More Than Just Race: A Rejoinder

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I very much appreciate Margaret Andersen's invitation to respond to these three challenging reviews of my book, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. It is not often that an author gets a chance to reply to reviews in the same issue in which they appear, including an opportunity to express both appreciation for the reviewers comments and points of disagreement.

I begin with Kimberly McClain DaCosta's thoughtful review. She points out that my work has been the center of a good deal of controversy, including my discussion of the "cultural aspects of entrench poverty" that have been "perceived by many on the left as 'blaming the victim,' and by those on the right as evidence that blacks were largely responsible for their own poverty." However, I hasten to add that such perceptions are not representative the vast majority of scholars who take my work seriously and read it carefully. And it is this latter group, not the ideologues of the left or right, who receive my attention. Among these serious scholars are those DaCosta correctly identified as being primarily concerned with whether I had "adequately theorized the interrelationship between cultural and structural outcomes" in my previous books.

Although I fully agree with DaCosta's statement that *More than Just Race* focuses more explicitly on the question of culture than my previous writings, I disagree that the book was written in response to my critics. Unlike *The Truly*

Disadvantaged (1987), which was in fact a rejoinder to the critics of *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), I wrote *More Than Just Race* not as a response to my critics, but as an attempt to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding race, class and urban poverty and thereby encourage scholars to reexamine the way they discuss to two important factors associated with racial inequality—structure and culture. In the process I revised some of my earlier views on the role of culture, and I very much appreciate Professor DaCosta's comment that my attempt to engage the cultural sociology literature in *More Than Just Race* "makes a significant contribution to the literature on racial inequality."

However, DaCosta appropriately points out that "as a term in everyday discourse, 'culture' . . . is subject to analytical confusion" because the many items including in a broad definition of culture make "cultural arguments susceptible to misreading." In *More Than Just Race* I follow Ulf Hannerz (1969) and defined 'culture' "as the sharing of outlooks and modes of behavior among individuals who face similar place-based circumstances (such as poor segregated neighborhoods). Therefore, when individuals act according to their culture, they are following inclinations developed from their exposure to the particular traditions, practices, and beliefs among those who live and interact in the same physical and social environment."

I pointed out that this definition goes beyond the simple and traditional notions of group norms, values, and attitudes toward family and work and includes cultural repertoires (habits, styles and skills) and the micro-level processes of meaning-making and decision-making—that is, how individuals in particular

groups, communities or societies develop an understanding of how the world works and make decisions based on that understanding. The processes of meaning-making and decision-making are reflected in cultural frames (shared group constructions of reality). In my book, I use the generic concept of *cultural traits* to refer to one or more of these different but related components of culture. I agree with DaCosta that this is a broad definition of culture, but it is theoretically derived from arguments that are designed to explain social outcomes emerging from processes of intra- and intergroup interaction (Hannerz, 1969, Swidler 1990, Wilson, 1987 and 1996, Patterson, 2004, and Lamonte and Small 2008).

Finally, I should like to respond to DaCosta argument that in my discussion of framing I may "have misread the political moment" and that I offer few specifics to address the practical challenges of "the time honored tradition of race-baiting" when public policy options are proposed. To offset or minimize the problem of race baiting, I proposed a type of political framing, with appropriate examples, that, as suggested by responses to national public opinion surveys, will likely to resonate with the American population; namely, the highlighting of programs that focus on opportunity enhancement—that is, helping people to help themselves.

However, Gregory D. Squire's comment that I "no longer endorse universalistic approached to racial inequality" makes me realize that I did not fully clarify my position on framing. My statement that we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issue of race and poverty in framing public policy did not mean that I reject universal programs, such as the stimulus package, which includes programs to address the needs of the poor, including poor people of color.

Although I no longer support a framing that is specifically and expressly designed to be race neutral or color blind, I fully support *both* race specific and universal programs to address racial inequality.

Squires also discussed "color-blindness" in a different context. He states: "On occasion Wilson sees color-blindness where color clearly matters. He refers to Katrina as a natural disaster where 'devastation . . . was broadly visited upon the residents of New Orleans—black and white, rich and poor, property owner and public housing tenant alike." He then devotes the next four paragraphs to argue against this position, and concludes: "Katrina has not been the colorblind phenomenon that Wilson suggests." Readers of my book will see that this is a gross distortion of my discussion of Katrina (see chapter two), and that my argument was clearly taken out of context. This is what I actually said: "When television cameras focused on the flooding, the people trapped in houses and apartments, and the vast devastation, many Americans were shocked to see the squalid living conditions of the poor. Of course, the devastation of Katrina was broadly visited upon the residents of New Orleans, black and white, rich and poor, property owner and public housing tenant alike. But while many residents were able to flee, the very poor, lacking automobiles or money for transportation and lodging, stayed to wait out the storm with tragic results. And through Katrina, the nation's attention became riveted to these poor urban neighborhoods." I then further elaborate on this issue in the next five paragraphs, including a discussion of my research on the lack of access to automobiles in poor black inner-city neighborhoods. It is therefore

ludicrous for Squires to say, "Katrina has not been the colorblind phenomenon that Wilson suggest."

Squires points out that in addition to the framing of an argument, we need action to translate it into public policy and he raises the question of "how much influence this book will have when its primary 'policy' recommendation is a call for more effective framing." This is a legitimate point. But you have to consider the purpose of this book, namely to address the culture vs. structure dispute with a comprehensive framework and to develop arguments about the framing of public policy that flow from that discussion. Framing is prior to any effective public policy.

Nonetheless, *More Than Just Race* does suggest a holistic public policy perspective whereby the complex web of structural and cultural factors that create and reinforce racial inequality are recognized and appreciated. And since my arguments were informed by empirical research, I regret that the spectacular results of a rigorous preliminary evaluation of the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), which epitomizes the type of holistic approach I have in mind, were released after my book was published (Dobbie and Fryer 2009). The HCZ would have been an apt example of programs that integrate structural and cultural interventions because President Barack Obama and his policy advisors are currently designing what they call "promised neighborhoods," patterned after the HCZ, which will be featured in twenty cities across the country.

Finally, it is difficult to respond to Deirdre Royster's critique because her review is not focused and it strays away from the central theme of *More Than Just Race*—the structure vs. culture dispute—and reflects her own research interests and policy agenda, much of it unrelated to my central arguments. She chastises me for my failure to include a

discussion of feminist studies of masculinity and the media as they relate to cultural issues and for not discussing "hostile institutional cultures that Blacks living on the margins in inner-cities confront daily." Severe space constraints preclude a detailed reaction to Royster's claims. Many of them amount to ex cathedra assertions backed by little more than her assured private convictions--For example, her blanket assertions that the culture of the ghetto is a reflection of the larger American culture--without advancing any specific research evidence for the claim.

And when she does directly address arguments relevant to my work, she goes over ground that I covered in *More Than Just Race*, especially chapter 3. For example, she discusses a study by Devah Pager and states that she "shows that Black and white men who seek entry-level service sector jobs and who are identical on paper and trained to self-present similarly, are simply not received similarly by employers." On the basis of Royster's review, readers who have not read my book would assume that I ignored the research on employer bias against black males, including the excellent study by Devah Pager (2003). However, I not only provide a detailed discussion of this very subject in chapter 3, I also pointed out that "Pagers research revealed that a white applicant with a felony conviction was more likely to receive a callback or job offer than was a black applicant with a clean record."

Royster concludes her rambling review with this question: "Given the outcomes experienced by the non-poor and well-behaved Black men Pager and I studied, I would like Wilson to explain precisely what cultural improvements poor inner-city Blacks can make that will assure improved life chances?" For my answer, I suggest that she go back and reread page 23 of *More Than Just Race,* where I emphatically argue that programs focusing

on cultural problems, "without confronting the broader and more fundamental issues of restricted economic opportunities, have limited chances to succeed."

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