



# How Culture Matters: Enriching Our Understandings of Poverty

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**HOW CULTURE MATTERS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY:  
ENRICHING OUR UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>**

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The term “culture” figures prominently in the literature on poverty, race, and ethnicity, though rarely with much theoretical or empirical sophistication. In the worst cases, the terms “culture” and “race” are used interchangeably, as if racial groups were primarily defined not demographically, but by a unified imputed culture. At times, culture is also treated as a residual category to explain why statistical models do not account for all the variance in poverty-related outcomes. Others view it as an intermediary mechanism—an intervening or an endogenous variable that helps explain why structural conditions such as neighborhood poverty lead to unwanted outcomes—but not an independent causal force.<sup>2</sup> Still others reject cultural explanations altogether, arguing that these inevitably “blame the victims” for their problems. In this literature, “culture” is rarely defined explicitly. Conceived as a group’s norms and values, as its attitudes toward work and family, or as patterns of behavior,<sup>3</sup> culture has not been studied by poverty experts with the depth or the precision that characterize their analyses of such matters as demographic trends, selection bias, and the impact of public policies on work and family structure. This chapter aims to help remedy the situation while examining whether and how culture helps explain the causes and consequences of racial disparities in poverty.

While poverty scholars provide a rather thin understanding of culture, over the last two decades cultural sociologists have produced theoretical and empirical research that has yielded a

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<sup>2</sup> Even scholars deep in the sociological tradition who believe cultural factors are important often argue that culture itself stems from economic or structural conditions. For instance Wilson (1987) argues that the social isolation fostered by concentrated poverty influences one’s cultural orientation (through the scarcity of conventional role models). This model stresses adaptations to constraints and opportunities. However, Sampson and Wilson (1995) describe community contexts as “cognitive landscapes” concerning behavioral norms. See also Wilson (1996) for a focus on culture as repertoire, in line with the work of Hannerz (2004[1969]).

<sup>3</sup> A straightforward indicator of the messiness of culture research among poverty scholars is its failure to distinguish attitudes from behavior. For instance, failure to marry (a pattern of behavior) does not necessarily indicate an anti-marriage attitude, just as infidelity does not signal the belief that adultery is acceptable. In a recent study of the differences between what employers say concerning their willingness to hire ex-convicts and what they actually do, Pager and Quillian (2005) rightfully note that “the resolution of these differences represents an important focus of sociological investigation in its own right. Although low correlations between attitudes and associated behaviors are often viewed as a purely methodological test of survey questions, in many cases, these discrepancies actually may provide clues for a better substantive understanding of the cognitive-emotional basis for action.”

subtle, heterogeneous, and sophisticated picture of how cultural factors shape and are shaped by poverty and inequality. They have used concepts such as “frames,” “cultural repertoires,” “narratives,” “symbolic boundaries,” “cultural capital,” and “institutions” to study how poor individuals interpret and respond to their circumstances, yielding insights that may be used to understand racial disparities. These concepts have been used by social scientists to go beyond concepts of culture that assume racial groups have inherent cultural traits, for example, that there is “work ethic of Asian children” or that marriage means something particular to “black women.” As we shall see, the new concepts allow us to understand racial disparities in a way that avoids cultural stereotypes that have too often framed policies and, in any case, yielded little explanatory power. By no means has this literature coalesced into a coherent perspective on culture. In addition, its attempts at depicting subtlety have often come at the cost of lost parsimony. Nevertheless, there is much promise in the work.

This work is often ignored by scholars of poverty and race, for at least two reasons. First, much of the work has been conducted by social scientists who are not part of the community of economists, demographers, sociologists, and political scientists working on poverty and policy.<sup>4</sup> Second, much of it is based on data-gathering techniques that are appropriate for the study of culture, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, comparative historical research, and content analysis. Quantitative social scientists often lack familiarity with these techniques and may not have at their disposal the cognitive tools needed to distinguish between good and bad practitioners. Some may be tempted at times to dismiss qualitative work as “anecdotal” or worse, “non-empirical” (which too often seems to mean “non-quantitative”). Even quantitative research in the sociology of culture, such as research on cultural consumption and on networks,

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<sup>4</sup> The reception of a few works, such as Newman (1999), Anderson (1999), and Edin and Kefalas (2005), is an exception.

too often remains ignored by the interdisciplinary core of inequality scholars, much to the detriment of scholarship (for an attempt to rectify the situation, see Furstenburg (2007)).<sup>5</sup>

The consequences of ignoring this scholarship are not limited to the ivory tower. Culture is the subject or subtext of the recurrent public debates about poverty. It remains the subtext of the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, and it underlies claims that the welfare system has been too permissive (see chapters by Bullock and by Soss and Schram, this volume). It is referenced, often crudely, in the discussions of American individualism, responsibility, hard work, and fairness that characterize debates on poverty and immigration. The writings of influential policy researchers such as George Borjas (2001), David Ellwood (1988), and Lawrence Mead (1986) rely on assumptions about culture among the poor—assumptions often stemming from “culture of poverty” theory—that have been criticized repeatedly since their emergence in the early 1960s (for example, Valentine 1968; Young 2004), and that have long been thrown in the dustbin of inefficient concepts by sociologists of culture. The policy discourse often relies on unsubstantiated assumptions about American culture (for example, about what its core values are), assumptions that, in addition to lacking empirical foundation, have become part of a powerful narrative that equates liberalism with moral decadence and laissez-faire economics with fairness (Guetzkow 2006; O'Connor 2001; Somers and Block 2005).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is not the venue for an extended discussion of methodology. We proceed on the assumption that social science requires multiple methods, because some questions are only or best addressed through particular methods. Still, we believe that culture may be studied through multiple methods, including quantitative methods.

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, authors may believe that the welfare system should require work, but stating that *Americans* believe this idea requires empirical substantiation. For example, criticizing Charles Murray’s critique of AFDC programs during the 1980s, David Ellwood wrote: “But what is often missed in this frenzy is that although Murray is almost certainly wrong in blaming the social welfare system for a large part of the predicament of the poor, he is almost certainly correct in stating that welfare does not reflect or reinforce our most basic values” (1988: 6). What are these basic values? Ellwood acknowledges the difficulty of answering this question. Yet he does not hesitate to try. He writes: “I have yet to find a definitive and convincing statement of our fundamental American values. The work of philosophers is often esoteric and the results of surveys are difficult to distill. Yet, I see recurring themes in public

These issues cannot be resolved without taking seriously the scholarship on poverty among sociologists of culture. In what follows we do not summarize or review all of this literature; in fact, we ignore many important works, to retain argumentative coherence. Rather, we: (a) identify those works we believe exemplify significant improvements on thin and dated conceptions of culture; (b) discuss the pitfalls any new work on culture should avoid; and (c) chart a research agenda for the study of poverty in the context of race that takes into account the difficulties in research on culture. Our review does not state where the field is headed—it states where we believe it *should* head. While the scholarship we review has much to offer poverty research, it still varies widely in the extent to which its empirical claims can be evaluated by quantitative poverty scholars. We take pains, therefore, to identify the limitations of the work we review and suggest issues to address for culture scholars themselves.

We should note that several of the analytical tools we describe are useful for the purpose of process-tracing, rather than as variables in statistical models (on process tracing, see Bennett and George 2005).<sup>7</sup> While it is necessary to examine *whether* two phenomena are associated, it is also necessary to examine *how* one leads to the other, or under what circumstances it does so – questions that are often best addressed with the help of qualitative data. Tackling such questions has been needed in the study of poverty for some time. In a review of the evidence on the spread of single-parent families, Ellwood and Jencks (2004, p. 60), noting that “quantitative social science does best with sharp turning points and tight links between dependent and independent variables,” skeptically conclude that “quantitative models have done about as well as could be expected given the limits of our methods for investigating a complex system.” While process-

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and academic discussion of what it is Americans believe. Four basic tenets seem to underlie much of the philosophical and political rhetoric about poverty” (1988: 16). Ellwood’s “four value tenets” are the autonomy of the individual, the virtue of work, the primacy of the family, and the desire for and sense of community. Thus, the author presents a major statement about the characteristics of “American culture” based on no empirical data.

<sup>7</sup> On how qualitative methods can identify causal mechanisms, see Ann Lin (1998).

tracing is important, we also note that many of the concepts we discuss (such as repertoires, frames, and narratives) may be turned into variables and studied quantitatively, for example through content analysis or survey data analysis.<sup>8</sup> Addressing these questions is essential to understand the social and cultural mechanisms that affect racial and ethnic differences in poverty.

### ***Background and Concepts***

For years, the most prominent and controversial theory of culture and poverty was Lewis' (1969) "culture of poverty." Lewis argued that this culture emerged when populations that were socially and economically marginalized from a capitalist society developed patterns of behavior to deal with their low status. This behavior was characterized by low aspirations, political apathy, helplessness, disorganization, provincialism, and the disparagement of so-called middle-class values (1969, pp. 190-192). Once this culture was in place, Lewis argued, it developed mechanisms that tended to perpetuate it, even if structural conditions changed.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an illustration concerning the use of content analysis, see Benson and Saguy (2005); for an illustration of the use of surveys to study boundary work, see Bail (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> More specifically, the culture of poverty perspective argued that the poor remained in poverty not merely as a result of their economic conditions but also because of cultural values and practices they had developed from poverty. This perspective, as exemplified by Lewis (1969) and Banfield (1974) argued that culture constituted a set of norms and values that guided the behavior of individuals. They also, however, conceived of culture as a "lifestyle," at times called a "worldview," which made the escape from poverty difficult or impossible. Both authors catalogued a series of characteristics that defined this culture. These included an orientation toward the present and instant gratification, a preference for happiness over work, a tendency to value familial ties over moral considerations of right or wrong, engaging in sex with multiple partners over the life course, and others. There were several problems with the culture of poverty conception: (1) it assumed that individuals' practices were caused by their values, largely ignoring that many people, rich or poor, constantly act in violation of their values; (2) despite this, its catalogue of the culture of poverty included both values and behaviors, leading to an often circular argument (people have multiple sexual partners because they have a culture characterized by the presence of multiple sexual partners); (3) it assumed that a single culture categorized very diverse people; (4) it assumed that people's culture is fundamentally static and does not change over their lifetimes, as though people play little role in the creation of their own culture or practices. For a related perspective, see Rainwater, *Beyond Ghetto Walls* (2006). For a critique, see Small and Newman (2001).

Lewis' work was in part an attempt to bridge the structure-culture divide that had been a feature of opposing explanations for poverty. Cultural explanations emphasized values and norms that directed behavior; structural explanations emphasized economic and structural constraints upon behavior. However, the idea that the culture of poverty was self-perpetuating placed Lewis, in the eyes of many, on the cultural side, and the perspectives eventually became two caricatures of what were, in fact, complex social processes: while some argued that the poor are poor because of their inadequate values, others blamed "the system." The cultural conservatism of the 1980s polarized research even further, such that politically moderate social scientists were wary of associating themselves with cultural explanations for fear of being considered reactionary (Patterson 1997; Wilson 1987).<sup>10</sup>

From the 1980s to the present, the sociological research on these questions has taken multiple trajectories. Some scholars have examined the interaction between culture and structure with respect to issues such as agency, free will, and determinism, moving well beyond the simple dichotomy (Sewell 2005). Others have abandoned these questions and asked how people develop meaning systems—how social circumstances shape scripts, frames, repertoires, and so forth, rather than the other way around.

Early approaches such as Lewis' also reflected a Parsonian conception of culture, whereby culture is a unitary and internally coherent set of attributes that characterizes a social group, such as inner-city African-Americans or "the Japanese." Today, there is no one consensus conception of culture, because different scholars focus on different social processes and employ different metaphors to describe and explain what they observe. However, most would disagree with the Parsonian conception which emphasizes how one is socialized into

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<sup>10</sup> Others, such as Liebow (1967) attempted to redefine the terrain by proposing the notion of "value stretch. Carol Stack's *All our Kin* (1970) was also a particularly influential critique of Lewis' thesis, having sold more than 500,000 copies.



values that then shape behaviors (Sewell 2005, Chapter 3). Many contemporary scholars have been influenced by Geertz (1973) who states: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (1973, p. 5). In this conception, as well as in the more “practice” oriented approaches, culture refers to the meaning that human beings produce and mobilize to act upon their environment (Ortner 1984). Instead of “having a culture”, one simply existed in the midst of, responded to, used and created cultural symbols

In this respect, we fundamentally agree. The idea that races or ethnic groups “have” a culture—for example, that there is an “Anglo-American culture” that differs from “Asian culture” or “Afro-American culture”—is unhelpful to the study of racial differences in poverty. Intra-group differences are often larger than inter-group differences. Consequently, our understanding of racial disparities in poverty does not account for these as a function of inherent ethnic cultures. Instead of imputing a shared culture to groups, we study empirically how individuals make sense of their lives.

In what follows, we examine six ways culture has been conceived and examined—as frames, repertoires, narratives, cultural capital, symbolic boundaries, institutions—and assess what researchers studying poverty have uncovered on the basis of each conception, and what differences it makes to use these concepts for our understanding of poverty. Instead of positing that races or ethnic groups “have a culture”, or that culture is “second nature,” we use these tools to analyze the cultural frames and assets found in various populations. These concepts are lenses through which to capture different dimensions of the causal processes that produce inequality and poverty. As such, they can be used together, or independently of one another. But they all speak to how factoring in meanings can result in more comprehensive explanations of poverty. It

should be noted that not all researchers we cover think of culture as an “independent variable” and poverty as the “outcome.” Some think of culture as the outcome. Others think of neither as a causal outcome, producing instead descriptive accounts of the operation of both variables. Still others abandon the variable-based approach altogether. This heterogeneity is part of the strength of this body of work.

### *Culture and Poverty Today*

#### *Culture as Frames*

Building on insights from Schultz (1962), Berger and Luckman (1966), Goffman (1963), and others, cultural sociologists ask how individuals cognitively perceive the world around them. Whereas normative conceptions focus on how individuals evaluate good and bad, cognitive ones ask the prior question of how something is perceived as real. The philosophical underpinnings of this work stem from (Kant 1982 [1781]), whose distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds introduced the idea that the world as it truly is differs from the world we represent to ourselves—as people, we only have access to the latter.

Sociologists in this tradition assume that no individual simply sees things “as they are.” Instead, every individual’s perception of the social world—of social relations, the class system, race, the neighborhood, organizations—is filtered through cultural frames that highlight certain aspects and hide or block others.

The most prominent empirical application of the conception of culture as frames stems from the social movements literature. Snow and Benford define a frame as “an interpretive [schema] that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present

or past environment” (1992, p. 137). Much of this literature evolved in response to the resource mobilization perspective on social movements, which argued that these were successful largely to the extent their leaders could access and mobilize resources for their cause. The framing perspective’s critique of resource mobilization theory is that cultural or symbolic elements are essential for the possibility of action. Regardless of resources, activists will be unable to mobilize potential participants without transforming their perception of their situation by ‘framing’ the issues in such a way that mobilization appears necessary (Small 2002, p. 23).

This perspective has been applied to the study of how people respond to neighborhood poverty. Small’s *Villa Victoria* (2004) analyzes local participation in a Latino housing project in Boston created thirty years earlier as a result of political mobilization. He examined why residents today differed in their level of local community participation and found that their expressed values seemed to bear little relation to differences in participation, contrary to a culture-of-poverty expectation. Rather, participants differed from non-participants in their (cognitive) framing of the neighborhood. Some residents perceived themselves to live in a neighborhood with a significant history of political and social involvement; others perceived it as little more than “the projects,” a low-income area with no especially notable history. When asked to describe their neighborhood (and thus, to reveal how they framed it), the two groups differed among other things in whether they included the neighborhood’s history in their description and whether they used the term “community” or the term “projects” to describe it.

Small showed that regardless of whether they believed in the value of participation in general, residents who had not framed the neighborhood as a place with a significant history did not participate in local activities. Those few who increased their participation level over time had

first adopted frames consistent with those of other participants, learning from the latter, for example, the history of the political mobilization that led to the creation of the neighborhood.

Harding (2005; 2007) also examines how framing influences the response to poverty. Whereas Small focused on how individuals frame their neighborhood, Harding focuses on (among other things) how they frame the idea of pregnancy. He finds that adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston exhibit greater *heterogeneity* of frames than those in other neighborhoods. For example, there is more heterogeneity in the response to questions on whether being pregnant as a teen would be “embarrassing” or “not all that bad” in disadvantaged than in non-disadvantaged neighborhoods. As a result, adolescents in the former neighborhoods are exposed to a greater array of options for conceiving their circumstances that include both mainstream and alternative conceptions of the world.

This literature improves upon the “culture of poverty” perspective in at least one respect. Whereas by definition this latter perspective expects a single set of cultural responses to arise from conditions of structural poverty, both Small and Harding make clear that heterogeneity in response is common and salient. Both studies find little support for the notion of a collective “ghetto” culture shared universally by residents in high poverty, and show important within-neighborhood differences in cultural frames. By extension, they suggest that studies of racial differences in poverty looking for explanations in values are unlikely to find much.

A second contribution of this work is to redefine the relation between culture and behavior. The norms-and-values perspective posited a cause-and-effect relationship between values and behaviors, whereas the frame perspective tends to posit what Small (2004; 2002) has called a “constraint-and-possibility” relationship. Frames do not cause behavior so much as make it possible or likely. However, a consequence of this redefinition is that cultural frames

are, by design, insufficient explanations of behavior; they may be thought of as necessary but insufficient conditions.

### *Culture as Repertoires*

Scholars have also conceived of culture as a repertoire of practices, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals call forth at the time of action. One of the most widely cited scholars in this tradition has been Swidler (1986), who approaches culture as a “tool kit” that individuals employ in unsettled times. She argues that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (1986, p. 273). Whereas a metaphor in the frames perspective might be that culture is the particular tint of the glasses through which individuals see the world, in the repertoires perspective it is the set of tools individuals have at their disposal to manage the social world.

For Swidler, it is less important whether individuals are shaped by their values than what repertoires of action are available to them in their figurative toolkits. Different toolkits contain different repertoires of action, and the toolboxes of some have more repertoires than those of others. The notion of *strategies of action*, which she defines as “persistent ways of ordering action through time” (1986, p. 273), is important. Speaking explicitly about a perennial issue in the urban poverty literature, Swidler explains that asking whether the poor share the values of the middle class will yield very little:

The irony of this debate is that it cannot be resolved by evidence that the poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class, as indeed they seem to do. In repeated surveys, lower-class youth say that they value education and intend to go

to college.... People may share common aspirations while remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organizes their overall pattern of behavior.

Culture in this sense is more like a style or a set of skills than a set of preferences or wants. If one asked a slum youth why he did not take steps to pursue a middle-class path to success (or indeed asked oneself why one did not pursue a different life direction) the answer might well be not “I don’t want that life,” but instead “Who, me?” One can hardly pursue success in a world where the accepted skills, style, and informal know-how are unfamiliar. One does better to look for a line of action for which one already has the cultural equipment.

(1986, p. 275)

For Swidler, one may utilize a practice only if it exists in one’s toolbox.

This perspective views culture as a heterogeneous set of attributes, rather than a single, coherent system. It allows for cultural differentiation and contradictions within a group. Preceding Swidler, Ulf Hannerz’s classic but often overlooked *Soulside* (2004[1969]) argued that ghetto residents have access to a repertoire that included both ghetto-specific and mainstream forms of behavior. Wilson (1996) extended this idea by arguing that under conditions of high joblessness, many mainstream forms of behavior are difficult to implement. Sharon Hays’s *Flat Broke with Children* (2003) shows that low-income mothers make use of the alternative strategies of action available to them, and that these are often in contradiction. She finds that the notions of responsibility and financial self-sufficiency are clearly part of low-income women’s cultural toolkits. When examining differences in race or class, this work would point to different questions. Wilson’s work may suggest, for example, that the repertoire

of strategies available is constrained by neighborhood poverty. Blacks have been shown to be much more likely than whites or Latinos to live in high poverty neighborhoods (Jargowsky 1997; Massey and Denton 1993). This would lead one to expect racial differences in repertoires, even if there are few racial differences in values.

As with the “frame” perspective, the added value of the “culture as repertoire” perspective is that it leaves room and accounts for diversity within groups and for the multiplicity of perspectives within a single actor. Since individuals can and do resort to different repertoires in the course of action, this perspective makes it possible to understand what to outsiders may appear as inconsistencies -- for example, between a reported belief in the sanctity of marriage and a birth out of wedlock. In addition, this perspective helps identify which actions are unlikely: if the strategies for obtaining a college degree or for sustaining a long-term marriage are not part of one’s toolkit, one is not likely to pursue that course of action. Today, the strategies for entering a competitive college include contacting the Educational Testing Service and registering for the SAT; obtaining studying materials or enrolling in a preparatory course; indicating which colleges one wants the grades sent; and many others. If a 17-year old does not know to do these things, it is unlikely she will pursue a college education in a competitive institution even if, in theory, going to college seems like a rational thing to do. The poor often need multiple repertoires to get out of poverty, such as knowledge of how to enroll in two- or four-year college, how to acquire technical skills, how to demonstrate street savvy, and how to avoid being drawn into street violence. Understanding their acquisition and use of these repertoires is critical to understanding the path out of poverty.

As Lamont (1992, chapter 7) argues, the tool-kit perspective presents problems, particularly in that it does not explain why some repertoire choices, rather than others, are

followed in a course of action. In a sense, it is concerned with the “supply side” of culture, but not with the factors that make various groups of people more or less likely to have access to, and use, one set of tools (for example, concerning how to get access to a college education) rather than another. The choice itself depends on opportunities and structural constraints that are shaped by cultural and non-cultural factors. In addition, Swidler allows a slippage among the terms strategies, repertoires, skills, styles, and habits, which weakens the powerful simplicity of the tool-kit concept. Nevertheless, this approach does address many of the weaknesses of some earlier paradigms, notably, their incapacity to deal with heterogeneity or contradiction.

### *Culture as Narratives*

In contrast to frames and repertoires, narratives are *stories* and they often present a beginning, middle, and end, and they are clearly identifiable as a chunk of discourse (Polletta forthcoming, p.7) Narratives of personal experience have informed the study of social class since the pioneering work of William Labov on the African-American vernacular in South Harlem (see also Bertaux 1984).<sup>11</sup> Although the term “narrative” is generally used very loosely and one finds many variations in how narrative analysis is practiced, in general it suggests that people develop an understanding of themselves, their environment, and others that shape their actions (Somers 1994). This approach posits that, when faced with two courses of action concerning, for instance, their project of social mobility, individuals are likely to pursue the plan that is most consistent with their personal narrative, as opposed to the plan that may seem most rational to an outsider (for example, Abelmann (2003), on gendered projects of upward mobility in South Korea).

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<sup>11</sup> Labov (1997); <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/sfs.html>.



Whether scholars use the concept of narrative explicitly or not, they often argue that the “stories” people tell themselves influence how they make sense of their lives and of their difficulties. For example, Young (2004) finds that the black low-income residents of a Chicago public housing project he interviewed placed little emphasis on racial prejudice in their account of the limitations and possibilities they encounter in their life trajectory. The residential segregation they experienced meant that they rarely interacted with whites. As a consequence, whites were not salient in their causal explanations of their own social trajectory. For their part, in their book, *Legacies* (2001), Portes and Rumbaut reveal radically diverse narrative about the immigrant experience found among immigrant families in Miami and San Diego from places as diverse as Jamaica, the Philippines, Cuba, Mexico, Cambodia, Colombia, and Haiti. These narratives help make their choices, notably concerning education and social mobility, more comprehensible. (See also Kasinitz, Mollenkoff and Waters (2006) on differences in cultural orientation of second generation immigrants from various ethnic and racial groups).

The narrative perspective is particularly useful in demonstrating how self-conception, including one’s sense of self-limitations and responsibility toward others, influences action – for instance how one goes about passing on resources to one’s children (for example, Abelman 2003; Steedman 1987). This perspective has enormous potential and should be more fully explored in the American context. It shows how action is not an automatic response to incentive: it is made possible within the context of narratives around which people make sense of their lives. Qualitative methods are well suited to obtain the stories actors have about their lives. However, narratives can also be studied through discourse and content analysis, surveys, cognitive mapping, and other techniques that are amenable to quantification (Abdelal et al. 2006; Jepperson and Swidler 1994).

### *Culture as Symbolic Boundaries*

“Symbolic boundaries” are conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorize objects, people, and practices. These boundaries operate as a “system of rule that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act” (Lamont and Fournier 1992, p. 12). Boundaries distinguish between those who are worthy and those who are less so, from the standpoint of morality, economic success, cultural sophistication, and so forth. Such boundaries are the necessary, but insufficient condition for the creation of social boundaries manifested in spatial segregation, labor market segregation, and patterns of intermarriage (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Thus, the importance of paying heed to the boundaries that are drawn by members of various groups, their relative porousness (the extent to which they are policed), what criteria are used to draw and justify them, and what groups they exclude or stigmatize. They revealed how individuals implicitly and explicitly characterize members of various classes, and particularly what they view as the characteristics and flaws of groups, including the poor. Thus, in the United States, workers’ self-definition stresses hard work, responsibility, and self-sufficiency. In valuing their own attributes, they draw strong moral boundaries toward the poor, who they view as lazy and as taking advantage. In France, in contrast, workers are more likely to see the poor as worthy of support as workers who are temporarily displaced by the forces of capitalism. This view is sustained by cultural repertoires making the notions of solidarity widely available, which repertoires are sustained by a strong socialist tradition, by Catholicism, and by Republicanism (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000).<sup>12</sup> This cross-national contrast corresponds to wider

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<sup>12</sup> Kefalas (2001) analyzes how white working class people in Chicago define and defend their identities largely against blacks who they code as “the poor,” in what they perceive to be an imperiled environment. They defend themselves through the care with which they keep their homes clean, cultivate their gardens, maintain their property,

patterns in redistributive policies toward the poor in the two countries (see also Gallie and Paugham 2000; Katz 1989; Silver 1993). As we will see, “cultural categories of worth,” including widely shared views of the poor, figure prominently among the conditions explaining such policies in the United States (Steensland 2006) or comparatively (Dobbin 1994; Sato 2007).

Boundary work (the separation of “us” and “them”) is crucial for the making of groupness. It is part of the process of construction of collective identity: individuals differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of common traits and experiences and a sense of shared belonging. They must be recognized by outsiders as distinct for their collective identity to crystalize (Cornell and Hartman 1997, chapter 4; Jenkins 1996, chapter 4). Social identity theory, elaborated by social psychologists, suggests that “Pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other.” This process of differentiation aims “to maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimension”. (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1985: pp. 16-17). Hence, in-group favoritism, manifested in stereotyping, is common, especially among high status groups (for a review, see Sidanius and Pratto 1999); also Bullock, this volume). Understanding this process affects how we account for people’s success and failures—with external/environmental as opposed to internal/individual and self-blaming explanations (Crocker, Major and Steele 1998).

Studies of boundary work and identity among the poor have focused on how they self-define (as workers, good parents, or moral beings), as opposed to assigning them an identity by isolating specific cultural patterns as central and enduring aspects of a “culture of poverty.”

These studies also consider whether, how, and by whom such self-identifications are validated,

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defend the neighborhoods, and celebrate the nation. In both studies, the meanings given by workers to the poor are closely tied to their own identities as responsible, hard-working, moral people.

and whether they can crystallize as social categories and in turn affect behavior. For instance, in *No Shame in My Game*, Newman (1999) studied how the Black and Latino working poor of Harlem who work in the fast-food industry contrast themselves with the unemployed poor. They develop a sense of their identity as workers in contrast to that of the unemployed poor, and create a status hierarchy which echoes the dominant social hierarchy, as well as the dominant narrative of the American Dream. Similarly, in *The Code of the Street*, Anderson (1999) analyzes intra-racial boundaries that separate “decent” from “street” poor African-Americans, and examines how the latter develop behavioral traits and identity defined in opposition to those of whites. Fosse (2007) shows how low-income black men define women as “stunt” and “wifey,” and how these categories are associated with different moral constructs concerning trustworthiness, which affect the prevalence of single-parent families. In *My Baby’s Father*, Waller (2002) shows how unmarried poor men understand their identities as fathers and describes the *emotional* contributions they make to the lives of their children (contra governmental programs that focus only on their material contributions). She contrasts her approach with earlier ones: “rather than examining whether low-income unmarried parents adopt sub-cultural values that contrast with those in the rest of society, [the] analysis [shows] that these parents draw their ideas, justifications, and practices regarding fatherhood from various sources, including their families, communities, other institutions, and general culture.” (p. 45). Thus, these men define themselves in opposition to the “deadbeat dads” that are targeted by governmental programs concerning child-support enforcement. Focusing on their self-concept through boundary work captures conditions that make possible the choices they make, helping social scientists move beyond a view of their lives as aberrational. Without such a focus, analysts would miss important dimensions of what explains the choices that the poor make.

Ethnic and racial differences, which in the United States overlap with the boundary between the poor and the non-poor, are often defended and contested—including by parents who reinforce ethnic identity in order to prevent their children from assimilating downward (Noh 2003). This daily boundary work contributes to the reproduction of racial stereotype and to the policing of racial group boundaries. Policies created to address racial disparities in poverty need to clearly dissociate poverty from race and ethnicity (primarily African American, Native American, and Latino), if they are to avoid reinforcing stereotypical views of racial differences.

### *Culture as Cultural Capital*

Cultural capital refers to the “institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals...” used to exclude others in various contexts (Lamont and Lareau 1988, p.156); This concept has become widely used as an analytical device to understand how differences in lifestyles and taste contribute to the reproduction of inequality. It illuminates how middle and upper middle class adults (professionals and managers) pass on advantages to their children, mostly by familiarizing them with cultural habits and orientations valued by the educational system. While the early American literature on this topic tended to focus primarily on familiarity with high culture (for example DiMaggio 1982), more recent work has tended to focus on a wider range of high status signals.

According to the original framework elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977[1970]), children of poor and working class families are handicapped by a schooling system that systematically uses criteria of evaluation that are biased in favor of middle class culture – the use of a wide vocabulary for instance (Bernstein 1993). For these children, this bias frequently results in over-selection, self-exclusion, and “relegation” or marginalization (Lamont and Lareau 1988). The living conditions of poor and working class children often lead

them to internalize the notion that upper-middle and middle class culture is superior. Thus, they are also victims of a *symbolic violence* that leads them to downplay the value of their own class culture and to evaluate themselves through the prisms of standards that favor the middle class.<sup>13</sup>

One of the issues raised by students of cultural capital is whether various types of capital operate in different environments, and whether women, ethnic groups, the poor, or the working class have relatively autonomous understandings of what counts as cultural capital (Erikson 1996; Hall 1991; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Thus, forty years after the publication of *Reproduction*, sociologists are studying various coinages that are operative across social worlds and the resources they give access to. For instance, in *Keeping it Real*, Carter (2005) writes about non-dominant forms of cultural capital (NDCC) that she contrasts with theories of oppositional

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<sup>13</sup> More specifically, in *Reproduction* (1977[1970]), Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron propose that the lower academic performance of working class children cannot be accounted for by lower ability but by institutional biases. They suggest that schools evaluate all children on the basis of their familiarity with the culture of the dominant class (or cultural capital), thus penalizing lower-class students. Extensive vocabulary, wide-ranging cultural references, and command of high culture are valued by the school system, and students from higher social backgrounds are exposed to this class culture at home. Hence, children from other classes, including the poor, are over-selected by the educational system. They are not aware of it, as they remain under the spell of the culture of the dominant class. They blame themselves for their failure, which leads them to drop out or to sort themselves into lower prestige educational tracks.

This work can be read as a direct extension of Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's (1979) "dominant ideology thesis," which centers on the role of ideology in cementing relations of domination by camouflaging exploitation and differences in class interests. However, the control of subjectivity in everyday life through the shaping of common sense and the naturalization of social relations is the focus of their attention. Bourdieu and Passeron broaden Marx and Engels by suggesting that crucial power relations are structured in the symbolic realm proper and are mediated by meaning. They *de facto* provide a more encompassing understanding of the exercise of hegemony by pointing to the incorporation of class-differentiated cultural dispositions mediated by both the educational system and family socialization.

In *Distinction* (1984[1979]), Bourdieu applies this analysis to the world of taste and cultural practice at large. He shows how the logic of class struggle extends to the realm of taste and lifestyle, and that symbolic classification is key to the reproduction of class privileges: dominant groups define their own culture and ways of being as superior (opposing refined food to heavy food, linen to polyester, tennis to bingo, and so on). Thereby they exercise "symbolic violence," that is, impose a specific meaning as legitimate while concealing the power relations that are the basis of its force (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970]: 4). They define legitimate and "dominated" cultures in opposition: the value of cultural preferences and behaviors are defined relationally around binary oppositions (or boundaries) such as high/lower, pure/impure, distinguished/vulgar, and aesthetic/practical (p. 245). The legitimate culture they thereby define is used by dominant groups to mark cultural distance and proximity, monopolize privileges, and exclude or recruit new occupants for high status positions (p. 31). Through the incorporation of "habitus" or cultural dispositions, cultural practices have inescapable and unconscious classificatory effects that shape social positions. Thus, this framework accounts for how the cultural marginalization of the poor is central to processes of domination and to the reproduction of inequality.

culture and reactive assimilation (also Tyson, Darity and Castellino 2005). She challenges the assertions of the “acting white” thesis that suggests that poor African-Americans reject education as an act of resistance. Drawing on ethnographic data, she documents a wider range of attitudes that poor minority students have toward education and school culture. Foremost in Carter’s argument and evidence are the importance that students attach to educational achievement *and* to maintaining cultural authenticity in schools. The latter requires involvement with, and admiration for, non-dominant forms of cultural capital that are associated with African-American youth culture, through which students gain peer respect, but which may be read by teachers as disrespecting school values. Thus, Carter locates students in the broader cultural contexts in which they live, and the dynamics between various types of cultural coinage that are valued in their environment—not only those that are institutionally sanctioned. She also shows that meaning-making concerning the self should be factored into any explanation of school failure among urban youth.

Lareau’s (2004) *Unequal Childhoods* shows that middle class parents on the one hand, and working class and poor parents on the other hand, manage differently the extra-curricular activities of their children, thus providing them with different endowments or assets of cultural capital. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a small number of poor, working class, and middle class families, Lareau finds that middle class people favor “purposeful cultivation” and organize a large number of extra-curricular activities for their children. In contrast, working class and poor people favor “natural growth” and are much less involved in managing their children’s lives than are their middle class counterparts (see also Farkas, this volume). The leisure time of the working class and poor is relatively unstructured and does not contribute to teaching children skills that middle class children learn and that would prepare them for professional life (self-

directiveness, multitasking, leadership, and so on). Thus, Lareau shows how the use of “free time” contributes to the reproduction of class inequality, even beyond differences that can be explained simply by class differences in time and money. Differences are found in the types of cultural references, orientations, and habits of the mind (or habitus) that parents pass on to their children.<sup>14</sup> Class differences are greater than differences within racial groups; for instance, the black and white middle class parents resemble each other in the way they manage children’s leisure time. This study shows that class differences in the ability to pass on advantages, including cultural advantages, are crucial to understanding class and racial inequality. Moreover, it demonstrates that a cross-class analysis illuminates aspects of social processes of exclusion that remain invisible to studies that focus exclusively on the cultural world of the poor.

Studies of cultural capital *qua* cultural consumption help us understand how culture contributes to poverty by documenting patterns of cultural differentiation and segmentation across classes. For instance, drawing on the General Social Survey, Bryson (1996) shows how the middle class distinguishes itself from other groups by its omnivorous musical tastes—from pop to jazz and classical music, as it were. She also shows that members of the middle class appreciate “anything but heavy metal,” that is, they most dislike the musical tastes associated with groups socially and culturally farthest from their own (the working class and the poor, who appreciate heavy metal, and blacks, who like hip hop and rap). Thus, building on Bourdieu

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<sup>14</sup> In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu defines habitus as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.” Repeated exposure to similar social conditions leads individuals to develop a set of *dispositions* toward action that are class-specific, or to simplify, specific to the distance toward material necessity that is characteristic of each class. One of the most successful applications of the concept has been MacLeod’s (1995) *Ain’t No Makin’ It*, in which the author studies two small groups of adolescent boys (whites and blacks) as they develop their aspirations in a housing project. He shows that as working class children, the white boys had developed a habitus (a set of “rules” about their own lives) through which they expected no more than working class lives. To speak of their habitus is to invoke the habitual element of their culture, whereby they expected a working class life because it had never occurred to them or their parents that another life was reasonably possible. In contrast, the high aspirations of the black boys stemmed, in part, from what they saw as the reduction in racial injustice that resulted from the civil rights struggles of their parents’ generation—thinking that their own opportunities would be greater than their parents’, their aspirations were appropriately higher.



(1984), she shows that shared dislikes are as crucial to understanding boundary work as are patterns of cultural similarities. Meanwhile, the poor and the working class appreciate a smaller range of musical genres, and their narrowness acts as a class marker in a cultural universe that values cultural breadth. Bryson (1996) proposes that cultural tolerance constitutes a multicultural capital more strongly concentrated in the middle and upper classes than in the lower classes. In our view, such shared patterns of distastes and tastes result in culturally isolating practices for the privileged and poor alike, which work in conjunction with class- (and often race-) segregating institutions (housing, schools, families, cities) to create pervasive us/them boundaries. Such insights must be incorporated in the literature on poverty if we are to develop a more encompassing understanding the conditions that sustain the social isolation of the poor, and inequality more generally. Institutional discrimination may have a multiplier effect against this background of cultural differences. One of the challenges ahead is to tackle the cascading and compounding effects of cultural templates and institutions working together.

Finally, this literature also offers a response to theorists who have argued that if culture is so heterogeneous, then it is epiphenomal, and not useful as a causal explanation. Cultural sociologists have demonstrated patterns of cultural likes and dislikes that are differentiated across classes and racial groups; see Peterson (2005). A wide international literature demonstrates how many institutions, such as schools, are biased in favor of middle class tastes, which has indirect effect on working class and low-income populations. Surely such research offers a powerful counterweight to a view that cultural differences are haphazard and without explanatory power.

*Culture as Institution*

The growing literature on institutions has become preoccupied with analyzing precisely how institutional channels have cascading effects on individual attitudes. These channels are germane to the goal of understanding mechanisms and opportunities for incorporation and exclusion. Institutions, defined either robustly, as formal and informal rules, procedures, routines and norms (Hall and Taylor 1996) or as socially constructed shared cognitive and interpretive schemas (Meyer and Rowan 1991), or more narrowly yet, as formal organizations, enable or constrain shared definitions and experiences of race, class, and gender, which in turn affect poverty. Thus, institutions are the last culture-related analytical device to which we turn. They are particularly salient when one considers how cultural constructs feed into poverty-related policy, as for instance when the latter resonates with institutionalized, taken-for-granted, boundaries.

Examining guaranteed annual income proposals in the 1960s and 1970s, Steensland (2006) analyzed the role of culture in the schematic, discursive, and institutional mechanisms leading to policy outcomes. In previous research, he suggests, explanations centered on the impact of social movements, state autonomy, and business interests and “the role of culture is recognized empirically, but disappears theoretically” (p. 1280, ftnt # 8). In contrast, Steensland emphasizes interpretive feedback mechanisms (p. 1287) and shows that supporters and opponents of guaranteed annual income proposals “use language that buttressed cultural categories of worthiness” (for example, welfare recipients versus the working poor, or “income supplement” versus “welfare support”), that in turn influenced the shape of policies. This illustrates how templates for categorization (or boundaries) encounter discursive opportunity structures that influence the likelihood that specific schemas will diffuse, become institutionalized in policy, and affect who gets what. Moreover, “categories of worth exert

institutional influence when they interlock with patterned practices in ways that channel routinized action.” In other words, through feedback or loop effects, boundaries become institutionalized, that is, largely taken for granted and embedded in policies, in informal organization, and in cultural practices. Institutional arrangements come to reproduce themselves and result in systematic exclusions of some categories of the population.

Such processes have consequences for how the poor are incorporated and “dealt with” across advanced industrial societies. For instance, Silver (2006) contrasts French, British, and other European policies of social inclusion (and their concerns with “social exclusion”) with American approaches that isolate the poor, namely through means-tested (as opposed to universal) welfare programs (Silver 1993). Such cultural *qua* institutional processes help explain patterns of racial incorporation (for instance, through laws against employment discrimination, or through social security and welfare) in these different contexts. For his part, Lieberman (2005) analyzes different configurations of “institutions, group-state linkages, and cultural repertoires” that result in the unintentional but systemic exclusion of blacks in favor of whites in the United States, mediated by labor market access and state structure. In turn, individuals interpret the cultural frameworks sustained by policies to make sense of their place in the world. Similarly, drawing on in-depth interviews with welfare recipients, Soss (2005) describes how the latter understand their client status and the potential effectiveness of collective action (see also Jenson and Papillon 2001; and Soss and Mettler 2004) on the framing of membership.)

Investigating such institutionalized processes requires reframing poverty knowledge within a broader perspective. It requires focusing less on individuals and more on structures and institutions, including the cultural and social mechanisms that maintain classification systems

that demarcate the poor from “us” (O'Connor 2001). Moreover, cultural approaches to the study of poverty thus have to focus on poverty policies, as well as on the poor.

### ***Remaining Challenges***

In this paper, we have not argued that scholars of poverty and racial inequality should only concern themselves with culture. We would not expect, for example, that concentrated urban poverty would be explainable solely by a shift in certain repertoires of action among a population or by a secular decline in the belief in meritocracies. Rather, our goal has been to introduce alternative ways of thinking about culture and to suggest that culture, in its many forms, may interact with structure in ways other than those hitherto proposed by much of the scholarship on poverty and racial inequality.

Meaning is multifaceted and it may intervene differently at various points in the causal chain that determines whether members of different racial or ethnic groups end up in poverty. Its role will not be the same in all settings. For example, determining whether poor Native Americans born in reservations are likely to escape poverty may call for different cultural tools and analytical strategies, than determining why equally poor people of different racial groups differ in their use of traditional banking.<sup>15</sup> Thus, breaking down “culture” into many components is essential if we are to better understand its role in channeling racial disparities.

For this reason, we have attempted not to adjudicate among the six analytical tools we have presented, but to suggest that they each can illuminate different processes through which meaning contributes to the uneven distribution of poverty across racial and ethnic groups. These processes cannot be captured by accounts provided by the culture of poverty thesis and its many implicit descendants. Some of these processes concern micro-level processes of meaning-making

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<sup>15</sup> (Bertrand, Mullainathan and Shafir 2006: 11)

and decision-making among the poor (how low-income individuals' framing of their neighborhoods shapes their actions, how the narratives of people of different racial or ethnic groups affects their perceptions of the path to a good life, how the working poor uses the poor to help define who they themselves are). Others concern society-wide cultural representations about this group that impact policies and institutions that regulate them (the cultural assumptions of policy makers and politicians about the motivations of unwed mothers causes of poverty). The emerging picture is far more complex and multidimensional than that generated by the assumption that living in poverty creates self-perpetuating and pernicious cultural orientations. Again, only by employing a range of culture-related concepts that point to different aspects of an hypothesized causal process – as opposed to referring to “culture” broadly defined – can a more finely-grained understanding of the relevant aspects be brought to light.

For research on racial differences in poverty to produce works that builds on and improve upon the literature just described, several changes will be necessary.<sup>16</sup> First, this literature should accommodate a broader understanding of how various disciplines accumulate empirical evidence. Certainly some of the ideas discussed here can be examined through quantitative, survey-based methods. Nevertheless, many are best studied through other data-gathering techniques. Inductive research and field-based methods are a *sine qua non* if we are to capture the distinctive frames or narratives through which the poor make sense of their lives. It is also especially well-suited to capture path-dependent processes and to perform process-tracing more generally. Familiarity with a variety of methods is probably a requirement for fulfilling the promise of the field.

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<sup>16</sup> The poverty literature is hardly unique in its use of a rather thin conception of culture. Indeed, building on Kornhauser (1978), social scientists studying crime and deviance are also leaving unexamined the impact of cultural mechanisms on their object (Sampson and Bean 2005), and those studying sexuality among the poor have also tended to use a theoretically impoverished model to understand patterns of behavior across a population (for a critique, see Fosse 2007).

Second, concerns with endogeneity should not stop researchers from considering how culture-related phenomena figure in the production and reproduction of inequality. Indeed, while the question of what is cause and consequence is crucial for research that aims at assessing the relative significance of various factors in multivariate models, it is of much less relevance and consequence in studies concerned with process-tracing, where loop-back effects and other similar processes are common. This should be stressed because problems of endogeneity have often deterred quantitatively inclined social scientists from considering the causal role of culture.

Third, we need more heterogeneous views about how culture and poverty are causally related: cultural practices may shape responses to poverty, cultural repertoires may be limited by poverty, cultural frames may be expanded by neighborhood poverty, cultural narratives may change irrespective of poverty, and so on. To ask whether cultural change leads to structure change is a counterproductive way of asking the question. Much more useful is to ask when, where, and how cultural change leads to structural change. It is imperative that the terms of the debate be changed, to make room for conceptions of culture that go beyond thin accounts of simple preferences.

A few recent poverty studies show the promise and potential pitfalls of rethinking how culture is examined. In *Promises I Can Keep*, Edin and Kefalas (2005) paint a convincing picture of how poor single mothers understand the place of fathers, husbands, and children in their lives. While they document in detail how poor white, black, and Latina women living in Philadelphia account for their lives, they do not spell out in their explanation how these accounts feed into the reproduction of poverty. They explain that their respondents give meanings to various aspects of their lives, which include (a) the meaning they give to marriage: if women do not marry, it is because they hold marriage in very high regard and wish to avoid divorce; (b) the

meaning they give to children: if women do not postpone childbearing, it is because having a child is a source of self-esteem, given their low labor-market prospects; (c) the meaning they give to autonomy: if they hold off from marriage, it is in part to protect their independence from men through financial security. These cultural orientations (and others) intersect with the structural factors discussed by Wilson (1987), such as social isolation, to explain the high rate of non-marital birth among the poor. What is missing, however, is an explicit account of how one meaning is connected to another, and through what processes the women come to give a particular issue a given meaning—for example, whether tropes available from feminism, entertainment television, or Catholicism (especially among the Latina respondents) converged to produce the distinct meanings these women give to autonomy. Being clearer about such processes would lead to explicit and more detailed process-tracing with regard to the relationship between culture and poverty, and it would help us compare processes from case to case and from setting to setting.

Another example is Young's *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men* (2004), based on interviews with 26 young, low-income African-American men. Young's respondents clearly aspire to a college education, without knowing how to achieve it, in part because they are not in frequent contact with the college-educated. Their isolation from the middle class makes it difficult to engage in practices likely to lead to higher educational attainment. Thus, their firm belief in educational achievement cannot be easily translated into behavior.<sup>17</sup> Just as these respondents value going to college but do not have a cultural template of how to get there, Edin and Kefalas (2005)'s respondents value marriage, but view it as nearly unattainable because they posit that it requires "the white picket fence lifestyle" (2005 pp. 74, 111). The parallel between

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<sup>17</sup> It is also the case that professing faith in these ideals is a means of acquiring cultural citizenship in a context of acute social exclusion, an issue Lamont has discussed elsewhere (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

the findings of these two studies is striking and cries for further exploration of the disjuncture between the cultural toolkits made available by the American dream, the disconnect between these toolkits and the lived reality of some Americans, and how this disconnect results in the institutionalization of popular repertoires among the poor that may be dysfunctional from the perspective of social incorporation.

We hope our discussion has made clear that researchers are unlikely to understand racial disparities in poverty by looking at racial or ethnic “cultures,” in the sense of sets of values or attitudes that all or most members of a racial or ethnic (or class) group share. This idea was ineffective in its “culture of poverty” incarnation, and it has recently been shown to be of limited value in other realms as well – see for instance the criticisms of the “oppositional culture” thesis (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1978). The concepts we have discussed all locate cultural process in individuals or in relations between individuals, rather than in groups. This suggests that the most promising venues for understanding racial disparities through cultural concepts lie in how *individuals* of different racial backgrounds face differential discrimination, access to structural opportunities, wealth advantages, social capital, and other opportunities and constraints. Cultural factors are more likely operating in conjunction with these factors than independently of them.

A proper framing of the role of culture in producing racial disparity in poverty should lead to more appropriate policy recommendations, based on more accurate and encompassing understandings of the social worlds that the poor inhabit.<sup>18</sup> For instance, one may imagine that

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<sup>18</sup> From our analysis, one should not conclude that there exist no cultural traits or orientations that are concentrated among various categories of poor people. There may be large differences in the types of verbal interaction and the words used among professional, working class, and low income parents when talking with their children. Hart and Risley (1995), for example, count class differences in numbers of words employed with children—in the tens of millions by as early as age 3; see also Farkas (2003). However, we suggest that such differences should be understood not through the prism of essential or permanent differences between class norms or attitudes, but as elements in a broader account that employs multiple analytical tools to examine the problem.



understanding better the narratives that White, Black, and Latino unwed mothers use to make sense of their experience would result in more adequate programs to reduce out-of-wedlock childbirth. Programs to combat poverty among the elderly should be shaped by a more detailed understanding of the frames used to define moral boundaries around family responsibilities among Asians, Latinos, Blacks, and Whites (e.g., Espiritu 1997). Similarly, programs to address prisoner recidivism should take into account that being arrested or having been imprisoned may carry different meanings among different ethnic groups and in different neighborhoods, (see Winship and Berrien 2003).

Of course, culture cannot be easily manipulated or changed through policies. However, institutions can be more effective policy levers if they are based on a fuller understanding of the environment which they aim to engineer, and of how to propose changes that are in sync with shared understandings. Policies can stimulate cultural responses or exacerbate cultural tensions. An adequate comprehension of contexts, including shared definitions of the situation, are essential to successful policy implementations, as well as to avoiding pernicious unintended consequences (on this point, see Swidler forthcoming).

There is much work we have not covered and many issues we have ignored in this short article -- for example, (Patterson 1997; 2000) has attempted to demonstrate the long-term cultural impacts among African-Americans of the experience of slavery. While this and other studies are in some senses couched in older conceptions of culture, they nevertheless introduce a concern with meaning that has too often been neglected by poverty scholars. What remains to be done is to enrich this literature with the conceptual tools produced in other terrains more traditionally hospitable to cultural analysis, so as to move toward a richer understanding of the

cultural mechanisms involved in the production of poverty. Without this effort, a good part of the puzzle will remain unsolved.

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