the poor but for the lives of single individuals, its lacking of historical perspective, and its empirical-blindness. Many researchers have presented what amounts to a wealth of evidence of people in poverty behaving in ways that contradict the original CoP notion or provide alternative interpretations for similar empirical observations (early examples: Whyte 1943; Rodman 1963; Liebow 1967; Leacock 1969:189; Dickeman 1971; Ladner 1971; Stack 1974; Willis 1977; Horowitz 1983). The misuse of culture as concept and measure is probably the most critiqued problem in the works of Oscar Lewis. In describing the concept of culture of poverty, Lewis (1965) identifies four components: 1) lack of participation and integration in larger society; 2) a low level of organization beyond the family in the community; 3) the absence of a protected childhood, along with the prevalence of free unions, female-centered families, authoritarianism, and lack of privacy; and 4) individual feelings of marginality, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority. As Kornhauser (1987) notes, Lewis does not distinguish between social structure and culture, but throws a variety of observed traits into a mix of alleged "values". He does not distinguish between what people do and what they would like to do, nor between situation and response. Valentine (1971) points out that many of the aspects of the CoP presented by Lewis are not really cultural patterns at all, but structural conditions or exigencies, such as crowded living quarters. The lack of integration, the absence of a protected childhood, and the lack of privacy may also be better categorized as structural features of the lives of the poor. Leeds (1971) also argues that Lewis's use of the term culture and the traits he associates with a culture of poverty lack clarity. If CoP can occur across country and time for different peoples, can it really be called a culture? Furthermore, Lewis cannot clarify why some of the poor do not have a CoP. Lewis's own data show a wide range of situation and behavior

among the poor, "the majority of whom do not appear to be in the culture of poverty at all" (Leeds 1971: 235). The notion of a "culture of poverty" commits the sins of conflation, tautology, and oversimplification.

Other scholarly uses of the CoP approach are mixed in terms of how carefully the concept was used. On one hand, scholars like Lee Rainwater and Walter B. Miller combined structural and cultural accounts of poverty, but identified structure as the most important and primary cause, with the cultural adaptations less problematic. Rainwater (1970: 5) writes that "the victimization process as it operates in families prepares and toughens its members to function in the ghetto world at the same time that it seriously interferes with their ability to operate in any other currently available world. The presentation of this situation, however, is very different from arguing that 'the family is to blame.'" He cautions against attempts to change the family or personalities of individuals (Rainwater 1970: 5). Moreover, the solutions that African Americans formed in response to their segregation, Rainwater writes, combine elements from larger society as well as distinctive cultural features. The resulting subculture will have some positive and some negative repercussions. Hence, Rainwater maintains recognition that people make adaptations to their situations that may be difficult for others to understand, but as it is not the source of poverty, it is not at all important to attacking poverty itself.

Other poverty and race scholars were far less careful in their combination of structural and cultural factors. Drake and Cayton (1970), in *Black Metropolis*, point to multiple factors as the producers of black poverty, including structural factors in the political economy and racism, but also emphasized social disorganization and deviant culture. A more explicitly conservative CoP argument also developed, primarily among pundits like George Gilder and right-wing political scientists like Charles Murray. These conservatives did utilize or build on CoP to argue that the poor have only themselves to blame for their predicament, and ignored or minimized structural or environmental factors altogether (Gilder 1981). In *Losing Ground*, Murray (1984) argues that the war on poverty itself exacerbated the situation of the poor, inviting them to remain dependent and quashing ambition. Others (Gilder 1981; Harrison 1985) agree that there is a culture of poverty, it is highly problematic, it is worsened by the welfare state, and/or that the

poor ultimately are hindered by their own behaviors. Gilder (1981: 12; cited by O'Connor 2001: 226) wrote that poverty "is less a state of income than a state of mind…the government dole blights most of the people who come to depend on it." Many sociologists who take issue with CoP see this view as the inevitable outcome of CoP, especially as Murray's social Darwinism spoke so well to middle-class fears, desires, and political expediency (see also Katz 2013).

The use of the culture of poverty idea in the social sciences was largely discredited by the end of the 1960s, though attention to race and family instability in social science research did not disappear. Social scientists began to "approach them from the safer distance of quantitative data and rationalistic models that treated race and class as demographic variables rather than as either cultural or political economic facts" (O'Connor 2001: 210). Then, in 1987, William Julius Wilson revitalizes explicit attention to the social pathologies of poor communities, this time by discussing urban poverty in terms of concentrated disadvantage that is externally produced. The underclass thesis, as it came to be called, is the argument that joblessness under deindustrialization in the inner city combined with middle-class flight produced social isolation that compounded social pathologies of single mother households, welfare dependency, and other problems of poor people of color. *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson 1987) was very influential on the study of urban concerns and race, especially the idea that the concentration of poverty had devastating consequences as residents became increasingly isolated from job networks, role models, mainstream institutions, and mainstream behaviors. Critiques of the underclass thesis were quickly forthcoming (Jencks 1991; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Gans 2010). Nonetheless, *The Truly Disadvantaged* heralded a new wave of research on neighborhood effects, including social capital and networks. In Wilson's 1996 book, *When Work Disappears*, he emphasizes the structural factors—namely, the forces of high rates of unemployment in the inner city. He locates the problem in terms of a global economy job shrinkage, as wages between low-skilled and high-skilled workers polarize. Crime, welfare dependence, family dissolution, and social organization continue to be viewed as the negative side effects of concentrated unemployment, but his policy proposals focus not on the behavior of the poor, but what he sees as ultimately responsible for their predicament: failing schools, poor returns on low-wage work,

lack of child care, and so on. However, like many others, he maintains a monolithic and simplistic view of the culture of inner-city residents as maladaptive.

In many of these later accounts, structure is seen as externally-imposed whereas culture is internal, and culture is increasingly used to refer to the actions of people, their adaptations to structural conditions, and their difference from others. But as Roach and Gursslin (1967) insist, culture should not be treated as a residual factor that requires no further explanation: what one should *not* do, is "conclude in effect that the traits of the poor are the cause of the traits of the poor" (392). Rather than thinking of structure as the ultimate cause, with culture second, and the individual as the endpoint, we can see structure interacting with culture to produce strategies of action. The "traits of the poor" are not culture, they are not the cause of poverty, and they are highly variable and susceptible to circumstances across individuals.

Contemporary Approaches and Issues

The reanalysis of the role of culture in understanding the poor is best represented by the special 2010 issue "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty" of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Small, Harding and Lamont 2010). Young (2010) suggests the position of this new wave of cultural scholars is that researchers should emphasize particularities rather than generalities. The choices and behaviors of people in poverty can then be examined more closely, such as by considering how African American men actually come to make sense of opportunities, rather than assuming they must be motivated to take advantage of opportunities. Indeed, many of the concepts proposed for the study of culture and poverty, such as frames, worldviews, and identity, are far more precise than how culture is used in the traditional CoP corpus. Vaisey (2010) further suggests that, in making culture about resources or abilities rather than values, we continue to consider the importance of aspirations and motives. He argues that what people want does matter. These are compelling points, and I support the turn toward precision in cultural concept usage. However, I would like to see more analysis of the formation of what

people want and how the adoption and use of frames, for instance, leads to action under different conditions.

Overall, contemporary literature suggests there are at least three overlapping reasons to include the study of culture in research on poverty. First, it is important to study how people in poverty interpret their lives because it helps to illuminate the effects of poverty and the agency of individuals and groups. Further, we can examine how these outcomes vary by cultural context. Identifying cultural consequences of poverty may reveal "hidden injuries of class" to use a phrase from the classic Sennet and Cobb (1972) book. It is perhaps equally important to recognize the strength and resilience of people. As Ridge summarizes the documented effects of poverty, "the evidence also shows that children are active and resourceful, and they seek to manage and mediate the highly corrosive effects of poverty…These strategies of survival involve mediation and moderation, concealment of needs…However, these strategies of survival are not without tensions and costs for children themselves" (2011: 82). It is further important to recognize the agency of people in poverty as necessary for involving them in solutions to their own problems. A large volume of research on addressing poverty demonstrates that involving people in their own solutions is essential, and that this is too often overlooked (see Rao and Sanyal 2010; Khader 2011). However, the study of culture does not automatically implicate agency. Not only is it necessary to consider how people respond to structural conditions, but also the cultural resources they draw upon and transform in the process of coping with structural conditions. For instance, research shows how the valuing of children over career affects decision-making of young women in low-income communities (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Erdmans and Black 2015). Furthermore, there are cultural differences by race, ethnicity, national origin, reservation status, and distance from migration that may affect not only the values and worldviews of people, and their experience of poverty, but their strategies for coping with or escaping poverty (Skrentny 2008). For instance, Small and Newman (2001) note that research that focuses on structure to the exclusion of culture can reify social arrangements and fail to identify mediating factors that are based in human interpretation and agency.

This brings us to the next reason for studying culture, which is to identify how people react to, cope with, and create lifeways in response to poverty. Reliance on certain symbolic resources can be a source of strength or just a way to cope. Behaviors can be a response to meanings or a response to conditions or a combination. Study of culture can illuminate the resources people have, or lack, as in cultural or social capital. Engaging with their personal goals and values is necessary to assist people in poverty, especially in terms of understanding the difficult trade-offs people face (Khader 2011; Wolf and De-shalit 2007). Stack (1974) argues that black families in The Flats evolved certain patterns, and that these "highly adaptive structural features of urban black families comprise a resilient response to the social-economic conditions of poverty" and unemployment (124). By referencing these adaptations as structural rather than cultural features and as strategies for survival, Stack does not assume that the adaptations are necessarily accepted as the best way of doing things by residents of The Flats. She also identifies how such adaptations exact a cost from participants. Attempting to move upward by marriage or employment entails drifting away from the kin network and the security that comes with it. In her conclusion, Stack pushes back against "the notion of a self-perpetuating culture of poverty", indicating that the coping mechanisms developed do not compensate for poverty, nor perpetuate the cycle of poverty. "But when mainstream values fail the poor, as they have failed most Flats' residents, the harsh economic conditions of poverty force people to return to proven strategies for survival" (129). Symbolic resources and structural conditions thus interact to produce behaviors. We can also compare across groups to determine how different structural and cultural conditions shape the behavior of people in poverty, especially in terms of violence, gender norms, and revictimization. For instance, Harding (2011), in discussing violence in poor communities, emphasizes the importance of acknowledging not only the agency of the poor, but both "commendable" and "deplorable" behavior. He argues that neighborhood violence and cultural heterogeneity are important factors in the behavior of young boys and men. "To whitewash or sanitize their experiences out of fear or stigmatization will merely blind us to the realities that they face" (19). By studying what meanings are important to people, we can more clearly identify the trade-offs and choices that people actually face.

Third, we better understand the mechanisms of inequality when we extend investigation beyond simply structure. As Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) point out, inequality is both structural and cultural. Social oppression, more specifically, is as cultural as it is structural, as demonstrated by Iris Young's (1990) "Five Faces of Oppression": Marginalization, Exploitation, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism, and Violence. For many prominent sociological theories, it is important to see how and to what degree people in poverty may accept their inferiority and understand their participation in the mechanisms that disadvantage them. For Tilly (1990), mechanisms of emulation and adaptation perpetuate categorical inequality, and adaptation and emulation operate through shared local knowledge and scripting. For Bourdieu, culture is how inequality is legitimated. Culture can be imposed on people. Skrentny (2008) discusses how the notions of discrimination and stereotypes as mechanisms of racial inequality, for instance, are essentially cultural explanations. Culture can be invented by people as a form of resistance, such as the use of hip-hop by minority youth in late-1970's New York City. And at the community level, Duncan (1990) shows how cultural attributes of communities contribute in varying degrees to the marginalization of the poor.

Therefore, although "the culture of poverty" is problematic, culture for people in poverty remains worthy of our attention and understanding. Accordingly, how do we study poverty and culture without repeating the mistakes of CoP? More broadly, how should we study meaning and the behavior that is affected by it? One approach to avoid essentializing or overgeneralizing findings has been to consider culture at the individual-level and break it down into more operationalizable concepts, like (most famously) "strategies of action".

Although culture is traditionally considered to be a group-level phenomenon, it is often operationalized at the individual-level in both qualitative and quantitative sociological research. Focus on the individual-level of culture typically means examining how an individual draws from multiple group-level cultures to make sense of his/her own experiences and to shape action. Taking culture to the individual-level alleviates the problem of measurement somewhat, but poses issues when we generalize

back up to the group-level. Importantly, at the individual-level, it is usually a matter of measuring what is really a mediator of culture, not culture itself.

Consider how Ann Swidler resituates culture in her classic (1986) *American Sociological Review* article, "Culture in Action." Jettisoning culture as a set of values, Swidler (1986) views culture as symbols, rituals, stories, and world-views from which people select to solve whatever problem they face and form enduring strategies of action over time. Culture therefore does not determine so much the ends that people seek, but the ways in which they are able or choose to seek those ends: "Culture in this sense is more like a style or a set of skills and habits than a set of preferences or wants" (Swidler 1986: 75). Many scholars latched onto her idea of a "tool kit" consisting of resources for action, capabilities, and readily-available meanings.

However, it is important to note that Swidler does not write that these strategies for action, or tool-kits, *are* culture, but that they are affected by culture and in turn affect action. They serve therefore as a mediator between culture and human behavior. Moreover, she leaves open the possibility, in my reading, that "social structure" also affects strategies of action. Strategies of action, therefore, can be seen to develop in response to shared meanings and expectations of the world, as well as limitations and opportunities afforded by the social structure. These strategies of action then heavily influence action, but are not exclusively responsible for action; social structure, culture, or individual-level factors may also directly influence action in addition to influencing action through strategies of action. This formulation of human behavior is useful for recognizing variation in human behavior within a single culture since culture and social structure are theorized to have direct and indirect effects on human behavior. People develop their own strategies of action, for which they draw from multiple cultural sources. Habits or patterns of behavior, represented by strategies of action or habitus depending on which theorist one prefers, shift our attention away from merely what people do as a reflection of culture. I would further push us to focus on how behavior is a function of both structure and culture, with culture providing the meaning, structure the organizational context, and all of this occurring through social relations.

POINTS OF EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

The lack of adequate comparison for making claims of difference and the failure to account for diversity in strategies of action among individuals and group have plagued culture of poverty research from the start. It is well recognized by accomplished poverty scholars that there exists considerable heterogeneity among the poor; in fact, heterogeneity is a defining factor of populations in poverty. One imperative for studies of culture and poverty is the need for more extended empirical observation than is typically the case with studies utilizing cross-sectional interview or survey, and which is not assured with ethnography or participant observation. If we are to examine the meanings relevant to and behaviors of people in poverty, essential study components include comparison internally and externally and extended points of observation. Diversity among people in poverty must also be appropriately acknowledged by researchers. Too often in the past we have lacked rigorous empirical evidence before ideas caught on outside of the discipline, such as with the oppositional culture models for education and crime (Kornhauser 1987; Small and Newman 2001; but also see Willis 1977). Second, we lack comparisons between the poor and the non-poor. We must ascertain whether the culture of the poor is truly different from the mainstream (Small and Newman 2001). How do we know some experience, habit, or belief is a feature of poverty and not a more general feature or an individual adaptation to poverty rather than a part of the culture?

We can take steps to explicitly avoid Unacknowledged Comparison in both quantitative and qualitative research. While more comparative studies to interrogate cross-class or cross-group habits, challenges, and routines (e.g., Lareau 2001) may be ideal, it is not very realistic for many researchers, especially ethnographers, and is not necessary for every project. However, when interpreting data, analysts must be careful about Unacknowledged Comparison and take steps to address the uniqueness or difference of the behavior under analysis. Readers have a tendency to assume difference of the research subject even when the uniqueness of observations is not addressed. We must think comparatively even if we do not have the data. That does not mean making assertions without empirical data; it means not implying claims of difference without empirical data. It means not leaving the data open to

misinterpretation by readers or users of the research. The otherness and the difference of subjects must be overtly questioned by the analyst. This may entail referencing literature on other populations to demonstrate that whatever processes, ideas, coping strategies, etc. are being described are not wholly new nor unique to people in poverty. Researchers can also point out that their findings about the behavior of subjects in poverty may apply equally or in part to anyone who found oneself in such a situation. For instance, in their study of single motherhood among low-income women in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area, Edin and Kefalas (2005) point out that nonmarital childbirth has not just increased for those in poverty, but among the middle class as well. It is a population-wide trend, not some strategy or response unique to the poor. What may differ for these women is the context for forming and maintaining romantic relationships and the centrality of children to their lives. The early, non-marital childbearing has nothing to do with promiscuity, and everything to do with lack of better options for giving meaning in one's life.

Researchers must also investigate the differences among the poor (Gans 2010). Quantitative research can be improved by locating important subcategories of poverty rather than homogenizing the poor. Poverty can manifest very different across geographic areas, but research in the US has focused on the urban poor to such an extent that the different circumstances of the rural poor have been ignored by policy reforms (Weber et al. 2005; Green 2006). The poor who live in the suburbs or in mixed-income metropolitan areas are even further off the policy radar.

In addition to considering the breadth of findings, depth is a critical consideration. Seeking depth in data collection is especially relevant for addressing pathologization and stereotyping. Snow, Anderson and Koegel (1994) find that homeless people are most often surveyed on personal problems and dysfunctions, and that this has provided a distorted picture of them. They note that the practice of "taking slices or strips of talk or behavior as indicative of a pattern" (Snow et al. 1994: 3) is problematic especially for studying the homeless, who are constantly having to adapt to difficult situations and for whom behavior can vary greatly as a result. Single encounters can be misleading, as Snow and colleagues demonstrate with the example of a homeless man who seemed delusional with his talk of spirits and

conspiracies, but who they found over time was not only well-educated, but often coherent. Study of culture—or meanings and behaviors—should be in close consultation with qualitative work that goes beyond a few brief exposures. Furthermore, we cannot take everyday understandings and representations at face value. All this does not mean quantitative sociology has no role to play, but there are major risks and potential problems to address for survey and statistical research. Interviewers also should consider multiple interviews or contacts with individuals, as change occurring between the interview periods can be quite revealing. Edin and Lein (1997) found that interviewing more than once was crucial for their study on how low-income single mothers actually made and spent money. The subjects were sometimes hesitant to give the whole story of how they made ends meet, and the researchers did not always know how to interpret responses initially. Small and Newman (2001) also point out the difficulty in ascertaining whether, for a given individual, living in a particular neighborhood has negative effects. Their recommendations support the need for multiple data points such as longitudinal data or assessment of neighborhood versus school effects to avoid overly simplified accounts of the lives of people in poverty.

A particularly revealing example is Furstenberg's (2007) study of young Baltimore mothers. This study compared their life experiences with those of their counterparts who engaged in later childbirth, debunking the myth perpetuated by earlier research that early childbearing causes poverty. The longitudinal and comparative aspect helps us separate correlation from causation in a way that multiple cross-sectional studies do not. The earlier studies do not do anything wrong, per se, but they are easily overinterpreted in a context of general misunderstandings of the family lives of poor women (Furstenberg 2007: 4). Studies that compared children born early and later in parents' lives failed to account for preexisting differences (Furstenberg 2007: 67). Mothers who gave birth early were poorer and had less access to prenatal care and health services. And teen pregnancy – viewed as a major social problem by many – became an explanation for why so many of the poor did not succeed. But the longitudinal and comparative analysis demonstrates this is not in fact accurate. Early childbearing might be a marker of marginality and inequality, but the impact early childbearing has on the life chances of poor women has been greatly exaggerated (Furstenberg 2007)

Finally, any analysis should also explicitly address and make sense of conflicting or non-conforming evidence. Miller and Crabtree encourage qualitative researchers to "celebrate anomalies as the window to insight" (1999: 142-143). Often this does not mean ditching the path the analyst has taken once some patterns are alighted upon, but rather enriching the understanding of the processes described. For instance, in Paul Willis's (1981) research he identifies not only the ways in which his working-class adolescent subjects limit themselves by enacting an oppositional style to middle-class standards and expectations, but also takes care to elaborate the "penetrations" they make in terms of their worldview. The "lads" recognize that the school makes false promises about the opportunities available to them should they conform and they hold the true value of school credentials in some doubt. Willis is thereby able to explain how it is that the lads rebel by rejecting school norms and by valuing working class labor, yet in the end conform to expectations for them held by wider society. Overall, variation should be acknowledged and exceptions considered for what they tell us about the main pattern (c.f. Glaser and Strauss 1967). In some cases, the researcher may need to seek out anomalies or certain forms of variation.

Another related problem in studying the culture of the poor in the United States is that this is a population whose members regularly change from year to year. Most of those who are poor at any given time only remain in poverty for one to five years. Blank's (1997) research demonstrates that there is a lot of movement in and out of poverty, although the *proportion* of the overall population in poverty at any given moment in time does not change much. Drawing on a randomized sample of Americans surveyed over 13 years, Blank (1997) finds that about half of those who were ever poor during these 13 years were poor for only one to three years. A mere five percent were poor for more than 10 years. Data from the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation indicates that over the four-year period between 2009 and 2012, 34.5% of the population experienced poverty lasting 2 or more months, and 2.7% of the population lived in poverty all 48 months (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2016). While many individuals who cycle in and out may remain near-poor, this only introduces more complexity for delimiting the group under study. Who counts as "poor"? Are the working class a separate group? What we know already suggests there are both similarities and differences.

There are few characteristics that a significant (>65%) majority of people in poverty share beyond general economic scarcity at any given point in time. While rates are higher for people of color, whites remain the largest racial group among people in poverty (60.2% of people in poverty are non-Hispanic white according to 2018 Current Population Survey data). While a majority of the poor live in metropolitan areas, only 12% of all poor persons live in an urban ghetto (Blank 1997), and the majority of the poor live in mixed-income neighborhoods. In 2010, around 16.4 million poor people lived in the suburbs, compared with 13.4 million in cities and 7.3 million in rural areas (Kneebone and Berub 2014). One exception where people in poverty constitute a majority among themselves is education, and even there, the distribution is not dramatic: only 62% of people in poverty have a high school diploma or less—though 84% lack a four-year degree (Current Population Survey for 2018).

Given that there is so much movement in and out of poverty, we would not expect there to be persistent and entrenched cultural patterns among the poor at large. While subgroups of the poor might demonstrate patterns in meaning or behavior, such patterns are unlikely to apply to a large subsection of people in poverty across the nation and should be interpreted with extra caution. People in poverty face a variety of conditions that are unlikely to create a coherent culture. Even within a neighborhood, overgeneralizing is problematic. For one, changes produced by immigration and demographic patterns render neighborhoods and communities more culturally complex (Small and Newman 2001). Many studies of inner-city poverty focus on African Americans, despite surging numbers of other people of color and different nationalities. Residents of minority inner-city neighborhoods are in general quite diverse in how involved they are in community and in their orientation to politics (Small 2004).

Nonetheless, it may be useful to examine how people respond to conditions of poverty in similar ways such that we might better understand the effects of poverty and the adaptations people make to structural conditions. Suppose there are a variety of ideal types? Sánchez-Jankowski's (2008) work provides an example of some judicious depth in this area. To examine the sort of life the urban poor make for themselves, Sánchez-Jankowski conducts observations in five persistently impoverished neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New York City. He agrees with Lewis that conditions of persistent

poverty can create a culture, but departs in his assessment of how this culture works to create social order.

He addresses culture by combining a notion of culture as worldview with a notion of culture as practices

and identifies different types of value orientations held by individuals within and across those

neighborhoods. Two value orientations dominate, according to Sánchez-Jankowski (2008): security-

maximizing and excitement-maximizing. Both are "present-oriented" but are also tied to notions of what

is truly responsible under given conditions of poverty. "Security-maximizing individuals work for an

impending disaster that they believe is always very close to happening" (21), and savings may need to be

drawn upon within hours or days. The security-maximizing orientation supposedly differs from the

future-oriented behaviors and planning of the middle class, however, in that it is highly risk-averse,

though Sánchez-Jankowski does not do a direct comparison. The excitement-maximizing orientation "is

predicated on the belief that the chance of living comfortably within their environment is unlikely and

people should therefore find a much excitement as possible in such conditions [and] live each day to the

fullest" (23). People with the excitement-maximizing orientation believe in being generous with family

and friends, in "the goodness of reciprocity", and that "any other behavior is foolishly shortsighted, and

individually and socially irresponsible" (23). Sánchez-Jankowski presents both value orientations as

having strengths and weaknesses as adaptations to conditions of scarcity, and argues that these

orientations are developed without reference to mainstream or external values. They also are not

necessarily "passed down" intergenerationally, as children will often depart from their parents' approach

(Sánchez-Jankowski 2008). Both orientations are about managing conditions of scarcity, and arguably,

both are ways people comfort themselves and seek control, perhaps choosing one over the other based on

the type of anxiety or fear that afflicts that individual.

These orientation categories may be useful for examining the different strategies of action that

people in poverty develop. However, these notions of security-maximizing and excitement-maximizing

strategies cannot be generalized to all people in poverty, even the urban poor.[2] And are they truly distinct

---

[2] In *All My Kin*, Stack writes that African American residents of "The Flats" share values with the
mainstream, even though they also have built an alternative cooperative lifestyle, referring to a "value-

from how people in general tend to regard life? What evidence is there that these value orientations do not map just as well onto middle-class subjects? Moreover, many researchers have recorded observations of individuals in poverty who generally ascribe to security-first principles, but who will also regularly break their own rules and occasionally indulge themselves or their families (Fitchen 1981; Desmond 2016). As ideal-types, Sánchez-Jankowski's (2008) value orientations may be best applied to short-term individual strategies of action as opposed to fixed ones. Individuals may be more flexible and adaptive in their strategies of action than even a series of observations might suggest.

However, social processes, because they are not about specific people but rather about how under certain circumstances social interaction unfolds, can be thought about in a more generalized way, with less risk of stereotyping. For instance, Lareau (2000) finds that when parents from a low-SES background do not have much education and feel insecure interacting with teachers and other school officials, they are less successful in obtaining benefits for their children and less able to offer their children helpful advice about how to solve school-related problems. Properly interpreted, this does *not* mean that a majority of lower-class parents therefore are unable to interact with school officials in beneficial ways, and that is why their children perform less well on average. What it *does* mean is that *when* lower-class parents do not have certain skills and insights, they are likely to be disadvantaged when it comes to the workings of schools. However, in my experience, readers of Lareau's work often take her to mean the first interpretation, and the distinction between the former and the latter interpretation is lost. The advantages of identifying behavior as products of specific sets of circumstances are threefold. We avoid overgeneralization, which is especially important for a diverse and categorically-unstable group as "the poor". We develop more specific understanding of the factors in particular behavioral and positional

mosaic of the poor" (1974: 125). She argues that her research subjects have a "remarkably accurate assessment of the social order…they can realistically appraise the futility of hoarding a small cash reserve…What is seen by some interpreters as disinterest in delayed rewards is actually a rational evaluation of need" (Stack 1974: 128). Horowitz (1985) had similarly developed a dichotomous categorization of normative codes found among Chicano Chicago residents. These codes—one being an honor code and the other more akin to the Protestant work ethic—are not inflexible nor static, and tension between them can be found in the same individual.

outcomes, allowing for both structural and cultural features to be considered. And third, it allows for the recognition of adaptability and flexibility of individual strategies of action and in terms of how they draw from and participate in culture. In fact, focus on the specific sets of circumstances is further enhanced by thinking of those sets of circumstances as consisting of social relations: both the immediate relations in which people act, as well as the wider set of social relations that produce the context for those immediate relations. In the next section, I explain why a focus on social relations specifically improves our understanding of people in poverty, especially when the symbolic resources that relations depend upon and recreate are examined.

RELATIONALITY

In this section, I begin by discussing why we should integrate relational and cultural perspectives. I then roughly sketch out the *how* of that task. Relational approaches take some outcome of interest, such as poverty itself, educational outcomes, or the ability to conduct family planning, as a relational achievement (produced through the relations of two or more individuals), rather than an individual one. This has the virtue of providing greater contextualization to subjects' perspectives and behaviors because we can see how situations and immediate context, including the actions and perspectives of others, matter. When discussions of subjects' perspectives and behaviors lack contextualization, such perspectives and behaviors are easily interpreted as being intrinsic to those individuals and thus pathologized. Several scholars since Swidler have rethought the concept of culture in ways that dovetail with the relational approach. I am particularly influenced by Rao and Sanyal's (2010) article in the *Annals*, in which they state that culture is "a relational, discursive process, which is affected by socioeconomic and political inequalities and which, in turn, influences them" (167). Jenkins argues in her ethnographic study of the struggle with schizophrenia (even more individualized than poverty) that "culture is not a place or a people, not a fixed and coherent set of values, beliefs, or behaviors, but an orientation to being-in-the-world that is *dynamically created and re-created in the process of social interaction and historical*

context" (2015: 9, italics added). These definitions recognize that culture depends on and in turn shapes social relations.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that as agents, individuals act in terms of the sources of meaning and significance in their lives and they choose to modify culture and its arrangements, but an individual cannot singly create their own culture. Culture may very well have more to do with agency than does structure, but it is not a straightforward relationship. "Human action is both constrained and enabled by the meaning people give to their actions" (Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010: 23). Meanings and behavior are never purely agentic, and neither are individuals completely powerless. Symbolic resources are not *merely* imposed, but nor do we fashion stories and worldviews in isolation. It helps to situate meanings (and behaviors) as relational products; they are not created by individuals or even by monolithic groups, but socially, in relation to one another. Culture is therefore constantly recreated, like "doing gender" for West and Zimmerman (1987). The positionality of people and the nature of the relations are key to how meanings are created and how they are put into action.

Relational inequality theory (in addition to the larger category of relational sociology) posits that individual actions and beliefs derive from social relations. Social relations should thus be the object of study (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2018). This approach suggests that our work can obscure the most important insights of the discipline when our statistical and qualitative approaches lead to reductionism. Relational inequality approaches would benefit in turn from an explicit consideration of the creation and use of symbolic resources for finding and creating meaning. Blokland (2012) proposes we focus on the interactions and relations of people from different positions of power, and to do so as sites where boundaries are constructed, not merely expressed. For instance, the poor are perhaps distinctive in that for them, the struggle for survival is often in opposition to the struggle for meaning. Hence, the study of symbolic resources and the relational approach are mutually enhancing.

Small, Harding and Lamont (2010) note that more contemporary conceptions of culture in the study of poverty are advantageous in that they "tend to be more narrowly defined, easier to measure, and more plausibly falsifiable" (8). They list and describe seven different concepts that have been used to

study culture and poverty: values, frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions. Some of these already incorporate or better lend themselves to a relationality perspective. Values, frames to some extent, repertoires, and narratives may encourage individual-level observations more than do symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions. This does not mean we should not study values, frames, repertoires or narratives of people in poverty, but that we may need to be more deliberate in terms of contextualizing our observations.

Poverty itself is not produced through the individual actions of the poor either, but through multiple processes, including boundary work that discursively distinguish the poor from the middle class (Elwood et al. 2017). Boundaries between the poor and the middle class are not permanent, and can be analyzed and even disturbed. When we analyze the behavior of the poor, then, we need to include the relational context—how are others interacting with people in poverty, and how do the relations they have with others determine their poverty? Relationships between individuals and service providers, gatekeepers, and even those who are not immediately present but who are acting in relation to such individuals, should be part of the analysis. Lamont's (2000) study of working-class men in and around Paris, France and New York City also includes managers and professional men to examine the sorts of boundary work conducted under different structural and cultural positions. Most of the working-class men in his study have steady jobs and some stability, but are finding their living standards declining. They defend their dignity by reference to their exclusive morality. He finds overall that workers "judge members of other groups to be deficient in respect to the criteria they value most" (242), which is primarily hard work and self-discipline among other mostly traditional forms of morality. Working-class men differentiate themselves from the poor on one side and professionals on the other. What is interesting is that it is the moral criteria these men emphasize, not group membership per se, which opens up the possibilities for change in group boundaries. The moral labeling of the poor is the justification for their exclusion. Nonetheless, we can see why working men of the 1990's would resist sympathizing, advocating for, or identifying with the poor, as differentiating themselves from the poor is part of their

cultural armor. In other times and places, structural and cultural conditions may differ enough to open up the possibilities for different boundary work.

When possible, the unit of analysis should be relational. Studying the relational unit rather than the individual is not always easy to do. It means going beyond simple sets of observations. Willis (1981) suggests we can only completely analyze the cultural by considering the unspoken—such as assumptions and the context. "The cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do - at least in the logic of their praxis. There is no dishonesty in interpreting that" (125-6). The culture of any group of people cannot be understood by simply observing the people's talk and behavior and interpreting it only with reference to the internal logic (Willis 1981: 186). The decisions and actions of individual people in poverty often only make sense in their relational context.

For example, in one of my studies (BLINDED), I identify the relational nature of family planning clients' autonomy specifically by analytically centering exceptions to the rule of negative interactions with service providers. By recognizing that clients can experience positive and effective interactions with service providers, I was able to demonstrate that individual-level problems, like lack of confidence and inhibited autonomy, are actually relational: they occur in some interactions but not in others, depending on the characteristics and actions of the other actors. By contrast, the voluminous literature on risk, which examines what factors increase the likelihood of some negative outcome such as high school drop-out or child neglect, tends to identify characteristics that are viewed as belonging to the individual or family, such as being a single-parent household, having a depressive parent, or economic resources (Berger 2004; Slack et al. 2011; Roy and Raver 2014). But the larger context in which these characteristics are risks and under what circumstances they are risks is often covered in passing, or neglected altogether.

Judith Levine's (2013) work demonstrates the value of identifying relations as the important context for particular outcomes. Levine examines how some of the most important relationships that low-income mothers in her study have, such as with boyfriends, caseworkers, and employers, produce an enduring form of distrust. She found that since many of the women did not expect other people to follow through on promises or to be respectful, they went into situations already mistrustful, or preemptively

reacted to problems. This may have protected them from hurt and exploitation, but it could also entail lost opportunity. These women's subordinate positioning is the main context for this distrust and the effects it has for them. Their lower structural position is characterized by powerlessness, and they are vulnerable to mistreatment across the five social institutions Levine studied: welfare offices, the workplace, childcare markets, romantic partnerships, and social networks. This distrust prevailed despite race, ethnicity, age, education, employment history and time period. Levine writes that low-income women find themselves in contexts that "are structured in ways that promote the untrustworthiness of others" (16). For instance, these women distrusted caseworkers and the welfare office because of past experience and warnings from friends and family. If this distrust translates into "attitude", then it could bring out hostility in caseworkers. But overall, the main feature of the mutual distrust is the fact that caseworkers have power over clients. Clients desperately need the assistance, and so it is "welfare recipients' location at the bottom of two different structures—the macrostructure of the U.S. class system and the mesostructure of the welfare office—that leads them to feel vulnerable to caseworker power over them" (Levine 2013: 81). Levine also notes that low-wage employees are often quick to quit their jobs if they feel disrespected. This seems odd or inappropriate, but Levine's research shows that one of the few areas of their life where they have control is in terms of how they are treated by others and what they are willing to put up with. Given the little autonomy these workers had, Levine suggests they demanded the only thing they could control—respectful treatment (119). The target for intervention should not be the women themselves, but their interaction partnership (Levine 2013: 16). Levine is clear that her research suggests not that distrust is an individual trait, but rather that it is something people learn from experience. These are not cultural values that were passed down intergenerationally. The distrust develops over time through experience. However, Levine does say that the women were not uniform in their distrust (22). Thus, it is important to take Levine's point seriously that the limited success of these women in the labor market is a reflection not only of individual factors, like skill-levels, child care problems, health, etc., but is also due to relational factors such as how they are treated at work. People need to have meaning in their life, but sometimes having a sense of meaning is at odds with survival.

Sometimes studying the relational means considering the community or imagined audience that matters to the individual. To whom do we perform? To whom do we relate? For instance, Sherman (2006) examines the choices people make in the larger normative context of what she calls "moral capital." She points out that previous literature on the coping strategies of the poor tend to ignore how the community not only limits opportunities for survival, but also the interpretations and meanings of certain survival strategies. In the rural community of her study, Sherman finds that certain approaches to survival are considered more acceptable or moral than others, and that community judgments on the moral status of people have concrete consequences.

Focusing on social relations helps us avoid reifying culture and structure. Culture and structure affect strategies of action and action through social relations. In turn strategies of action and action, through social relations, create culture and structure. Culture is therefore changeable, but perhaps some aspects are more difficult to change than certain structural features, depending on the circumstances. Whether social relations and strategies of action are immediately modifiable (without targeting culture of structure instead) depends on the sets of circumstances as subject to empirical investigation. Culture, for relational sociologists, is created in interaction, not as something that is contained within actors (Crossley 2015). The symbolic resources of people are worth study, but symbolic resources *as explanation* only makes sense when we consider context and its multiplicity.

CONCLUSION

Despite the problems and challenges described in the previous section, there are compelling reasons for pursuing a redefined notion of culture as relates to poverty. David Swartz (1997) begins his book on *The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* by writing: "Culture provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction; it is also a source of domination" (1). For this reason alone, it is worth close study. Clearly, we neither can nor should rescue the thesis or concept of a "culture of poverty" as such. It suggests semantically that a single way of life exists that characterizes the poor, unavoidably reifying and stigmatizing such a "culture." But that does not mean all of the insights should be completely rejected.

Indeed, while structural analysis proves a powerful predictor of poverty across place and time, it does not always adequately explain the individual behavior of people in poverty. How to study and conceptualize that behavior continues to be a difficult and fraught challenge for contemporary researchers. We need to go beyond structure and culture as competing explanations for poverty.

The best approach to study of meaning and behavior among the poor is to study the sets of circumstances that produce behaviors and behavioral outcomes for people in poverty, especially in ways that highlight how social relations reinforce poverty and powerlessness. Sets of circumstances include the structure, or institutional arrangements and access to key resources, and culture, symbolic resources that provide meaning. Sets of circumstances also include the social relations through which structure and culture shape action and in turn create that structure and culture in the first place. Data collection that provides in-depth knowledge and broad exposure to research subjects and situations begets the holism of sets of circumstances, as well as the necessary complexity with which to make evidential claims. Interpretation of data that draws attention to situational and relational features of the behavior of people in poverty decreases the tendency to individualize the problems of poverty. Researchers can thereby contribute to the understanding of poverty without pathologizing, misrepresenting, or stigmatizing people in poverty by reflexively adopting these strategies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Addams, J. (1910). *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. NY: Macmillan.

Berger, L.M. (2004). Income, family structure, and child maltreatment risk. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26(8), 725–748.

Blank, R. M. (1997). *It Takes a Nation: A New Agenda for Fighting Poverty*. NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Blokland, T. (2012). Blaming neither the undeserving poor nor the revanchist middle classes: A relational approach to marginalization. *Urban Geography* 33(4): 488-507.

Crossley, N. (2015). Relational sociology and culture: a preliminary framework. *International Review of Sociology* 25(1): 65-85.

Current Population Survey. (2019). Table POV29. U.S. Census Bureau. Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2016). Number in poverty and poverty rate: 1959 to 2015. U.S. Census Bureau. URL:

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.pdf

Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. NY, NY: Crown Publishers.

Dickeman, M. (1971). The integrity of the Cherokee student. In E. B. Leacock (Ed.), *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (pp. 140-179). Simon and Schuster, NY.

Drake, S. & Cayton, H. R. (1970). *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & World.

DuBois, W.E.B. (1899, 1967). *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. NY: Schocken Books.

Duncan, C. Mils. 1999. Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Edin, K. & Kefalas, M. (2005, 2011). *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Edin, K. & Lein, L. (1997). *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. NY, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Elwood, S., Lawson, V., & Sheppard, E. (2017). Geographical relational poverty studies. *Progress in Human Geography* 41(6): 745-765.

Fitchen, J. M. (1981). *Poverty in Rural America: A Case Study*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Frazier, F. E. (1937). The impact of urban civilization upon Negro family life. *American Sociological Review* 2(5).

Foster, C. H. (2008). The welfare queen: Race, gender, class, and public opinion. *Race, Gender & Class*. 15(3/4):162-179.

Furstenberg, F. F. (2007). *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teen Childbearing*. NY, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Gans, H. J. (1967). The Negro family: Reflections on the Moynihan Report. In L. Rainwater and W. L. Yancey (Eds.), *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (pp. 445-457). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Reprint from *Commonweal*, October 15, 1965.

Gans, H. J. (2010). Concentrated poverty: A critical analysis. *Challenge* 53(3): 82-96.

Gilder, G. (1981). *Wealth and Poverty*. NY: Basic Books.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Green, M. (2006). Representing poverty and attacking representations: Perspectives on poverty from social anthropology. *Journal of Development Studies* 42(7): 1108-1129.

Harding, D. J. (2011). Rethinking the cultural context of schooling decisions in disadvantaged neighborhoods: From deviant subculture to cultural heterogeneity. *Sociology of Education* 84(4): 322-339.

Harrison, L. E. (1985). *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

Horowitz, R. (1983, 1985). *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Jargowsky, P. A. (1996). Beyond the street corner: The hidden diversity of high poverty neighborhoods. *Urban Geography* 17(7): 579-603.

Jencks, C. (1991). Is the American underclass growing? In C. Jencks and P. Peterson (Eds.), *The Urban Underclass* (pp. 28-100). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute.

Katz, M. B. (2013). *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*. 2nd ed. NY, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kneebone, E. & Alan B. (2014). *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press.

Kochar, V. K. (1969). Culture and poverty: Critique and counter-proposals. *Current Anthropology* 10:181-201.

Kornhauser, R. R. (1978). *Social Sources of Delinquency: An Appraisal of Analytic Models*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Krumer-Nevo, M. & Benjamin, O. (2010). Critical poverty knowledge: Contesting othering and social distancing. *Current Sociology* 58(5): 693-714.

Ladner, J. (1971). *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday

Lamont, M. (2000). *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. NY, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lareau, A. (2001, 2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Intersectionality*. 2nd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leacock, E. B. (1971). Introduction. In E. B. Leacock (Ed.), *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique*. Simon and Schuster, NY.

Leeds, A. (1971). The concept of the 'culture of poverty': Conceptual, logical, and empirical problems, with perspectives from Brazil and Peru. In E. B. Leacock (Ed.), *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (pp226-284). Simon and Schuster, NY.

Levine, J. A. (2013). *Ain't No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low-Income Mothers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lewis, O. (1959, 1975). *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. NY: Basic Books.

Lewis, O. (1965, 1966). *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. NY: Random House.

Liebow, E. (1967). *Talley's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Boston, MA: Little Brown.

Miller, W. L. & Crabtree, B. F. (1994). The dance of interpretation. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing Qualitative Research* (pp. 127-143). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morgen, S. and Maskovsky, J. (2003). The anthropology of welfare 'reform': New perspectives on U.S. urban poverty in the post-welfare era. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 315-338.

Moynihan, D. P. (1968, 1969). *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. NY: Basic Books.

Murray, C. (1984). *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 2950-1980*. NY: Basic Books.

Myrdal, G., with R. Sterner & A. Rose. (1944). *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. NY: Harper.

O'Connor, A. (2001). *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Quadagno, J. (1995). *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Rainwater, L. (1970). *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

Rainwater, L. and Yancey, W. L. (1967). *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.

Rao, V. & Sanyal, P. (2010). Dignity through discourse: Poverty and the culture of deliberation in Indian village democracies. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629:146-172.

Rodman, H. (1963). The lower-class value stretch. *Social Forces* 42(2): 205-215.

Roy, A. L. & Raver, C. C. (2014). Are all risks equal? Early experiences of poverty-related risk and children's functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology* 28(3).

Roach, J. L. & Gursslin, O. R. (1967). An evaluation of the concept 'Culture of Poverty'. *Social Forces* 45(3): 383-392.

Sánchez-Jankowski, M. (2008). *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods.* Berkeley: UC Press.

Schram, S. (2006). *Welfare Discipline: Discourse, Governance, and Globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sherman, J. (2006). Coping with rural poverty: Economic survival and moral capital in rural America. *Social Forces* 85(2).

Slack, K. S., Berger, L. M., DuMont, K., Yang, M. Kim, B., Ehrhard-Dietzel, S. & Holl, J. L. (2011). Risk and protective factors for child neglect during early childhood: A cross-study comparison. *Children and Youth Services Review* 33: 1354-1363.

Small, Mario Luis. 2004. *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Small, M. L. & Newman, K. (2001). Urban poverty after The Truly Disadvantaged: The rediscovery of the family, the neighborhood, and culture. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 23-45.

Small, M. L., Harding, D. J. & Lamont, M. (2010). Reconsidering culture and poverty. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629: 6-27.

Snow, D. A., Anderson, L. & Koegel, P. (1994). Distorting tendencies in research on the homeless. *American Behavioral Scientist* 37(4).

So, A. Y. (1990). *Social Change and Development: Modernization, Dependency, and World-System Theories*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Stack, C. (1974). *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. NY, NY: Harper & Row.

Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51: 273-286.

Tomaskovic-Devey, D. & Avent-Holt, D. (2019). *Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach*. NY, NY: Oxford University Press.

Valentine, C. A. (1968). *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Valentine, C. A. (1971). The 'Culture of Poverty': Its scientific significance and its implications for action. In E. B. Leacock (Ed.), *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (pp. 193-225). Simon and Schuster, NY.

Weber, B., Jensen, L., Miller, K., Mosley, J., & Fisher, M. (2005). A critical review of rural poverty literature: Is there truly a rural effect? Institute for Research on Poverty, Discussion Paper no. 1309-05.

West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1:125-151.

Whyte, W. F. (1943). *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Willis, P. (1977, 1981). *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. NY: Columbia University Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When Work Disappears*. Random House, Inc.

Wirth, L. (1928). *The Ghetto*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wolff, Jonathan and Avner De-Shalit. 2007. *Disadvantage*. NY: Oxford University Press.