Sociologists are in the midst of a scholarly revival that delves into the culture of the poor. In *Living the Drama*, Harding offers a cognitive view of the approach to culture to address an old argument in the “culture of poverty” debate: that poverty is caused by a set of self-perpetuating (and self-destructive) beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that become entrenched over time. Harding takes the culture of poverty debate in a new direction by isolating attitudes from behavior and distinguishing social structure from culture, values from perception. In particular, he differentiates a values view from a cognitive view of culture. In the former, culture is viewed from a frame based on subcultures that have their own value system. Harding capitalizes on the cognitive view of culture, which focuses on how sense-making shapes a “culture of poverty.” Using a cognitive view of culture, Harding explores the uniqueness of poor segregated neighborhoods where social norms and values may lead young people to drop out of school, participate in an underground economy, and become sexually promiscuous.

Using in-depth interviews with 60 adolescent African-American and Latino boys living “under the influence of poverty” in three Boston neighborhoods, Harding examines the complexities of their decision-making processes regarding education and romantic and sexual relationships. What Harding does differently from many other contemporary studies of the poor is to explore not only the value systems of subcultures that are shaping youths’ decisions, but also how the culture of their communities, large and small, influence their cognitive style—that is how they make sense of their worlds—and ultimately shape their decisions. He does this from a more expansive, “neo-cultural” view of poverty in which the structural constraints of institutions and the strategies that boys use to deal with violence and sexuality are front and center. He stresses the youths’ culturally influenced sense-making as neighborhood residents.

Several themes emerged around the salience of violence and sexuality, particularly when Harding examines the great lengths to which young boys will go to avoid being victims of violence. *Living the Drama* presents the boys as active decision makers navigating their trials. As in Ann Swidler’s *Culture in Action*, Harding sees culture as a toolkit for making sense of and navigating the world. The diverse symbols, stories, and ideas drawn from the system of values and norms that inform actions (the
toolkit) are culturally varied, allowing for an array of multiple and sometimes conflicting cultural models. Yet, even with this toolkit, the fear and the trauma of violence are ever-present in the narratives of his participants. Harding also presents rich information about the kinship and friendship networks of his participants that seems drastically different from those described by Carol Stack in her classic ethnography, *All of Our Kin*. No longer are familial and fictive kin networks the go-to for resources. Instead, the youth turn to friendship networks and build relationships with older boys for safety against violence.

To elucidate the themes he observed while conducting his interviews and to offer depth to the three neighborhoods where the boys were interviewed, Harding relies heavily on ethnographic literature, most notably Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*. Although Harding critiques his participants’ cultural goals and ambitions, the book finds itself in a precarious situation by pointing out that those neighborhood institutions, such as schools and employers, are fragile and the institutional means of making it out of these spaces are limited. The underlying issue is that all the traditional rational choices are not working. Harding presupposes that institutions work in these communities as they do in middle-class spaces with resources. Even if his participants held the most ideal middle-class values and sense-making abilities, they still must address severely compromised economic and educational institutions that have historically been essential to middle-class success. Another issue for Harding is that many of the assumptions for a cognitive view of culture result in many of the same findings as if he were to have used a values lens, leading to an over reliance on individual sense making versus structural issues. Equally, the dilemma for *Living the Drama*—a dilemma he never quite addresses satisfactorily—is to pinpoint the extent to which cognition explains the issues that Harding observes, if it does at all. A different tack that could have enriched the culture of poverty debate would have been to address poverty as a condition that people move in and out of, and to include the push and pull factors of living in poverty. Addressing both micro- and macro factors that lead to poverty opens up the discussion for potentially wider structural issues, such as housing policy, economic opportunities, and discrimination.

Harding struggles in good faith to understand the strategies these boys devise to cope with their trials and challenges, some of which may have unintended and long-term implications. What is missing, however, is any discussion of Harding himself as a researcher and his ability to gain trust, especially given the subject matter. Finally, the myopic lens through which culture is studied (both in Harding’s analysis and in the larger culture of poverty debate) could be enhanced by exploring how structural, historical, and public policy factors affect this population, particularly the war on drugs, the rise in incarceration, housing reform, and changes in public education. In addition, given that this is a study of African-American and Latino adolescents, the discussion of race and racism could have been more central.

This study, by breathing new life into the culture of poverty debate, aims to add an important dimension to the literature and research of culture. *Living the Drama* will prove especially fruitful when read in conjunction with other classics and contemporary texts of a similar vein, most importantly *Off the Books* by Sudhir Venkatesh, Jay Macleod’s *Ain’t No Makin’ It*, Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor*, Carol Stack’s *All of Our Kin*, and Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*.