

## Reconsidering Culture and Poverty

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Culture is back on the poverty research agenda. Over the past decade, sociologists, demographers, and even economists have begun asking questions about the role of culture in many aspects of poverty and even explicitly explaining the behavior of low-income population in reference to cultural factors. An example is Prudence Carter (2005), who, based on interviews with poor minority students, argues that whether poor children will work hard at school depends in part on their cultural beliefs about the differences between minorities and the majority. Annette Lareau (2003), after studying poor, working-class, and middle-class families, argues that poor children may do worse over their lifetimes in part because their parents are more committed to “natural growth” than “concerted cultivation” as their cultural model for child rearing. Mario Small (2004), based on fieldwork in a Boston housing complex, argues that poor people may be reluctant to participate in beneficial community activities in part because of how they culturally perceive their neighborhoods. David Harding (2007, 2010), using survey and qualitative interview data on adolescents, argues that the sexual behavior of poor teenagers depends in part on the extent of cultural heterogeneity in their neighborhoods. Economists George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton (2002), relying on the work of other scholars, argue that whether students invest in schooling depends in part on their cultural identity, wherein payoffs will differ among “jocks,” “nerds,” and “burnouts.” And William Julius Wilson, in his latest book (2009a), argues that culture helps explain how poor African Americans respond to the structural conditions they experience.

These and other scholars have begun to explore a long abandoned topic. The last generation of scholarship on the poverty-culture relationship was primarily identified, for better or worse, with the “culture of poverty” model of

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Oscar Lewis (1966) and the report on the Negro family by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965). Lewis argued that sustained poverty generated a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices and that this culture of poverty would tend to perpetuate itself over time, even if the structural conditions that originally gave rise to it were to change. Moynihan argued that the black family was caught in a tangle of pathology that resulted from the cumulative effects of slavery and the subsequent structural poverty that characterized the experience of many African Americans (see also Banfield 1970).

The emerging generation of culture scholars is often at pains to distance itself from the earlier one, and for good reason. The earlier scholars were repeatedly accused of “blaming the victims” for their problems, because they seemed to imply that people might cease to be poor if they changed their culture (Ryan 1976). As many have documented, the heated political environment dissuaded many young scholars of the time from studying culture in the context of poverty. Even the time period’s more theoretically sensitive research on culture, such as that by Ulf Hannerz (1969) or Charles Valentine (1968), which attracted many followers, failed to stem the exodus. In fact, scholars only began asking these

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questions again after publication of Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged* (see Small and Newman 2001). This renewed interest was made possible in part by a resurgence of interest in culture across the social sciences.

Contemporary researchers rarely claim that culture will perpetuate itself for multiple generations regardless of structural changes, and they practically never use the term "pathology." But the new generation of scholars also *conceives* of culture in substantially different ways. It typically rejects the idea that whether people are poor can be explained by their values. It is often reluctant to divide explanations into "structural" and "cultural," because of the increasingly questionable utility of this old distinction.<sup>1</sup> It generally does not define culture as comprehensively as Lewis did, instead being careful to distinguish values from perceptions and attitudes from behavior. It almost always sets aside the ideas that members of a group or nation share "a culture" or that a group's culture is more or less coherent or internally consistent. In many cases, its conceptions of culture tend to be more narrowly defined, easier to measure, and more plausibly falsifiable. As we discuss below, it also tends to draw on an entirely different literature: the large body of new research that has emerged over the past thirty years or so in cultural anthropology and cultural sociology.

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In spite of this spurt of scholarly activity, the future is far from clear. While the aforementioned scholars have sought to inject cultural analysis into poverty research, others remain deeply skeptical of, and even antagonistic toward, such efforts. Many thoughtful scientists today insist that culture is epiphenomenal at best, explainable, as per the long-standing Marxist tradition, by structural conditions. Still others remain suspicious of the political intentions of the new culture scholars, and charges of "blaming the victim" have not disappeared from contemporary discourse. Furthermore, the poverty scholars who study culture do not constitute a school of thought, a group, or even a network—they have not issued a coherent agenda or even a commitment to study these questions for the near future. There is no common vocabulary or agreed-upon set of questions. The topic may well disappear from scholarly consciousness as quickly as it emerged.

Our objective in this introduction is to take stock of this budding literature; identify issues that remain unanswered; and make the case that the judicious, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded study of culture can and should be a permanent component of the poverty research agenda. We begin by identifying the scholarly and policy reasons why poverty researchers should be deeply concerned with culture. We then tackle a difficult question—what is "culture"?—and make the case that sociologists and anthropologists of culture have developed at least seven different, though sometimes overlapping, analytical tools for capturing meaning-making that could help answer questions about marriage, education, neighborhoods, community participation, and other topics central to the study of poverty. Finally, we discuss how the seven studies that follow help enrich our understanding of poverty by engaging culture.

## Why Study Culture?

Students of poverty should be concerned with culture for both scholarly and policy reasons.

### *Scholarly motivations*

Poverty scholarship should be concerned with culture for at least three reasons. The first is to understand better why people respond to poverty the way they do—both how they cope with it and how they escape it.

Why do people *cope* with poverty the way they do? The literature on how people respond to material hardship or deprivation is large, and it has identified a number of coping strategies: using family ties, exchanging goods within friendship networks, seeking help from the state, turning to private organizations, relocating, and others (see Edin and Lein 1997; Newman and Massengill 2006). But people differ substantially in which coping strategy they employ, and some of this heterogeneity probably results from cultural factors. For example, researchers in immigration have shown that poor immigrants often create rotating credit associations to generate resource pools available to the group (Portes 1998; see also Sanyal [2009] on microcredit associations in an international context). An important question, and one that cultural models might help answer, is why creating rotating associations is much more common among the immigrant poor than the native poor. Similar questions—about why some individuals or groups employ family ties, formal organizations, exchange networks, and other strategies—remain to be answered. Some sociologists argue that people’s resilience, including their ability to cope with stigma, is associated with cultural identity and social membership (Hall and Lamont 2009; Lamont 2009).

Why do people differ in their ability to *escape* poverty? Ultimately, the greatest barrier to middle-class status among the poor is *sustained material deprivation itself*. But there is significant variation in behavior, decision making, and outcomes among people living in seemingly identical structural conditions, as several researchers have noted (Hannerz 1969; Newman 1999; Small 2004). The fact that similarly poor people living in the same high-poverty neighborhoods make substantially different decisions regarding pregnancy, studying, drug sales, community participation, and robbery has been documented repeatedly by ethnographers (see Newman and Massengill [2006] for a recent review). What explains this variation? It is likely not that some have the “wrong” set of values. Indeed, the “right” set of values or beliefs may actually undermine one’s mobility when exercised in a difficult context. For example, consider the belief in individualism and personal responsibility, which many Americans consider to be positive. In a recent study, Sandra Smith (2007) has shown that this value may actually undermine people’s ability to find a job. We know that many people get jobs by mobilizing their social networks (Granovetter 1974). But in her study of job-seeking among poor black women and men, Smith found that some people failed to use their networks because of (among other things) a strong sense of

individualism, which dictated that people ought to succeed based primarily on their *own* efforts. Among Smith's respondents, the decision to *not* use their available social connections to get a job was not the result of "bad" values, even if it was, in part, culturally determined. Second, "values" constitute only one conception of culture, and probably not the one with the greatest explanatory power. For example, if we think of culture as a person's set of strategies of action (such as how to apply for college, how to network properly, how to request favors from acquaintances), then people who lack a particular strategy will have a more difficult time making a particular decision (Swidler 1986). Similar models of the role of culture in mobility have been used to explain why working-class boys seek working-class, rather than middle-class, jobs (Willis 1977); and why some poor and working-class men but not others seek to leave their neighborhoods (Whyte 1943). Exploring further how low-income populations make sense of their experience and options is essential for developing stronger explanations of how they escape poverty.

A second reason to study culture is to debunk existing myths about the cultural orientations of the poor. The "culture of poverty" thesis has been criticized at length, since shortly after its publication, because of its many theoretical inconsistencies (e.g., Valentine 1968). But basic empirical work is needed to assess many rather straightforward beliefs about the cultural orientations of the poor or of ethnic minorities. For example, John Ogbu argued that, in part as a reaction to what they perceived as blocked opportunities, poor black students developed an oppositional culture that devalued performing schoolwork as "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1978). But in a series of recent studies, scholars testing the theory against nationally representative data have found little support for it (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; but see Fryer and Torelli 2005). (In fact, net of socioeconomic differences black students tend to have *greater* proschool attitudes.) Similar assessments regarding parenthood, marriage, work, and mobility are ripe for investigation. Developing a more complete understanding of the conditions that produce and sustain poverty requires analyzing empirically with greater detail and accuracy how the poor make sense of and explain their current situations, options, and decisions.

A third reason for poverty scholars to study culture is to develop and clarify exactly what they mean by it—regardless of whether they believe it helps explain an outcome. Culture was a "third rail" in scholarship on poverty for so long that it became essentially a black box, one now ripe for reopening. In this endeavor, students of poverty should read, critique, and deploy the work of sociologists and anthropologists of culture. This task will be difficult: the literature on *poverty* and the literature on *culture* are too often produced in substantially different intellectual worlds, worlds that involve different interlocutors, theories of behavior, styles of thought, and standards of evidence. Traditionally, the former world has included not merely sociologists but also economists, political scientists, and demographers; favored quantitative evidence; placed a premium on clarity; and operated with an eye to solving social problems. The latter has included humanists, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists; favored interpretive or qualitative

analysis; and rewarded the development of new theories. As a result, major works in one field have often had little impact in the other.

Nevertheless, one can exaggerate the differences between these fields. Many of the most important works on poverty have been qualitative or interpretive in nature (see Newman and Massengill 2006), and some of the classics in the sociology of culture have relied on quantitative analysis (Bourdieu 1984). In fact, a number of poverty scholars are increasingly comfortable with multiple methods and styles of thought. Such convergences are evident not merely in the articles in this volume but also in recent issues of *The Annals* that have showcased developments in cultural sociology and poverty studies.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, economists have also begun to draw upon cultural concepts to understand where individuals' beliefs and preferences come from (see Rao and Walton 2004). For example, Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (2006) develop a model in which group-level beliefs and norms affect individual beliefs and preferences, which in turn affect economic outcomes and economic decision making. Akerloff and Kranton (2000, 2002) draw on the concept of identity to develop a model in which individuals have preferences for behavior that is consistent with their group identities and derive utility from such behavior (see also Benabou and Tirole 2006). And Amartya Sen (1992) has developed the concept of capabilities to understand aspects of inequality in well-being not captured by the traditional notion of utility. These developments are promising and may suggest possibilities for greater interdisciplinary dialogue.

### *Policy motivations*

Researchers and others interested in policy should also be concerned with culture, for several reasons. First, ignoring culture can lead to bad policy. The anthropologist Simon Harragin (2004), for example, examined the implementation of food relief policies in southern Sudan to address the famine that arose among the Dinka in 1998. Relief agencies devised a targeted program that would give aid only to those with signs of advanced malnutrition. Local authorities, however, were reassembling the international aid and redistributing it to the general population through their kinship leaders along kinship lines. Many who were hungry but not malnourished were getting aid because their family members were malnourished. Agencies tried to combat this practice, considering it evidence of corruption and local dysfunction. But the Dinka operate within a cultural system that is both egalitarian and kinship-based, wherein food is always shared in equal parts among all members of extended families, administered by kin leaders. In addition, according to Harragin, the only reason that severe famine arose in 1998, rather than 1997, was that local kin leaders had been redistributing their dwindling food supplies equitably and with an eye to those in need. Changing these cultural practices now was infeasible, and few recipients in 1998, no matter how destitute, would hoard aid from those family members who a year earlier had helped them survive. Harragin suggests, and we are inclined to agree, that a more culturally aware policy—one designed to work within local kinship

and equity customs, rather than (inadvertently) attempting to sidestep them—would have proved more effective and would have avoided the allegations of corruption that tainted the aid effort.<sup>3</sup>

Another example can be seen among policy makers in the United States. In recent years, politicians have launched promarriage “campaigns” to change cultural attitudes toward marriage among the poor, based on the belief that the poor have higher births to unmarried mothers because they do not value marriage as much as middle-class people. But Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2005) interviewed more than a hundred low-income mothers and found that, on the contrary, many of them prized marriage—in fact, they held marriage in such high esteem that they were reluctant to marry until they believed that both they and their partners were emotionally and financially prepared. Unfortunately, many of the women had little confidence that their partners would ever become “marriage material,” such that waiting until marriage would have placed them at high risk of never becoming mothers. Regardless of what policy makers believe about the wisdom of these decisions, if Edin and Kefalas’s mothers are representative of low-income mothers, then policies designed to make such mothers value marriage highly are simply trying to convince people of what they already believe.

People who care about policy should also be concerned with culture because it shapes how *policy elites* make decisions affecting the poor. Among policy elites we include the scholars, journalists, and pundits who discuss poverty policy; the activists, advocates, scholars, and practitioners who purport to speak on behalf of the poor; and the lawmakers, employers, and nonprofit leaders who, one way or another, make policy decisions that affect the conditions of the poor. The public discourse on poverty, and the policies resulting from that discourse, are themselves cultural products, subject to the whims, predilections, prejudices, beliefs, attitudes, and orientations of policy elites. Both the discourse and the policy reflect deeply held (if often inconsistent) assumptions about the goals of policy and especially about work, responsibility, service, agency, “deservingness,” and the structure of opportunity. These circumstances are particularly important in the realm of lawmaking and public policy. Lawmakers do not make policy based merely on public opinion polls (Kingdon 1984; Stone 1989). For example, Somers and Block (2005) have documented that, at multiple points in history, poverty policy has reflected the influence of one particular idea, which they call the perversity thesis—the belief that government aid to the poor actually increases poverty by creating dependence. Most recently invoked by Murray (1984) in *Losing Ground* and institutionalized in the welfare reforms of the late 1990s, the perversity thesis was also central to Malthusian reforms to the English Poor Laws in the 1830s (see also Bullock 2008). These ideas differ substantially from country to country, and they constitute an important part of the universe of alternatives that policy elites envision; they determine the parameters under which policy debates occur and policy decisions are made (Steenland 2006; O’Connor 2001).

A third policy-related reason to study culture is that, for better or worse, culture is *already* part of the policy discourse on work, marriage, crime, welfare, housing, fatherhood, and a host of other conditions related to poverty. It is part of

the debate on both sides of the political spectrum, not merely on the right. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama argued that part of the problem with young children is that too many fathers had failed to take responsibility for their children, leaving mothers and children to fend for themselves. Then-candidate Obama gave little ground to those who countered that poverty undermined fatherhood—he was firm in his belief that fathers needed to change their (cultural) attitudes about parenting. (In fact, some critics believed he was unfairly targeting African Americans, since he often made those arguments when speaking to black churches.) Regardless of a scholar's position on this or other issues in which the public discusses culture, refusing to study, think about, and comment on culture's relationship to poverty will not make the debates disappear.

Scholars of poverty and inequality *also* invoke culture in public debates—selectively. Orlando Patterson (2000) has noted that scholars of inequality, who tend to lie on the left of the political spectrum on policy matters, are often unwilling to turn to cultural factors when explaining many aspects of poverty or social inequality. However, they eagerly turned to cultural explanations during the recent public controversy over racial differences in IQ. After Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argued that racial differences in IQ test scores are, in part, genetically determined, researchers responded with a slew of arguments, many of which invoked cultural factors explicitly: for example, that IQ tests are often culturally biased and that black and white children may operate in cultural environments that encourage different styles of learning. Invoking cultural explanations selectively only undermines the ability of social science research to inform policy discussion.

### *Moving forward*

Some will complain that making a case for the study of culture in the context of poverty advances a conservative agenda that seeks to blame the victims for their problems. We hope we have made clear why we strongly disagree. None of the three editors of this volume happens to fall on the right of the political spectrum, but our political orientation is beside the point. Whether, when, and how cultural tools and cultural constraints matter is ultimately an empirical, not a political question. It is also important to ask the right question, and some perspectives tended to “blame the victim,” because they lacked sufficient evidence or asked the wrong questions. We believe that invocations of culture would be more compelling if they were informed by the much more sophisticated culture literature that has developed over the past three or so decades.

## What Is Culture?

Readers will note that we have not defined “culture,” at least not explicitly. We have taken this approach because the literature has produced multiple definitions, and consensus is unlikely to emerge soon.<sup>4</sup> Given this state of affairs, the

best approach is a pragmatic one. Today, many cultural sociologists have examined empirical conditions using specific and (often) well-defined concepts, such as frames or narratives, that in one way or another are recognizable as “cultural.” While the umbrella term “culture” might serve as useful shorthand to point to a constellation of issues to which poverty scholars should pay greater attention, it ultimately masks more than it reveals, at least when the purpose is to understand a specific problem, such as why poorer students spend fewer hours doing homework or why low-income women more often bear children outside of marriage. In what follows, we outline seven different but sometimes overlapping perspectives, based on seven different concepts—values, frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions—illustrating how a greater sensitivity to cultural conditions can enrich our understanding of poverty.<sup>5</sup> We believe that using these narrower and distinct analytical devices is far more useful than using the concept of “culture,” which is generally used in too vague a fashion.

### *Values*

The Parsonian conception of culture as values may be the most commonly known among poverty researchers. Values specify the *ends* toward which behavior is directed (as opposed to the means to achieve them, or the lens through which to interpret action). The core propositions relevant to our discussion—that values are robust predictors of behavior and that the poor exhibit values substantially different from those of the middle class—have received little support in the literature. In fact, there is considerable evidence of the widespread adoption of mainstream values among the poor (e.g., Young 2004; Newman 1999; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Dohan 2003; Hayes 2003; Carter 2005; Waller 2002; Duneier 1992).

Some scholars have proposed alternative models based on values. Probably the most prominent is Rodman’s (1963) “lower-class value stretch.” Rodman argues that the poor exhibit not different values but a wider set and also less commitment to them. Testing the theory, Della Fave (1974) found little support (see also Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). However, several scholars have adopted the notion of greater heterogeneity among the poor, based on different conceptions of culture (Hannerz 1969; Anderson 1999). Vaisey, in the present volume, makes a case for the importance of values in educational attainment.

### *Frames*

The basic premise behind the idea of a frame is that how people act depends on how they cognitively perceive themselves, the world, or their surroundings (see Goffman 1974). A frame is often thought of as a lens through which we observe and interpret social life. Frames highlight certain aspects of social life and hide or block others. Frames are ways of understanding “how the world works” (Young 2004). The concept of frame is based on the premise that different

individuals perceive the same events differently based on their prior experiences and understandings. They encode expectations about consequences of behavior and the relationships between various aspects of our social worlds. A frame structures how we interpret events and therefore how we react to them. Frames as a concept have roots in the work of Shutz (1962), Berger and Luckman (1966), and Goffman (1963), **FAQ: 1** among others.

By understanding the frames that different individuals or groups bring to social interactions and decision making, we can begin to understand variation in their interpretations and understandings. For example, Small (2002, 2004) analyzed local community participation in a Latino public housing project in Boston. The housing project had been built after political mobilization by community residents decades earlier. Small found that the frames through which residents viewed the neighborhood, rather than the degree to which individuals valued community participation, affected participation. Those who framed participation through the lens of the community's history of political mobilization were more likely to participate, while those who framed the community as just another public housing project did not participate. Furthermore, residents who had formerly been uninvolved only became active participants after first reframing their understanding of the neighborhood. Harding (2007, 2010) applied the concept of frame to decision making regarding romantic relationships and teenage pregnancy among adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Frames regarding teenage pregnancy define the social and economic consequences of early childbearing. Drawing on both nationally representative survey data and qualitative interview data from three neighborhoods in Boston, he documented the wide array of competing and conflicting teenage pregnancy frames in disadvantaged neighborhoods. These include both conventional or mainstream frames that highlight the potential for a teenage pregnancy to derail schooling and career and the alternative frames that highlight the adult social status and requirement for responsibility that comes with childbearing.

These examples illustrate two contributions to poverty research that were made possible by focusing on frames. First, while the subculture of poverty perspective expects a uniform set of responses to poverty, both Small and Harding make clear that heterogeneity is common and important. Poor neighborhoods are culturally heterogeneous, and so they also contain a heterogeneous array of behaviors and outcomes. Both Small and Harding reject the notion that there is a single, cohesive ghetto culture shared by residents of high-poverty neighborhoods. Instead, both find considerable variation in framing in these contexts. Second, frames allow for a different conceptualization of the link between culture and behavior. Rather than a tight cause-and-effect relationship between culture and behavior, conceptualizing culture as frames makes possible what Small (2002, 2004) calls a "constraint-and-possibility" relationship. Rather than causing behavior, frames make it possible or likely. Thus, how one thinks about procreation is likely to be influenced by other frames: how one conceives opportunities in the realm of work or thinks about salvation, for example. Frames define horizons of possibilities, individual life projects, or what is thinkable.

### *Repertoires*

The idea of repertoires of action is based on two premises: first, that people have a list or repertoire of strategies and actions in their minds (how to apply to college, how to fire a gun, how to wear a condom); second, that people are unlikely to engage in an action unless the strategy to perpetrate it is part of their repertoire. Hannerz (1969) described a repertoire as a set of “modes of action” and meanings. Each individual has a repertoire of these cultural tools and calls on them when action is required. Hannerz argued that the residents of the Washington, D.C., ghetto neighborhood that he studied had access to both mainstream and “ghetto-specific” cultural elements. The metaphor of a “toolkit” has been used by Swidler (1986) to explain how the repertoire works. A repertoire is a cache of ideas from which to draw rather than a unified system of values or norms (Swidler 1986). Swidler argued that the poor do not possess different values from the rest of society but rather have access to a different repertoire from which to construct their strategies of action. This approach was recently used by Van Hook and Bean (2009) to explain the welfare behaviors of Mexican immigrants. These authors demonstrated the importance of prowork repertoires, as opposed to welfare-dependence repertoires, for this population.

Repertoires may vary not only in the content of their elements but in the number and scope of their elements. Thus, some actors may have greater horizons of possibility because they have a wider array of repertoires of action. A wider array introduces the possibility of contradictions. Indeed, cognitive research suggests we are not only able to but frequently do live with such contradictions, employing different tools in different situations (DiMaggio 1997).

While the repertoire concept has considerable potential, it requires further theoretical and empirical development. In particular, Lamont (1992, chap. 7) argues that the repertoire perspective has failed to explain why some elements of the repertoire are chosen for constructing a course of action while others are not. Lamont suggests that opportunities and constraints influence these decisions (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). In addition, there is considerable slippage in terminology between strategies, repertoires, skills, habits, and styles in Swidler’s formulation, which undermines the application of the concept among poverty researchers.

### *Narratives*

The key premise behind the idea of narrative is that people interpret their lives as a set of narratives, or stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end and contain causally linked sequences of events. What distinguishes narrative from other concepts is that they contain causally linked sequences of events (Somers and Gibson 1994; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Polletta 2006). Individuals make sense of their lives through narratives about their personal experiences, and as Ewick and Silbey (2003) argue, narratives are exchanged and build upon one another, becoming “part of a stream of sociocultural knowledge about how structures work

to distribute power and disadvantage.” Somers and Gibson (1994) argue that a key aspect of narratives is that they link parts of the social world together (what they term “emplotment”), rather than simply categorize. For this reason, narratives provide accounts of how individuals view themselves in relation to others and are therefore central to how we construct social identities. They affect one’s actions because individuals choose actions that are consistent with their personal identities and personal narratives. They often captivate because they appeal to emotion and shared human experiences.

For poverty researchers, narratives are important because, as stories people tell about themselves and others, narratives reveal how people make sense of their experiences, constraints, and opportunities. For example, Young (2004) studied the mobility narratives of poor, young, black men living in a housing project on the West Side of Chicago and uncovered a surprising twist on the idea of social isolation (Wilson 1987, 1996). The young men who were most isolated from whites and had experienced the least involvement in the labor market were the most optimistic about equality of opportunity and the least likely to believe that racism affected their life chances. Only those who had considerable experience with whites cited prejudice as an important barrier to economic advancement.

### *Symbolic boundaries*

The concept of symbolic boundaries recognizes that schemes of social categorization are culturally constructed. Symbolic boundaries are the conceptual distinctions that we make between objects, people, and practices. They operate as a “system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act” (Lamont and Fournier 1992, 12). In short, symbolic boundaries constitute a system of classification that defines a hierarchy of groups and the similarities and differences between them. They typically imply and justify a hierarchy of moral worth across individuals and groups. Symbolic boundaries are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the more readily visible social boundaries of residential and occupational segregation, racial and class exclusion, and patterns of intermarriage (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Like narratives, symbolic boundaries are integral to social identities, but while narratives focus on links to others, symbolic boundaries illuminate the cultural basis of group divisions.

Lamont (2000) uses an analysis of symbolic boundaries of working-class men in France and the United States to investigate how they distinguish themselves from the poor. In the United States, working-class men draw strong moral distinctions between themselves and the poor, emphasizing hard work, responsibility, and self-sufficiency in their own self-definitions. In contrast, French working-class men do not draw such strong moral boundaries between themselves and the poor, instead viewing the poor as fellow workers temporarily displaced by the forces of capitalism (and thus worthy of support). These cross-national differences in symbolic boundaries are the product of different political and cultural traditions (e.g., individualism in the United States vs. Catholicism and socialism in France). For scholars of poverty policy, the important point is that cultural

categories of worth correspond to policy differences in redistributive and welfare policies across the two nations (see also Steensland 2006; Dobbin 1994). The act of constructing and sustaining symbolic boundaries is termed “boundary work.” Boundary work involves constructing collective identity by differentiating oneself from others by drawing on criteria such as common traits and experiences as well as a sense of shared belonging.

While studies of boundary work and symbolic boundaries among the larger public reveal the role of these processes in policy making and service provision for the poor, studies of boundary work among the poor themselves reveal the degree to which the poor define themselves as close to mainstream or middle-class society. For instance, Newman (1999) shows how fast-food workers in Harlem define themselves in contrast to the unemployed poor, developing a sense of identity as workers who are morally superior to the unemployed. Anderson (1999) documents the divisions between “decent” and “street” families in a Philadelphia ghetto. “Decent” families define themselves in contrast to “street” families on the basis of their employment in the formal labor market (vs. the underground economy); discipline and self-control of their children; and avoidance of crime, violence, drug use, and other deviant behavior.

### *Cultural capital*

The term “cultural capital” has been used in many ways, sometimes to mean knowledge or information acquired through social experience and sometimes—in its more original formulation—as styles or tastes associated with upper-class membership. Such styles and tastes are often unconsciously expressed and observed. Here we use Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) definition: “Institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals.” The concept of cultural capital contributes to our understanding of poverty and inequality by helping to explain how middle- and upper-class parents are able to pass on advantages to their children by familiarizing them with habits and behavioral styles valued by the educational system. Although the initial focus of U.S. research on cultural capital focused on familiarity with high culture (e.g., DiMaggio 1982), more recent work has examined a wider range of high-status signals. One interesting finding is that shared dislikes may be as important a cultural signal as shared likes (Bryson 1996).

The original cultural capital conceptualization developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) holds that the school system uses middle-class standards to evaluate children, disadvantaging those from working-class and poor families who do not have the opportunity to learn these behaviors and styles at home. Moreover, poor and working-class children may come to evaluate themselves and their origins according to the standards of middle-class culture, experiencing “symbolic violence” that attacks their self-worth and self-esteem.

A key recent finding in research on cultural capital and poverty is that different cultural environments privilege different tastes, habits, and styles. Carter (2005) develops the concept of “nondominant cultural capital,” or musical tastes,

clothing styles, and speech patterns that signal “cultural authenticity” in poor, minority communities. Nondominant cultural capital signals group membership among peers, as adolescents who do not exhibit facility with these cultural signals are portrayed as “acting white.” Carter’s findings highlight the mismatch between the cultural signals favored by middle-class institutions and those necessary for inclusion, identity, and social support in poor urban communities.

Lareau (2003) describes the processes by which middle-class parents pass on cultural capital advantages to their children. Middle-class parents practice what Lareau terms “concerted cultivation” by providing their children with many structured activities that teach them to function in institutional settings and by talking to their children in ways that engage them rather than control them. In contrast, poor and working-class parents practice “natural growth,” allowing for much unstructured free time socializing with family and community members and teaching children to be deferential and quiet. Children from these families learn self-reliance and social skills, but middle-class children learn cultural skills that are more valued by the educational system and in the labor market.

### *Institutions*

Among the seven concepts discussed, “institutions” may be the most widely employed in sociology (see Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Unfortunately, there is a substantial range of definitions, some of which strongly resemble several of the concepts of culture discussed above. For this reason, we do not argue that institution conceptions of culture can easily be pitted against others. However, there is often a difference in unit of analysis. For other conceptions, culture is typically located in individuals or in groups or in interpersonal relations; by contrast, institutions are typically located either in organizations or in society at large. In a review of old and new institutional theories, Scott (1995) identifies three different conceptions of institutions: as formal rules of behavior that are codified as laws or regulations, as norms of appropriate behavior that are enforced through informal sanctions, and as taken-for-granted understandings that simply structure or frame (as in the conception above) how actors perceive their circumstances.

Two examples illustrate. Small (2009) focuses on organizations and the first two conceptions of institutions (rules and norms), Steensland (2006) on society at large and the third conception (taken-for-granted understandings). Studying the networks that mothers in New York City formed in child care centers, Small (2009) asked why some mothers made many connections to other mothers while others made few. He finds that part of the answer lies in the institutional rules through which different centers regulated parents’ behavior, such as the rules for drop-off and pickup; the number of field trips the center held each year; and the organization of formal parents’ associations, which provided varying opportunities to encounter others. Steensland (2006) asked what accounted for the rise and fall of guaranteed income policy proposals in the 1960s and 1970s. He finds that (among other things) the taken-for-granted distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” was institutionalized in existing programs to such an extent

that it reinforced the perceived boundaries among categories of the poor, making proposals that did not accord with those boundaries difficult to institute.

## The Articles in This Volume

In selecting authors and topics for this special issue, the three editors aimed to convey a composite and multileveled picture of the ways in which meaning-making factors into the production and reproduction of poverty, so as to demonstrate the heuristic value of some of the analytical tools described above. We also aimed to consider poverty in the United States and abroad, as well as at the elite, policy-making level and in the daily lives of low-income people themselves. While the contributions represent broader genres of analysis, they are all suggestive of new trends in poverty research.

The first set of articles concerns poverty as experienced from below, often revealing aspects of meaning-making that have been ignored by policy makers. Sandra Smith examines how Latino and African American blue-collar workers' decisions about referring acquaintances for jobs depend on their perception of the acquaintances' moral character. Alford Young analyzes how upwardly mobile poor men understand the constraints on their social mobility by investigating the frames they use to define "the good job." Drawing on survey data, Stephen Vaisey demonstrates the importance of educational ideals for understanding the educational outcomes of poor youth. Maureen Waller considers how low-income non-custodial fathers understand and make sense of paternity, paternal duties, and their ability to meet their obligations. And Nathan Fosse studies how low-income black men think about procreation and the development of stable relationships.

The second set of articles concerns the policy realm. Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal examine how an innovative policy affected the poor's attempt to influence the distribution of resources in India, while Joshua Guetzkow explores how policy makers understand the cultural characteristics of the poor. The volume concludes with an article by William J. Wilson that offers a broader theoretical reflection on the relationship between the cultural and structural causes of poverty and considers the roles of each in social policy.

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In "A Test of Sincerity: How Black and Latino Service Workers Make Decisions about Making Referrals," Smith analyzes interviews with Latino and black blue-collar workers to examine how they determine whether to help coethnics in the search for employment. She finds that their decision is grounded in a careful assessment of whether the individual seeking help presents the proper work orientation and will tarnish or enhance one's reputation in the workplace. Smith argues that because of larger ethno-racial differences in how unemployment is interpreted, Latinos are more likely to help their coethnics find jobs than African Americans. These findings suggest that theories of social capital mobilization

must take into consideration individuals' access to and deployment of cultural resources to fully understand the circumstances under which actors are mobilized for instrumental and expressive action.

In "New Life for an Old Concept: Frame Analysis and the Reinvigoration of Studies in Culture and Poverty" Young examines what poor and working-class African American men believe a "good job" to be. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young men in Detroit, he examines how his subjects understand the characteristics of a good job. He finds that men of different education levels construct substantially different visions of a good life and frame a good or ideal job in remarkably different ways. Young suggests that these conceptions may help explain their attitudes about the job market and work opportunities.

Vaisey challenges the contemporary shift to conceptions of culture that focus on means over ends. In "What People Want: Rethinking Poverty, Culture, and Educational Attainment," he argues that poverty scholars have been too quick to dismiss the role of values in explaining the educational outcomes of the poor, throwing the proverbial "baby out with the bath water" when critiquing "culture of poverty" models. Drawing on a nationally representative longitudinal survey of adolescents and young adults, he shows that poor and nonpoor youth have different educational aspirations and that these aspirations help account for differences in educational outcomes by family background. Vaisey proposes that scholars working at the nexus of culture and poverty need to integrate values and preferences into theoretical formulations based on repertoires, frames, and schemas, combining "unconscious evaluative worldviews" with "the more strategic use of culture."

Over the past three decades, significant legislation has been passed to strengthen ties between disadvantaged fathers and their families. Although policy makers have become increasingly interested in addressing cultural factors that may shape men's decisions to provide economic support for their children, to assume important parenting responsibilities, and to maintain relationships with their child's mother, policy studies have primarily focused on identifying the economic determinants of paternal involvement in poor communities. As a result, policy makers have often turned to anecdotal rather than empirical evidence to understand why and how particular patterns of paternal involvement unfold. In "Viewing Low-Income Fathers' Ties to Families through a Cultural Lens," Waller draws on in-depth interviews with disadvantaged men and women in New Jersey and California to illustrate how a systematic investigation into the meaning of low-income fathers' ties to families may elucidate, or provide alternative explanations for, results from previous studies. In particular, it shows how analyzing paternal involvement through a cultural lens reveals new mechanisms and practices associated with men's involvement. This analysis informs recent policy initiatives around fatherhood by reducing the risk that they will be misdirected or have unintended consequences for poor families.

In "The Repertoire of Infidelity among Low-Income Men," Fosse, based on in-depth interviews, examines how low-income men understand romantic relationships. He finds a great deal of variation in sexual behavior, partly as a result

of differences in their sense of self and their orientations toward the future. The differences are tied to cultural logics about three issues: doubt, duty, and destiny. For example, duty can be understood as duty to friends or duty to family, with different implications for infidelity. His analysis illustrates, more generally, the heterogeneity of inner-city culture and the agency of inner-city men in constructing, manipulating, and applying cultural logics to everyday life.

In “Dignity through Discourse,” Rao and Sanyal explicitly abandon a view of culture as something contained in the heads of individuals in favor of a view of culture as something fundamentally relational, observable primarily through interaction and communication. They examine the case of the Indian “*gram sabhas*,” public deliberative forums instituted by law in all 2 million Indian villages to increase the voice of the poor in the political process. Rao and Sanyal find that poverty shapes the discursive style characteristic of the *gram sabhas*, which reflects less an orientation toward consensus than a constant, identity-based, competition for a piece of the pie. In addition, the authors find that for people to successfully negotiate these forums they must possess cultural skill, which makes clear why cultural factors can be important in the ability of the poor to secure valuable resources to alleviate or escape poverty. The case of the *gram sabhas* illustrates the cultural challenges to egalitarian political reform in the service of poverty alleviation.

In “Beyond Deservingness,” Guetzkow turns a cultural lens on elite decision makers, examining the congressional discourse on poverty in two time periods, 1961 to 1967 and 1981 to 1996. He argues that antipoverty initiatives can be understood as “policy tools” aimed at changing the behavior of the poor. Drawing on transcripts from congressional hearings, Guetzkow finds that during the 1960s, poverty was understood to be a product of “community breakdown” due to blocked opportunities, with the poor becoming hopeless and unmotivated as a result; during the 1980s and 1990s, poverty was understood to be a product of welfare benefits that fostered laziness and teenage pregnancy, with the poor viewed as rational actors whose lack of family values led to their dependency. His analysis traces these frames to specific policy developments in each era, demonstrating the importance of framing by political elites for social policy development.

Wilson, who has long been known as an economic structuralist, contributes an article at the intersection of scholarly and policy interests. He argues that some of the mechanisms by which neighborhood poverty affects life chances are cultural in nature. For example, long-term exposure to high-poverty neighborhoods can result in exposure to linguistic patterns that undermine academic performance. Furthermore, policies that take cultural conditions into account are more likely to be successful. As evidence, he cites the successes of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a program that has attempted to address the disadvantages associated with concentrated poverty by addressing not only structural but also cultural issues, such as the parenting practices of new mothers and fathers.

Finally, the volume concludes with commentaries on culture and poverty from two lawmakers, Representative Lynn Woolsey and Representative Raúl Grijalva.

Representative Woolsey emphasizes the importance of lawmakers' recognizing cultural changes when developing social policy in general and poverty policy in particular. She discusses changes in norms and values surrounding the American family, the ways that federal law has and has not kept up with these changes, and the implications for the poor. Representative Grijalva considers some of the cultural consequences of poverty, both for the poor themselves and for the frameworks through which policy makers understand poverty. He concludes that the complexity and enormity of poverty's effects on individuals, families, and communities require comprehensive investments to ensure economic security and stability, quality education, and access to health care.

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In bringing together these articles, we hope to foster a dynamic and productive dialogue among poverty scholars, not only within sociology but across the social sciences as a whole. We believe that a more serious interdisciplinary engagement is essential if researchers are to break free from the predictable analytical pathways toward which existing literatures lead us. Ultimately, our aim is to work toward identifying new approaches and new questions that may result in a more exhaustive, precise, and complex grasp of the processes and mechanisms that lead to the reproduction of poverty. Again, we do not deny the importance of macrostructural conditions, such as the concentration of wealth and income, the spatial segregation across classes and racial groups, or the persistent international migration of labor and capital. Instead, we argue that since human action is both constrained and enabled by the meaning people give to their actions, these dynamics should become central to our understanding of the production and reproduction of poverty and social inequality.

## Notes

1. Part of the problem is that, in sociology, the term "structure" has been defined in several different ways: the economic constraints an individual faces (as in much of the poverty literature), the mode of production characterizing a society (as in the neo-Marxist literature), or the system of nodes and ties that characterize a set of relations (as in the network literature), among others. When applying the structure-culture distinction in its simplest and most straightforward form, scholars argue that the behavior of the poor results not from their values (culture) but from their lack of financial resources (structure), whether this deprivation is individual (as in the case of material hardship) or collective (as in the case of underfunded schools or organizationally isolated neighborhoods). For example, Steinberg (1981) made an argument of this type when rejecting the idea that ethnic differences in behavior resulted from cultural differences among ethnic groups. For reasons we discuss throughout this article, we are inclined to agree that ideas such as "ethnic cultures" or "ghetto culture" lack much explanatory power. However, as we discuss below, the substantial variation in responses to similar financial constraints (whether individual or collective constraints) makes clear that such material constraints cannot explain everything. At issue is uncovering what kind of alternative explanations can be uncovered, including explanations regarding the constraints in the cultural repertoires that individuals have access to. We add that in cultural sociology, some scholars distinguish *social* structure (defined in one of the aforementioned ways) from *cultural* structure, defined as shared and taken-for-granted meaning.

2. See “Cultural Sociology and Its Diversity,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 619 (September 2008), especially the articles by Skrentny (2008) and Charles (2008); and “The Moynihan Report Revisited: Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (January 2009), especially the article by Wilson (2009b).

3. Along these lines, drawing on the tools of cultural sociologist, Ann Swidler (2009) has been studying institutional fit between policies and their targeted populations in the case of AIDS prevention in several African societies.

4. Some take culture to mean an actor’s values; others, the cognitive categories through which the actor perceives (rather than evaluates) the world. Some believe it resides in the minds of individuals; others, that it is necessarily a group, rather than an individual trait. Fifty years ago, sociologists might have quietly relied on the dominance of Talcott Parsons and resorted to his conception as the norms and values common to a society and required for its maintenance and reproduction. Anthropologists might have taken comfort in a more or less agreed upon, if somewhat ambiguous, conception of culture, derived from Edward Tylor (1871): “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” But even then the agreement was more imagined than real. In their *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) spent nearly four hundred pages describing, distilling, and assessing the many definitions of culture that anthropology had employed to date, only to leave the reader overwhelmed by the sheer number of issues (historicity, norms, psychology, language, etc.) that cultural concepts had attempted to capture. The fifty years since have produced entire new vocabularies (frames, habitus, doxa, structuration, etc.) that would make an updated version of that volume even more overwhelming.

5. A more detailed review can be found in Lamont and Small (2008).

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