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Oscar Lewis' *Culture of Poverty*: Critique and Further Development

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aprašoma JAV antropologo Oscaro Lewiso "skurdo subkultūros" samprata, autoriaus pasiūlyta XX a. šeštojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje. Čia pateikiama ir šios sampratos kritika. Taip pat apžvelgiami "skurdo kultūrą" mėginę matuoti tyrimai. Skurde gyvenančių žmonių elgesį traktuojant kaip prisitaikymą gyventi ilgalaikio skurdo sąlygomis, skurdo ir skurdo poveikio tyrimuose siūloma pasitelkti atitinkamus metodus.

Marksistinių pažiūrų Lewisas "skurdo kultūrą" nusakė kaip neturtingiausių sluoksnių prisitaikymą gyventi kapitalizmo sąlygomis, kai susiformuoja būdingi "skurdo kultūros" bruožai ir gyvenimo stilius. Visa tai yra perduodama iš kartos į kartą. Tam tikru laikotarpiu "skurdo kultūros" termino, sukėlusio karštas diskusijas dėl pačios kultūros sampratos, atsisakė dauguma mokslininkų dėl abstraktumo, numanomo skurstančiųjų kaltinimo bei nepakankamo teorinio pagrindimo. Tačiau terminas paplito, jį perėmė politikai ir plačioji visuomenė.

Dauguma straipsnyje nagrinėjamų tyrimų "skurdo kultūrą" matavo tik kaip nuostatas bei vertybes ir taip prasilenkė su materialistiniu Lewis'o "skurdo kultūros" traktavimu. Tyrėjų išvados dviprasmės, tiek dėl "skurdo kultūros" apibrėžimo miglotumo, tiek dėl naudojamų tyrimo metodų. Aiškesnis prisitaikymo gyventi skurde nagrinėjimo būdas, ypač kalbant apie skurdą kaip konsensą, galėtų būti "idealistinis" kultūros kaip konsenso modelis, nes jis atskiria žmonių mąstymą nuo bruožų, elgesio ar gyvenimo būdo. Tačiau besidomintiems skurdo klausimu tektų šį metodą derinti su kitais, išgaunančiais "materialesnius" kintamuosius dydžius (jei būtų norima plačiau suprasti ir paaiškinti skurdo įtaką).

Introduction

Although "culture" is the main concept and concern of anthropology, there are many ways to interpret it, resulting in a variety of competing definitions. One of the basic divisions in the discussions about culture is that of distinguishing culture as a process of adaptation and culture as shared ideas, or, as it is sometimes conceptualized, the difference of materialist and idealist approaches to culture.

The question of definitions of culture could be of special importance in the study of poverty and its structural and individual causes and implications. In this article the works of Oscar Lewis, who was the first to popularize the concept of the "culture of poverty," will be examined. This concept stimulated vivid discussions about the matter in the scientific world. Lewis was frequently quoted, the methods and

the outcomes of his studies were criticized, and questions about the use of the term "culture" were raised. In short, he was interpreted, misinterpreted and reinterpreted.

Some of the most important critiques and interpretations are overviewed here. The further development of knowledge/ conceptualization about poverty and culture is considered. In particular, the idealistic interpretation of culture as related to poverty is discussed.

Is There a Culture of Poverty?

My motivation to study this topic came from the years when I studied for the MSW degree in Kaunas, Lithuania. During my social work practice, I learned that the poor often think

differently than a young social worker would expect from her naïve and orderly understanding of society. One quite typical example was a case in which a social worker arranged a monthly allowance for a young single mother with zero official income. After getting the money, the woman immediately bought some grilled chicken (a pretty fancy meal in Lithuania) and took a taxi home in front of the eyes of the shocked social worker. The woman spent the money in a couple of days instead of trying to ration it for the whole month, as the social worker had hoped. There were similar stories of people living in extreme poverty but buying expensive household things if they got a chance, and being left without any money afterwards. Unofficially, the social workers talked about poor people having expectations, values, and behaviors different from others. However, the occasionally mentioned culture of poverty concept of Oscar Lewis was treated with some dose of suspicion. Recently I was told that one of the students, studying the issue of poverty for her master thesis, was finally totally confused: “Some authors say it exists, and some deny it. How is it in reality?”

Lewis: Culture of Poverty vs. Poverty *Per Se*

Oscar Lewis introduced his idea of the “sub-culture of poverty” in 1958, at the International Congress of Americanists in San Chose, Costa Rica (Harvey and Reed 1996), and he later mentioned it in his book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). Although he said he meant a “sub-culture,” Lewis chose to use the term “culture” for convenience, and the term got popular in this form, therefore I will use it in the same way. The largest description of the developing concept was given in his book *La Vida* (1966). Comparing his study of 171 families in Mexico city with data on slums collected by other scientists, and with the descriptions in novels, Lewis “noted certain persistent patterned associations of traits among families with the lowest income level and the least education” (Lewis 1970; x).

The following summary is drawn from Lewis’ *La Vida* (1970; xlii-lii).

It seemed that there always were contradicting evaluations of the poor, expressed in proverbs, literature, and art. Some of these contradictions, according to Lewis, stem from the power struggle of competing groups; others, however, derive from the failure to distinguish between poverty as such and the culture of poverty, and from the similar failure to distinguish between individual and group (family, slum) differences. The cross-regional and cross-national similarities of some of the poor in family structure, interpersonal relationships, time orientation, spending patterns, and value systems show that it is an adaptation to certain common problems.

What are the problems and conditions favorable for developing the culture of poverty? Lewis argues that they flow from an industrial capitalist society with its inherent inequalities. Some of the characteristics of that are: wage labor and production for profit, a high rate of unemployment; underemployment for unskilled labor; low wages; a failure to provide social, political, economic organization for the low-income population; bilateral kinship system; the values of the dominant class stressing the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility, and thrift; and blaming the poor for personal inadequacy.

“The way of life which develops among some of the poor under these conditions is the culture of poverty. It... can be described in terms of some seventy interrelated social, economic, and psychological traits,” writes Lewis. Some of the characteristics Lewis mentioned are:

- (1) The lack of effective participation and integration of the poor in the major institutions of the larger society. Poor people claim to have some of the middle class values, but on the whole, they do not live by them.
- (2) Life of the poor is characterized by poor housing conditions, crowding, gregariousness, and a minimum of organization beyond the level of the nuclear and extended family. There are occasionally informal temporary groupings or voluntary associations within slums (for instance, gangs).
- (3) Among some of the poor, characteristic is the absence of childhood as a specifically prolonged

and protected stage in the lifecycle, as well as early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages. There is also a trend toward female-centered family.

- (4) Some other traits include strong feeling of marginality, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority.

These characteristics, or traits, fall into clusters and are functionally related within each cluster. There are also many inter-cluster relationships. Traits, taken individually, are not representative of the culture of poverty, but their pattern, their conjunction is. The relationships between traits may vary from society to society, from family to family. Briefly, “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.” But it is not just an adaptation. “Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on children. By the time slum children are six or seven years old, they usually have absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.”

Therefore, to end a poverty situation does not mean to end the culture of poverty. In other words, even if the situation of poverty changes, people do not lose quickly the behavior which was adaptive for their previous situation for long years.

On the other hand, Lewis notes that not all the people living in poverty develop this culture of poverty. He gives several examples: preliterate peoples did not develop the culture of poverty because the societies were not as stratified. Low castes in India did not develop it because of other organizations in society that give them certain power. The Jews of Eastern Europe did not, because of their tradition of literacy and religiousness (although Robert Cherry finds evidence of the opposite, citing the dissertation of Wirth (1927), where Russian Jews were described as inferior to earlier German Jewish immigrants (Cherry 1995; 1123). And, finally, another somewhat controversial example of socialist countries, namely,

Cuba, is given – where Lewis found people living in poverty, but not having the despair and apathy common to the culture of poverty.

Talking about the future of the culture of poverty, Lewis saw it differently in countries where great vs. small segments of the populations live in it. In countries where the culture of poverty is not widespread, the solutions offered by social workers and social planners are to raise slowly the standard of living of this population and gradually incorporate it into the middle class. For underdeveloped countries where those living in the culture of poverty constitute large masses, the revolutionary solution might seem appropriate.

In sum, Lewis described the culture of poverty as a way of life, a combination of certain traits, passed through generations. It is an adaptation to poverty, to “being at the bottom” in an industrializing/-ed capitalist society, but perpetuating itself once started. It crosses national and ethnical boundaries, but has a different flavor in different situations. His culture of poverty model, being “grounded in what today is called ‘Marxist humanism’” (Harvey and Reed 1996: 485), was intended to argue against the racial, national, and regional discriminatory explanations. However, discrimination was one of the things Lewis was criticized for later. It is interesting to note that it was not his idea about the culture of poverty, but his development of new methods of family ethnography that Lewis considered his most important work. The culture of poverty idea was proposed as “simply a challenging hypothesis which should be widely tested by empirical research” (Lewis in Berndt 1969; 191).

Critique

Wide ranging discussions and criticisms of Lewis’ work were most common in the 60’s and the 70’s but continue until quite recently. Some of the most important criticisms are considered below.

Problematic Methodology and Style of Writing. Some critics point to problems with the sampling in *La Vida*, arguing that this distorts the

picture of Puerto Rican poverty (Opler 1968; 451). Yet, probably a more significant criticism is that Lewis data and his conclusions do not match. For example, Valentine comments: "Thus does Lewis attempt to move back and forth from individual to family to culture. The attempt is not altogether successful. The transitions, connections, and interrelations among the different levels of analysis are never entirely clear" (1968; 51). Valentine also criticizes the way Lewis' findings are presented: a short introduction by the author is followed by mere "transcriptions of testimony" of the informants afterwards, without the narrator commenting on them. This looked like raw data for Valentine. Similarly, Lewis was taken to task for not adequately contextualizing the life stories he presented, so that "any connection to political economy or broader social conditions was completely obscured" (O'Connor 2001; 120). Some misunderstandings arose from the way Lewis generalized about things in a broad manner. For example, both in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies of the Culture of Poverty*, and *La Vida*, not all of the described families and not all members of the families would represent the culture of poverty. That seemed "self-evident" for Lewis himself, but the descriptions confuse the readers, and instead of trying to distinguish where the described people are in the continuum "culture of poverty – working class – middle class," the readers end up making the same generalizing assumption that Lewis warned against: equating poverty with the culture of poverty.

One more problem was mentioned: it would be hard to operationalize most of the traits mentioned by Lewis, and therefore it is quite difficult to do a research about the culture of poverty.

The Culture of Poverty is Only Negative. Although Lewis stressed that the culture of poverty is adaptive, as helping the poor to survive in their circumstances, he was criticized for writing about it in largely negative terms. Therefore, to some authors the very concept of culture seemed an inappropriate usage: "until some positive aspects of the culture of the

poor are established, the use of the term 'culture' remains open to a question. To apply it to an entity which in fact represents 'poverty of culture' betrays the basic presumptions of culture theory" (Kochar in Berndt 1969; 188). Lewis himself, however, did not think about culture as being just "high," or "good." He also tried to come up with the positive, adaptive sides of the culture of poverty, such as low aspiration level being helpful in reducing frustration, or short-range hedonism making spontaneity and enjoyment possible. However, he also recognized, that the culture of poverty "is a thin, relatively superficial culture" (Lewis 1970; 78). Because of the suffering among those who live in it, and because of their increasing helplessness and isolation he was indeed thinking about eliminating both poverty and the culture of poverty.

The Concept Blames the Poor for Their Condition. A critique related to the previous one is that the concept itself had negative implications about poor people, despite Lewis' stated view that his notion of "culture" should stress the dignity and worth of the poor. That was especially true when the concept gained popularity, started to be used in politics, and people stopped looking at its origins. Again, Valentine discusses the whole "prehistory" of the idea that the poor have certain self-perpetuating traits and that certain doctrines interpret their social position and deprivation as resulting from internal deficiencies. He depicts E. Franklin Frazier, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel P. Moynihan writing in this "pejorative tradition," especially about black families, and interprets Lewis as following, maybe unconsciously, that line of thought, especially when he writes about policy questions. Moreover, Valentine interprets the "culture of poverty" and "lower-class culture" as "twin concepts" (1968; 76). No wonder Lewis later wrote: "...I find Valentine's book tendentious, self-righteous, pedestrian, and downright irresponsible in its distortion of the views of others" (in Berndt 1969; 189).

In a similar fashion, Leacock writes: "The fact is that, through the 'culture of poverty' and similar notions, the nineteenth-century argu-

ment that the poor are poor through their own lack of ability and initiative, has reentered the scene in a new form, well decked out with scientific jargon" (1971; 10-11). Others also noticed that the description of a culture of poverty is not only consistently negative, and reflects middle-class values, but that "the actual terms used to describe the attributes are value-laden" (Eames and Goode 1970; 481).

Culture of Poverty Equals/Blames Black Culture. Racial explanations of poverty have a long past and always bear the implication of genetic inferiority. One reason for this is that people of color have long comprised a large part of the families living in poverty in the U.S. (Murry, Smith, and Hill 2001; 911). At the time when Lewis' work was being published, the policies of the "War on Poverty" were directed mostly to the U.S. blacks, helping to link the concepts of "black" and "poor" together and thus contributing to the racialization of poverty. No wonder curiosity rose about how to disentangle the knot of race, poverty, and culture. Although Lewis was writing about the culture of poverty as a phenomenon crossing national and ethnic boundaries and Mexicans he was studying were not at all an ethnic minority in their country, the concept itself became largely associated with racial explanations because of the above-mentioned reasons, and consecutively criticized.

One of the recent research attempts was to examine (1) whether impoverished persons think consistently with the "culture of poverty" description, and (2) whether the attitudes toward employment, family values, and welfare differ in blacks and whites (Jones and Luo 1999; 439). The authors found little evidence of difference in value systems of poor and non-poor individuals and they did not find strong evidence "of a coherent "black culture," as reflected in attitudes." Race and poverty status put together, important differences appear according to the poverty status. The authors conclude that the roles of changing economic circumstances and income inequality are downplayed, making race the most salient feature.

Concept of Culture/ Subculture not clear. One more criticism of the culture of poverty concept is that the subculture concept came from sociology and was never adequately conceptualized in anthropology. Lewis also did not try to solve that problem. On the other hand, the "culture of poverty" issue raises a lot of questions about culture itself. What about the geographical location of culture, if we understand it in the sense Lewis proposes? In other words, what should a researcher study if he wants to study the culture of poverty? He cannot just study slums, because people there belong to higher as well as to lower classes (Eames and Goode 1970; 480). In a similar way, Kochar talks about the other multiple ways of conceptualizing subculture, like castes, regions, religions, rural-urban differences, tribes, and classes in India, and wonders: if there are poor in all of these levels, what is it that they are a subculture of? (in Berndt 1969; 188)

It also seems that some of Lewis' critics use definitions of culture that are different from the definition Lewis provided. For instance, Valentine was criticized later that he understands culture just as "a system of strongly held values passed on by formal instruction," which is much more narrow than the system of traits and way of life, as understood by Lewis (Hannerz in Berndt 1969; 186). Likewise, some authors applauded the use of concept of culture as a mechanism for adaptation, because it is the approach of cultural ecology (Eames and Goode 1970; 479). Others were skeptical about the appropriateness of the concept of culture in the circumstances of poverty because of the same reason: that the "way of life" starts as an adaptation to very oppressive circumstances (Valentine 1968; 114). This point was probably most exactly summed up by Peter Townsend. Defining a sub-culture as a system of values, beliefs and institutions, "positively established and upheld," and in variance with the majority in the society, he argues that disorganization, instability, fatalism, and inferiority are neither approved nor self-perpetuated. Statistical prevalence of these conditions is another thing, but it would be not consistent

to call it culture, when the members of it do not accept its supposed values (1979; 69).

Research about the Culture of Poverty

In the several reports that I could find the authors had to deal with the problems mentioned before: definition of the culture of poverty, location of the population with the culture of poverty, the most essential traits and clusters of traits important to measure, and the self-report techniques. As concerns the definition, if a researcher would treat Lewis' definition seriously, s/he would have to measure "a way of life," which includes behavior, and not only attitudes of the poor: Lewis warned that those having the culture of poverty claim the middle class values as theirs, but behave differently. However, the researchers mostly use self-report techniques to get their results. It is logical that the way of living is in some way reflected in the attitudes people hold, but the conscious or verbally expressed understandings were only part of the definition of culture of poverty as understood by Lewis.

David Miller tried to see if there is culture of poverty in the rural impoverished areas of the Deep South. He came to the conclusion that for Lewis, the main factor that separates people with the culture of poverty from the rest is their degree of social participation. Then he listed variables that could be related to social participation: race, membership in voluntary associations, occupational prestige (income and education related to the latter), age, marital status, religious affiliation, and urban or rural residency. The researcher did a secondary data analysis of impoverished households of one county in Mississippi. He categorized the scores of participation (both formal and informal participation together) into high, moderate and low, and used these as a dependent variable. He then looked how the dependent variable is related to age, education of parents and children, income, potential geographic mobility (i.e., do the people think they would move to another community), distance children moved away and whether the house is rented

or owned. All the relationships between the outcome and independent variables were insignificant except between the participation level of the household head and the level of education of his adult children, as well as between the level of participation and the distance children moved away from home. Among the limitations of the study, the small sample size and the secondary nature of the data analyzed are mentioned. The author concludes that there is some evidence of the culture of poverty in the rural South of the U.S. (Miller 1976).

An overview of the culture of poverty research is given by S. M. Miller in a review of the book *Poverty and Public Policy* (1980), edited by V. Covello. The reviewer groups the lessons learned from the poverty experience under two categories: lessons about poverty research and lessons about poverty policy. In the first, the poverty research section, he lists several methodological flaws. Among them are problems of inadequate data, of too narrow theoretical perspectives (talking just about causes and missing the processes), of confusing personal attributes with social and economic causes and of bias toward individualizing explanations in general, and of research being shaped and distorted by the interests of policy makers. The description of lessons from poverty policy include: critique of the measures of well-being as being not flexible and not sensitive to the societal expectations; critique of the culture of poverty orientation because it is discredited intellectually; critique of concentrating just on the poor and leaving out the dominant ideology; critique of political orientation being based not on the universalistic model (everyone is eligible to social support), but rather on a residual model (social support is restricted to populations in certain conditions, therefore creating an atmosphere of blaming the individual); and more.

The quite recent Jones and Luo's study, already cited in this paper, mentions other "mindsets" (compared to what Miller used in his research about the rural South) proposed in the literature, which distinguish some of the poor from the mainstream society. These are: lack

of work ethic, improper family values, and an ethic of dependency. The authors discuss the empirical evidence from research, found about each of the statements. In the research reports they find that poor people do possess work ethic. On the other hand, there is some evidence that with the worsening personal economical conditions people become less motivated and less oriented to the future. Therefore, this type of motivation develops as a result of economic conditions. The research about family values that the authors cite shows that often there is no difference in family values across social classes, and that there is some variance in the family values related to race. Similarly, there is no support of the hypothesis that welfare use leads individuals to desire welfare dependency. Jones and Luo then did a secondary data analysis, using longitudinal data from the General Social Survey. The researchers used eight items as dependent variables: three to measure work ethic, three to measure family values, and two to measure ethic of dependency. Independent variables were poverty status, race, residency, region, unemployment, and religiosity, with age, education, and gender as control variables. The authors rejected the culture of poverty hypothesis in six of the eight equations, furthermore, one of the two was found to be race-specific. Therefore they conclude that there is little support for the traditional culture of poverty arguments (Jones and Luo 1999).

In short, there has been a storm of reactions to the concept of culture of poverty in the scientific literature; but it was also widely used and misused in the popular literature and in politics. Because of the weight of those critiques and because of its many negative implications, the concept has largely been abandoned.

Further Development. “Culture of Poverty” vs. “Underclass”

The anthropological concept of culture was more and more changed by the sociological/economical language of class/ underclass. Michael Morris discusses this shift in public

language, and finds that there is an ideological basis for preferences in use of some concepts rather than others. As with the culture concept, there is no clear consensus about the meaning of underclass. However, one of the meanings is that “the underclass represents a segment of the poor who are not only economically deprived, but who manifest a distinctive set of values, attitudes, beliefs, norms, and behaviors as well” (1989; 125). Obviously, “the culture of poverty” and the “underclass” are comparable. Moreover, there is a disagreement in how much structural or sub-cultural explanation the concepts imply. The widespread use of the underclass concept began with William Julius Wilson’s book *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Since then it has become more and more popular, and Morris mentioned several reasons for that (1989; 128-131). First, “underclass” is a more neutral term. It is less demeaning to the poor people, and lacks the normative preferences in lifestyle, than the “culture of poverty.” Second, it does not depict the poor in general, but only one subgroup. Third, as most of the scholarly analysis of poverty appears to be in sociology and economy, the “underclass” concept better fits the sociological frameworks focused on class-based stratification systems. This also means it better fits the structural explanation of poverty. Finally, it fits the “spirit of the times” better: for the conservatives the understanding that just a small segment of the lower class has some problems is comforting, it means no bigger restructuring of society in order to change the redistribution system would be necessary.

There is a criticism nowadays, that the underclass concept, also originating from the Marxist tradition, “needs to be informed by a better theory” because the Marxist tradition is not capable of analyzing the contemporary society appropriately (Goldthorpe 2000; 1572).

Culture as Consensus: is the Link with Poverty Possible?

An opposite to the materialistic definitions of culture is the idea of culture as shared and

learned ideas, developed by cognitive anthropologists. One of the most popular techniques to measure the degree of sharedness of a cultural aspect (called “domain”) is the cultural consensus model developed by K. Romney, W. Batchelder and S. Weller (Romney, Weller, and Batchelder 1986; Weller and Romney 1988). The model is based on the assumption that culture patterns (subsystems of culture related to one aspect of culture) have an associated semantic domain. Knowledge about the domain can be inferred from consensus about its constituents. Research using the cultural consensus model consists of: defining the domain properly, free listing to elicit the items of the domain, and pile-sorting and ranking to understand the dimensions of the domain. Researchers treat informants’ statements as probabilistic: they might be correct and not, depending on how knowledgeable the respondent is about the issue. The cultural consensus model allows defining an “answer key” (the culturally “correct” answer to a question, i.e. the answer that most people agree about); measuring each informant’s cultural competence (the proportion of items the informant shared with others); and seeing if informants were from a single culture (if their answers fit a single factor).

What is the evidence of the poor having a different culture from others, as measured by this method? Several research examples from Brazil, where the sample was carefully selected from four socioeconomic strata in Ribeirao Preto, prove rather the opposite. For instance, there was enough evidence to suggest that the citizens of Ribeirao Preto have common cultural models of lifestyle, and of social support, which was “surprising given the wide range of economic status sampled” (Dressler and Dos Santos 2000; 310). The finding is consistent with the other research mentioned, where the poor do not differ in their values from the better-off part of society. It is also consistent with what Lewis himself was writing; however, he stressed that the poor behave differently from what they say. The explanation of behavior can-

not be found within the boundaries of the model of cultural consensus, because culture is understood as shared ideas; therefore, in order to connect culture as consensus to the wider context of deprivation and poverty, and their outcomes, some additional measures are necessary. For example, in the above-mentioned study Dressler and Dos Santos not only measure cultural consonance, but also take measures of perceived stress, and of blood pressure, as a health outcome. Analyzing the measure of lifestyle incongruity the authors found that instead of living beyond their means, the people of low income have difficulty in maintaining the very basic lifestyle, which creates stress and results in worse health outcomes.

Similarly, one could adopt Peter Townsend’s definition of poverty that is both materialistic and idealistic. “Poverty,” he writes, “is the lack of the resources necessary to permit participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society” (1979; 88). This would mean that first the cultural consensus about the style of living that is approved by a society has to be measured, and then the resources available to a specific person have to be assessed. Contrary to Lewis, Townsend lists a variety of sources of possible inequalities, not only the cash income from wages. They include assets, private income in kind, employment benefits, etc. In addition to measuring poverty, measuring effects of poverty, like health or psychological and other consequences, can be employed.

Briefly, Lewis’ culture of poverty idea is almost impossible to study because of the vagueness of the definition. Cultural consensus, on the other hand, could be a helpful method in doing research about poverty and its impact, even more so when poverty is defined as being a social consensus. However, as a method it is limited by its idealistic assumptions. Therefore more “materialistic” variables have to be employed if one wants to assess the issue of poverty holistically, as Lewis tried.

Summary

In this article the concept of the culture of poverty as defined by Oscar Lewis, and its critique was reviewed, and methodologies for exploring adaptation to poverty suggested. Lewis described the culture of poverty as a way of life, clusters of traits of some of poor people, that develop as an adaptation to living in poverty in a capitalist society, and from then are passed through generations. Lewis came to this idea from his Marxist background. The wording of the concept, however, was not very successful, as reflected by the number of misunderstandings and criticisms. Some of them, though, rise from a different understanding of culture. The theory behind the Lewis' concept was not developed well. The concept soon gained popularity among politicians and wider audience, but was largely discarded in the intellectual circles. The researchers, who

tried to check the culture of poverty hypotheses, also came to ambiguous conclusions. It was partly due to the vagueness of the definition of the concept, and partly because of the research methods used.

The idealistic model of culture as consensus, because of the separation of "what is in the mind" vs. traits, behaviors, way of life etc., could be a clearer way to understand and analyze some of the poverty issues, especially when poverty is defined by consensus. However, for those interested in the issue of poverty, it would require a connection with other, more "materialist" variables in order to understand and explain the issue more fully: the idea of adaptation to the long-term deprivations can help to understand the behavior of people living in poverty better.

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