Urban Life

Readings in the Anthropology of the City

Fifth Edition

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How Urban Ethnography Counters Myths about the Poor

Judith Goode

In this chapter, Judith Goode seeks to refute stereotypes of poor people as irrational human beings who must be retaught and regimented by governmental actions. She argues that the insights provided by urban ethnography have shown that poor people, given their limited choices, are just as rational in finding solutions to their problems as are people in other social strata. They are realistic about their own circumstances and are not any more self-destructive than are those who are affluent. Goode is critical of attempts to justify an unequal social order by blaming the poor for their circumstances while ignoring inequities in the political-economic structure. In particular, she criticizes Oscar Lewis's "Culture of Poverty" as legitimizing explanations of persistent poverty that lay the blame on pathological individual behavior and the culture of the poor.

Myths that justify an unequal social order by blaming those at the bottom for their own lowly position 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 that 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.[1]

Urban ethnography has been involved in both the generation and critique of myths about the behavior of the poor. In this chapter 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

Source: Written expressly for *Urban Life.*

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. Recently, in order to respond to the popular view that the poor represent a major threat of violence to society, some analysts have begun to refer instead to these institutional pressures themselves as a form of *structural violence* against the poor (Sharff 1998).

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 refute several concepts that 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 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.[2] 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 that 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.[3]

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. (see Lewis, this volume)

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 that 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 was mostly concerned with widespread poverty in the Third World, which he thought required revolutionary political mobilization to overcome. He was not specifically interested in poverty in the United States, which he saw as a minor "leftover" problem amenable to a "social work" solution that would work on individuals to change their flawed culture and behavior.

Lewis's ideas fitted well with American ideas of the time. In the postwar 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.[4] 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. Valentine (1978), Edin and Lein (1997), and Sharff (1998) provide data from poor communities and households that 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 included not only 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 (this volume) 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 spendthrift consumption is actually a form of savings.

Ethnographers have provided many insights about alternative (informal or underground) forms of production and consumption that 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. In a comparative analysis, Eames and Goode (1973) found these income-production and consumption practices as well as the sharing mechanisms discussed below to extend to the urban poor all over the world. 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 that 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. Peattie (1968) in Venezuela and Roberts (1973) in Guatemala both found that in the poor communities they studied, only a small fraction of the households had a steady income at a given time and that their steady jobs were short-lived. Nonetheless, by helping out their unemployed kin or friends, they insured that they would be supported when they lost their jobs.

In the 1970s, many anthropologists studied these sharing networks to rebut Lewis's view that the poor had no social relations outside the family. They were also concerned with debating the infamous Moynihan report, *The State of the Negro Family*, which, along with Lewis's ideas, had informed War on Poverty policy. The classic works of Stack (1974) about African Americans in a Midwest city, Lomnitz (1977) in a squatter settlement in Mexico City, and Safa (1974) in San Juan, Puerto Rico, revealed the cultural logic and practice of large extended family support networks. Carol Stack (1974) demonstrated that the multigenerational core networks of African American women in a midwestern urban community were adapted from preexisting forms developed earlier in the rural South and readapted to the precarious economic circumstances of deindustrializing northern cities. Eames and Goode (1973) surveyed similar women-centered networks among the poor in urban Africa and Asia. More recently, studies of how homeless families in the United States respond by "doubling up" or moving into the small apartments of kin or fictive kin provide still other examples of the strategic use of social ties (DeHavenon 1996).

When we look at households and their sharing networks, we see a preponderance of female-centered structures. Women head many households and develop and maintain network relationships. Even when people's tradi-

tional kinship systems were patrilineal, giving rights to children to the father's family, a move to the city and entry into the wage-labor market put the major burden for children on women for reasons discussed below.

In cross-cultural studies of the family, residential composition and child-care arrangements have long been seen as patterns that are very responsive to economic constraints. As Marvin Harris (1971:367) pointed out, when the job market for male labor is limited and unstable, and women have equal opportunities to earn income, the conjugal bond between men and women is weakened. The frequency of male unemployment and underemployment, coupled with the need to migrate long distances to look for work, makes the presence of husbands inconsistent and makes an unemployed male a drain on limited resources. Formal marriage is displaced by consensual unions that do not involve the costs of marriage and divorce and permit greater flexibility.

Consider the following facts for the case of African Americans in the United States. There is a long historical relationship between high rates of unemployment among black males resulting from labor market discrimination and consequently high labor force participation among black females, yielding more black women as primary wage earners and more black single motherhood (Mullings 1995). While this is the outcome of women not being able to count on consistent male economic assistance, it has also been exacerbated by biases against married couples in government programs (a problem discussed in more detail in a later section).

Yet, this by no means eliminates the presence of males from the household. First, fathers often retain a presence in the life of their children (Liebow 1967; Sharff 1998). In addition, a mother may rely on her own male relatives to help raise her children. Furthermore, the parents and siblings of the father often participate in the child's life even if the father is not around. In other words, even in the absence of formal marriage, a woman, by having a child, often extends her sharing network to include her nonformal "in-laws." Finally, new relationships with men may be developed to bring in extended support networks through the men's families. Sharff looks at why so many women continue to develop relationships with new men in the poor community that she studied ethnographically over more than a decade. She found that women who had no male kin to protect them in the increasingly dangerous neighborhood felt safer with males in the household and often found relationships with their new "in-laws" to be helpful as well.[5] Of course, social relationships are based on much more than mere calculated economic advantages. However, mating and reproduction decisions that look irresponsible from the outside often make good sense in the context of poverty.

Mullings (1995) shows that having children and making sacrifices for and investments in their future provide a major incentive for most of the black women whom she studied. Her ethnographic information rebuts the popular view that having children is a sign of immaturity or irresponsibility, or springs from the desire for more government support.

Ethnographic data that look 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 (downsizing) 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.[6]

In spite of the continued attacks on labor costs and the demand for flexible pools of labor, with few exceptions (for example Jencks and Peterson 1991; Katz 1993; Axinn and Stern 1988; Sassen 1992), discussions about the structural production of poverty played little role in antipoverty policy making at this time. Instead, cultural explanations were revived and strengthened (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). In fact, a massive political campaign for the withdrawal of funding from many programs in the War on Poverty occurred at the same time as wage rates declined and jobs became more insecure (Morgen and Weigt 2001).

At the same time, rising housing prices accompanied job instability to produce a rise in homelessness. In the 1980s, increased drug use and importation in the United States led to an increase in crime and violence that was felt predominantly in poor, increasingly minority neighborhoods where the retail drug distribution networks were located. Drug use itself was widespread in white suburbs. However, as drug distribution became the best paying, albeit most dangerous, underground job in the inner city, mandatory sentencing targeted minority youth from poor neighborhoods and led to unprecedented rates of incarceration (Buck 1992).

As the poor were increasingly represented in the media as black single mothers, they became stereotyped as hypersexualized, lazy, and immoral welfare cheats (Katz 1989), and were denied the virtues of motherhood accorded to middle-class women. Journalists often provided images of the

poor through sensationalized glimpses of exotic deviant "cultures": remorseless, violent teenagers; clever, entrepreneurial drug dealers; and welfare mothers as passive victims. This further reinforced stereotypes and social distance between the middle class and the poor.

In a book entitled *The Underclass* (1983), journalist Kenneth Auletta described women on welfare as incomprehensibly bewildered and passive. His narrow and shallow descriptions of these women came from brief glimpses and snippets of conversation in the context of welfare offices. He did not examine why their actions made sense within the context of their everyday lives—a context that offered extremely limited choices. He coined the term "underclass," and it became widely used to describe a dehumanized, incomprehensible population, either predatory or bewildered and incompetent and greatly removed from the mainstream.

Other discussions of the underclass relied heavily on statistical data rather than close-up, long-term ethnographies by anthropologists. If you connected the statistical correlations between poverty and measures of deviant behavior with the media's brief snapshots of incomprehensible behavior, a picture of a depraved, dysfunctional underclass developed. This was a new version of the persistent pathological culture of poverty, in which people were "infected" by "epidemics" of crime, violence, and sexual irresponsibility.

The complex, nuanced understandings of these families receded from view in the face of these depraved images. Ethnographic explanations of how living in poverty encouraged female-headed households; why women-centered sharing networks made sense; how women invested in their children's futures; and the managerial skills required to weave together sources of income from formal work, the underground economy, and public programs were once again invisible. Such ideas could not compete with the sensationalized and dehumanizing accounts that implied that nothing could or should be done about the growing inequality—short of fixing flawed individuals. In fact, the very flexible household structures and sharing networks that allowed poor people to survive now became viewed as the main cause of persistent poverty.

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.

In contrast, William Julius Wilson's notion of the underclass recognized the importance of recent structural economic transformations. He traced the persistence of poverty fundamentally to the loss of good jobs during the processes of deindustrialization and restructuring. Furthermore, he argued for the importance of job creation in social policy. However, his work—like that of Lewis, Murray, and Mead—left the causal link between behavioral pathology and poverty intact. In *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), Wilson viewed poverty as perpetuated by "cultural" factors produced by the isolation of the ghetto and the spatial concentration of what he saw as behavioral pathologies and cultural deficits: unwed teenage motherhood, absent male role models, reliance on the underground economy, crime, drugs, and violence. Thus, Wilson also did not seem to realize that many of these practices—when seen within the context of people's limited choices—made sense for survival. Most significantly, he seemed unaware that these adaptive practices had long been characteristic of the urban poor within industrial capitalism in all times and places.

Wilson further attributed these pathologies to the flight of middle-class African Americans from the ghetto after affirmative action. This flight, he believed, removed positive cultural role models from communities and led to an increase in social pathology. As Brett Williams (1992) and Katherine Newman (1992) have pointed out, Wilson's picture of pathology is not substantiated by the grounded ethnographic analyses of the lives of the poor.

For Wilson, the best solution to poverty was to provide work for men so they could marry the mothers of their children and live in stable nuclear families (Di Leonardo 1998). 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 by 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 theo-

rists assert. In recent years, ethnographic research has explored the way poor people navigate the social service system. 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.

Ethnographic work has long uncovered the ironic fact that state policy itself separates men from women and children. Stack (1974) first noted the effects that the oldest cash assistance program, Aid for Families with Dependent Children, had on removing men from families since it supported only single women and denied benefits to those who were discovered living with males. Through recent ethnographic work in homeless shelters and transitional housing in New York, Susser (1999) has found that state policies actually work to break up families by developing separate shelters for men and women, and removing teenage boys from shelters for women and children.

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 that so many other ethnographers have found in poor communities.

The first examples of the activism of the poor came from studies of Latin American squatter settlements (Leeds 1971; Lomnitz 1977; Roberts 1973; Peattie 1968; Uzzell 1975; and Safa 1974). In fact, Leeds used this work to specifically rebut Lewis's "culture of poverty" thesis. Much of the work demonstrated that communities who squatted on public land and invested money and labor in self-built housing developed links with the political system and were able to mobilize politically because they were vulnerable to state eradication and were interested in making their communities legal and/or gaining access to schools, electricity, and water.

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 do this by mobilizing their expanded informal networks to participate in broader coalitions and collective action. 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). Wagner (1993) has ethnographically analyzed a mobilization of homeless people in one New England city while Lyon-Callo (2001) has discussed the constraints on mobilizing the homeless in another city. Maskovsky (2000) analyzes the predicament of one group of poor, minority AIDS activists in Philadelphia. Each of these studies, like the

squatter studies before them, 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.

Victims of Structural Violence

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).

In seeking to explain structural violence, ethnographers have written about poor people living in homeless shelters and other institutions, making their predicaments understandable in ways that do not blame them as individuals. Both Elliot Liebow in *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993) and Alisse Waterston in *Love, Sorrow and Rage* (1999) provide portraits of destitute women in residential institutions which allow us to see them as persons with dignity and resourcefulness, and as victims of the structural violence resulting from inequities in the labor and housing markets and contradictory bureaucratic rules in the criminal justice and welfare systems.

Structural violence leads to intolerable, deplorable living conditions that often produce culturally constructed beliefs that allow people to cope with intolerable circumstances in ways that are ultimately self-destructive but meaningful. Philippe Bourgois (1996) graphically describes violent self-destructive behavior among Puerto Rican drug dealers in New York. He sees these practices as a search for meaning and respect, which parodies the ideology of the larger society and its values: competition, advancement, and excessive material consumption. Unfortunately, by looking at the community from the vantage point of only those deeply involved in drug distribution, he does not put enough emphasis on the fact that this alternative drug culture is not the dominant pattern in poor neighborhoods. In contrast, the ethnographic work of Sharff (1998) shows that many boys may participate in the lower rungs of the trade for brief periods of time to provide income for their household, but few actually become permanently enmeshed. In other words, many boys are never involved in the drug trade, others use drug trading sporadically as a partial source of income in difficult times, and only a few become the violent predatory characters depicted by Bourgois.

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. Looking at poor people's behavior instead of the political-economic system suggests that no change in the structure is necessary because some people are just unfit.

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. These drastic reform programs often take on aspects of punishment and control and operate in arbitrary and contradictory ways. 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. Critical to survival are the sharing networks that develop between female-headed households. In turn, these networks of females and often their male relatives, working hard to increase their children's life prospects, frequently engage in local community building and political activism.

Nonetheless, as the gap between the rich and poor keeps getting wider, as homelessness increases, as skewed rates of incarceration remove many young males from the community, and as the social safety net is loosened, support networks are weakened and individuals are more vulnerable. They do not have the resources of the middle class to deal with such problems as substance abuse and mental illness, which they share with the middle class.

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.

Notes

[1] The notion that poor people have moral flaws that cause and perpetuate their poverty has become firmly embedded in modern European, American, and increasingly international thought as industrial capitalism expanded in the last two centuries. In one form or another, it has been expressed since the seventeenth-century Elizabethan Poor Laws (Piven and Cloward 1971; Eames and Goode 1973).

[2] Social welfare programs soon followed in other industrial countries, where they surpassed the United States in protecting populations from social risk.

[3] Oscar Lewis's definition of the "culture of poverty" was first published in his best-selling monograph *La Vida* (1966) and then in the popular journal *Scientific American*. It was adopted by Michael Harrington and incorporated in his best-selling work, *The Other America*. Journalist Ken Auletta publicized this concept in a series of articles in the *New Yorker* which later formed the basis of his best-selling book, *The Underclass* (1983).

[4] Lewis's work influenced several War on Poverty programs in the 1960s. Ironically, since this was not his intent, the concept had more impact on United States policy than elsewhere. His work was influential in shaping and reinforcing the work of others, such as the Moynihan report on the black family (1965) and psychological research "proving" that the poor could not defer gratification (Miller, Reissman, and Seagull 1965), which served to justify an emphasis on programs that worked on the "culture" of the poor and deflected attention from issues of redistribution.

[5] Women's particular circumstances, such as whether they had adult sons or helpful brothers, made a big difference in how they dealt with the dangers of local street violence that accompanied the expanding drug trade.

[6] Brodkin (1998) demonstrates how postwar policies such as the GI Bill and FHA mortgages acted as a major affirmative action program to create a new, white, suburban middle class. Minorities were formally and informally excluded from these advantages. Later in the 1980s, Reagan tax policy created an economic redistribution that shifted more wealth to the top and widened the gap between top and bottom (Phillips 1990; Barlett and Steele 1992).

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