

How Urban Ethnography Counters Myths about the Poor

Judith Goode, 2002

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MYTHS which justify an unequal social order by blaming those at the bottom for their own lowly positions have been widespread throughout human history. Blaming the persistence of poverty in capitalist societies on the individual moral flaws and the deviant cultures of poor people is a belief which has developed along with industrial capitalism itself (H. Lewis 1971; Katz 1989). These ideas dehumanize poor people and make them into the “Other”: people who are socially different, isolated from normal citizens and threatening to society through crime, violence, and other moral lapses.

Urban ethnography has been involved in both the generation and critique of myths about the behavior of the poor. In this essay I will explore the contributions of such ethnography toward humanizing poor people in the face of sensationalized accounts of pathological personalities and dysfunctional family structures.

Ethnography involves long-term, close-up, personal observation and listening to people in the context of their everyday lives. Urban ethnography leads to new understandings of urban poverty in two ways. First, poor people are rehumanized as competent and moral social actors. Second, such descriptions of lived experience, especially when they are related to the context of larger political and economic constraints, helps to make sense out of seemingly irrational behaviors. This new understanding reveals the subtle ways in which public and private institutions such as government agencies or housing and labor markets sometimes exacerbate poverty and limit the possibility of choice for poor people. ...

The belief that poor people are culturally removed from the mainstream found in allusions to a “culture of poverty” or “underclass culture” is itself an aspect of the culture or ideology of industrial capitalism. Ideas such as these justify the existing social order with its significant inequality in resources. These justifications “blame the victim” (Ryan 1983). They encourage policies that focus on reforming flawed individuals rather than building on the ingenuity they demonstrate in strategies for survival. Such ideas also imply that since poverty is an intractable problem produced by inadequate individuals, there is nothing problematic about the political-

economic structure itself. The following discussion will look at how the insights provided by ethnography refutes several concepts which try to scientifically legitimize the moral and cultural explanations of the persistence of poverty.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, significant attention was paid to how the nature of industrial capitalism itself – with its boom-and-bust cycles and continuously transforming structures – created poverty. As firms responded to the worldwide depression with massive layoffs, the shared vulnerability of so many produced a shift from blaming the poor to [an] emphasis on the destructive structural uncertainties of the economy and generated public acceptance of government's responsibility for public welfare through New Deal social programs. At the same time, the right of labor to bargain collectively was legally enabled and, for a brief time, support for a living family wage became standard.

Nonetheless, in the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War era, we have seen the growth of explanations of poverty which ignore the political-economic structure and lay blame on pathological individual behavior and the culture of the poor. Social scientists have legitimized these ideas as “scientific” in three formulations: the “culture of poverty” of Oscar Lewis, the notion of “welfare dependency” promulgated by Murray (1984), Gilder (1981) and Mead (1992), and the model of an “isolated underclass” by William Julius Wilson (1987). These ideas have been widely disseminated to middle-class Americans through books and popular journals.

Oscar Lewis recognized that the “culture of poverty” was a response to both economic structures and concentrated social stigma for those at the bottom in capitalist societies. He states,

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. (1966)

While Lewis provided a mass of information about the ingenuity of poor people's strategies in coping with a lack of jobs and income, their social lives are described in terms of pathologies which keep them in poverty: broken families, a lack of male presence, social isolation, flawed personalities, weak egos, and passivity. They are described as lacking future-time orientation and political awareness. ...

Lewis's ideas fitted well with American ideas of the time. In the post-war United States, “policy science” was emerging within social science. There was considerable optimism about the way that social problems could be solved through applying social-scientific knowledge. Poverty was thus seen as a limited problem, easily eliminated in our affluent society. Lewis's ideas were used in War on Poverty programs in the 1960s to uplift the “leftover” poor. This optimism about the ease with which poverty could be eradicated ignored the extremely uneven economic development in different regions in this country resulting from different levels of investment. For example, the South until the advent of cheap air conditioning, and Appalachia were sites of underdevelopment. Some sectors of the economy were more advantaged than others depending on changes in technology and world market dynamics. Where you lived and the nature of the local industries had more to do with your success than your character. Lewis also ignored the persistence of institutional racism in the labor market that excluded people of color from family-wage jobs. Furthermore, he did not anticipate the economic crisis that would develop from expanding economic globalization in the 1970s.

Ethnographic Insights about Coping Strategies

Before we look ahead, let us examine some of the insights about living in poverty generated by both Lewis and other urban anthropologists. Lewis's own ethnographic data often contradicted his negative formula for the culture of poverty (Valentine 1968; Eames and Goode 1973). In fact, we are indebted to Lewis for demonstrating many of the ingenious material coping practices among the Mexican and Puerto Rican poor. Other ethnographic work has built on Lewis's findings that many seemingly irrational economic and social behaviors are really survival skills that make perfect sense for the poor, who work on the margins of the labor market in high-turnover, low-wage jobs.

Rather than illustrating laziness and work avoidance, ethnographers have discovered that making ends meet involves hard work and management skills. Household strategies develop in which adults and children all combine irregular formal low-wage jobs, informal work, and income from government programs. Bettylou Valentine (1978), Edin and Lein (1997), and Jagna Sharff (1998) provide data from poor communities and households which demonstrate the complex orchestration of work across the household by all members of a family.

Sharff (1987) describes the opportunity structure of one low-income neighborhood through the work experience of 133 families over a period of one year. In one case, a menial but steady job in the formal economy required a five-hour daily commute, but was short-lived because the employer did not tolerate lateness or absence. Informal work did not only include drug dealing but also working as a street mechanic – fixing cars on sidewalks or in empty lots – or in the home-based production and sale of food and items for celebrations. Looking at household budgets, Sharff saw that many households actually depended on the work of their children in government funded summer jobs programs to tide them over the year.

Liebow (1967) and Valentine (1978) illustrate the ways in which the peripheral labor market limited people's choices and the cultural practices that emerged in response. Liebow (1967) and Bourgois (2002) show why some kinds of work, especially in the high-risk, high-turnover, low-paying, dead-end segment of the labor market, are often rationally rejected. These jobs are all physically difficult, dangerous, and dirty. Liebow demonstrates that low-end construction labor is so physically demanding that only those in extraordinary shape with job continuity to maintain new musculature can last more than a short time. Bourgois examines how the demeaning experiences of young drug dealers who sought office work in the mainstream economy encouraged them to return to high-risk, violent work as the only way to achieve what they saw as mainstream success.

Informal credit pools that collect regular small contributions and distribute them through rotation or auction have developed throughout the world to help the urban poor cope with emergencies. Lewis demonstrates that informal savings can be achieved by storing wealth in expensive goods like furniture or appliances that can then be pawned. Sharff (1998) provides an example of how long-term layaway payments often work as a form of goal-oriented disciplined saving, leading to the acquisition of major desired commodities in spite of small incomes. Thus the kind of purchases viewed by the middle class as irrational and leading to undeserved ... consumption is actually a form of savings.

Ethnographers have provided many insights about alternative (informal or underground) forms of production and consumption which poor people use. For example, self-built, makeshift housing; second-hand markets for clothing; home-based production of cooked food and other commodities; and unlicensed transportation systems emerge and flourish in poor communities (Uzzell 1975). While viewed as illegal and substandard by bureaucrats and the middle class,

these activities provide both sources of income and cheap commodities for the poor.

Unfortunately they also make it possible for the substandard wage system to persist without massive social protest, thereby subsidizing a system of inequality with a wide gap between the rich and poor. ... The very complexity of these cultural adaptations rebuts the culture of poverty notion that the poor cannot plan for the future.

Family Structure and Sharing Networks

Central to the survival of the poor are the informal sharing networks for mutual aid which develop between households in the face of deteriorating living conditions. These networks are based on kinship or fictive kinship, in which friends act like kin. In this way, one family that currently has housing or income in a social network can help out the struggling households to which it is linked. ... [B]y helping out their unemployed kin or friends, they insured that they would be supported when they lost their jobs. ...

Ethnographic data which looks at multihousehold mutual aid networks from the perspective of poor women turns all the underclass stereotypes about the dysfunction of female-headed households upside down. In depicting the underclass, a correlation between poverty and female-headed households is used to imply that such households are pathological and responsible for producing the moral pathologies of laziness, dependency, and hypersexuality. They are thus seen as the mechanism that perpetuates poverty. Ethnographic studies reveal these behaviors to be major coping structures to ameliorate the instability and uncertainty of living in poverty.

The Underclass Debate

The idea of an “underclass” culture emerged in the 1980s in a period that witnessed new global economic integration and competition, which in turn led to deindustrialization as manufacturing was moved to cheaper labor markets often outside the United States while the U.S. economy was restructured as a service economy. The desire for a flexible labor force meant that jobs were less secure ... and the obligation to provide a family wage and job security was no longer acknowledged. Companies increasingly relied on contingent labor, that is, part time or temporary work that offered few benefits. Unions, which had protected the living wage, were weakened. These trends were exacerbated as both people (predominantly middle-class whites) and new jobs

moved to the post-war suburbs, leaving poor and minority populations in declining urban neighborhoods. ...

During the Reagan years in the 1980s, cultural explanations of poverty were rampant as the War on Poverty was replaced by a war against the poor (Gans 1992). A new argument asserted that antipoverty programs themselves had created dependency and reinforced an underclass mentality. Writers like Gilder (1981), Murray (1984), and Mead (1992) argued that it was dependency on the state rather than poverty that destroyed people's lives. In his book *Losing Ground* (1984), Murray ignored the recent economic restructuring and argued that War on Poverty programs had destroyed the ethic of family and work among the poor. Such programs, he said, created "welfare dependency" which threatened the family by encouraging promiscuity and out-of-wedlock births as a way to increase cash assistance. ...

This emphasis on the threat to family values especially resonated with the public at a time when Americans across classes were being affected by women's new roles as workers and high rates of divorce. The growing awareness that we were experiencing a change to alternative forms of viable family structures led to a fear of "moral decline" brought on by the "contagion" of poor people's immorality. Naples (1997) analyzed the congressional debates leading up to the rollback on welfare and characterized them as focusing almost entirely on family values and morality. So pervasive was this belief that even when massive research showed that women did not have children to add a few dollars to their welfare benefits, one congressman stated,

Statistical evidence does not prove those suppositions [that welfare benefits are an incentive to bear children]; and yet even the most casual observer of public assistance programs understands there is indeed some relationship between the availability of welfare and the inclination of many young women to bear fatherless children. (Quoted in Watts and Astone 1997:415)

In other words, in spite of tangible evidence, everyone just "knows" that a causal relationship exists. This preoccupation with morality displaces any concern about growing economic inequality in the United States.

Ethnography and the Contradictions of Welfare

Ethnographic studies show that welfare programs can indeed be criticized for their effects on the poor, but not in the ways that dependency theorists assert. ... These studies demonstrate over and over that poor people want to work, and that the average length of time on welfare is short. Moreover, as Kingfisher (1996) demonstrates through her ethnographic analysis of welfare workers and clients, the bureaucratic nature of welfare applications and periodic face-to-face evaluation meetings with social workers mean that being on welfare is hard and demeaning work. It is also rife with contradictory rules arbitrarily applied. Furthermore, the most costly kinds of fraud or dishonesty in the system come from welfare landlords, health professionals, and other providers (Axinn and Stern 1988). For example, a whole sector of welfare housing has developed in response to welfare rent payments. Landlords are able to charge more for substandard housing. Because most of the housing market rejects welfare families, they are a captive population for welfare housing (Susser and Kreniske 1987).

The welfare dependency theorists ignored the fact that welfare benefits themselves were inadequate to support a family at the poverty line. Since the initial War on Poverty programs, reduction in benefits and/or failure to upgrade benefits in response to inflation have made it impossible for single mothers on welfare to make ends meet. The ethnographic work of Susser and Kreniske (1987) and Edin and Lein (1997) demonstrates how the practices of the welfare bureaucracy force subversion by those who must depend on it. People are increasingly forced to depend on banned work in the underground economy, which leaves them vulnerable to both sanctions and an image as welfare cheats. When the only rational response of recipients in many situations is to hide information, they become vulnerable to charges of fraud. This opens them up to exploitation by such service providers as landlords, who can threaten to inform on them, sometimes using false information.

The Activist Poor

In both the popular stereotype of those in poverty and the “scientized” formulations of the “culture of poverty” and “underclass,” poor people are assumed to lack organization beyond the (broken) family (Lewis) or to be “isolated” in ghettos without competent political actors as role models. Both visions see the poor as politically incompetent, disengaged, and passive in regard to larger societal structures.

Here again, long-term ethnographic work contradicts this image. Poverty does not create crushing passivity but can produce active resistance and political activism. Lewis, whose ethnographic work largely took place through tape-recorded interviews of people away from their communities, was not in a position to observe much community organizing. He based his conclusions on a handful of households viewed as bounded entities. This was not a good vantage point for locating the significant informal and formal political organizing which so many other ethnographers have found in poor communities. ...

Piven and Cloward (1971, 1979) have written much about the ways in which poor people in the United States participated in both the welfare rights and civil rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and have continued their activism within the War on Poverty program called Community Action Program (CAP). For example, Naples (1991, 1998) has described how poor women employed through CAP retained their earlier activist ideas and practices developed around issues of child safety and education.

Moreover, Bookman and Morgen (1988) argue that a meaningful definition of politics should include those everyday practices undertaken to change power relations. Recent in-depth analyses of poor women's lives have demonstrated that such women engage in politics in response to their concerns for their children. ... They participate as community builders and political activists making demands for resources in an era when the government has withdrawn services from poor communities. Many had learned political organizing skills as participants in the earlier movements noted above. Poor white women, African American women, Latino women, and multiracial alliances of women and families have moved beyond the family to participate in a variety of collective social movements: seeking better schools (Goode 2001; Pardo 1998), preventing the removal of a local firehouse (Susser 1982), strengthening the role of activist community organizations (Naples 1998; Pardo 1998; Stack 1996; Goode 2001), and reinforcing tenant management in public housing (Hyatt 2001). ... Maskovsky (2000) analyzes the predicament of one group of poor, minority AIDS activists in Philadelphia. Each of these studies ... attempts to understand the conditions under which political activities have the potential for success as well as to identify the strategies and tactics which account for success or failure.

It is important not to overemphasize the success of poor people's coping strategies. Recent trends toward a greater gap between rich and poor occurring in global cities (Sassen 1992, Newsweek

1993) coupled with the crises of homelessness, the increased impact of drug use in cities, the withdrawal of cash assistance to the poor and the related prison expansion have only increased the misery of the poor and decreased their options for coping and the strength and capacity of their sharing networks (Goode and Maskovsky 2001).

Conclusions

Explaining poverty by blaming poor people's behavior has a long history in Western capitalism. During the expansion of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century-as slums became more visible in Europe and America-Social Darwinist ideas based on incipient scientific racism even argued that it was “natural” for the obviously inferior poor to be left alone so that the “survival of the fittest” could run its course. ...

One step removed from this “biological” argument is the assumption that the poor are flawed individuals who need to be reformed by letting experts repair their damaged psyches and values. These ideas underlie the concepts of “the culture of poverty,” “welfare dependency,” and “the underclass.” All of these ideas argue for a massive remaking, from the ground up, of individuals stereotyped as either violent and depraved, or passive, bewildered and lacking self-esteem. ... One irony is that in trying to rebuild self-esteem into “faulty” individuals, a great deal of paternalism and disrespect is manifested by individuals and bureaucratic organizations.

The ethnography of the urban poor enables us to see up close how people struggle to make the best choices under dreadful conditions. The poor create strategies to cope and find meaning in their lives. These strategies include ways to stretch and save income as well as to make ends meet by managing a household labor pool that works in a complex set of unstable formal jobs, underground activities, and the “work” of dealing with social service bureaucracies. ...

The depiction of the life experiences of the poor illuminate the ways in which many societal structures, especially the wage-labor market and many of the social service bureaucracies, unintentionally work to perpetrate structural violence against the poor. Instead of working to reform the poor, ethnographic work argues for reforming these structures and building on the personal and social strengths of poor people themselves.