

More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City

by William Julius Wilson

In *More than Just Race*, I hope to further our understanding of the complex and interrelated factors that continue to contribute to racial inequality in the United States. In the process, I call for reexamining the way social scientists discuss two important factors associated with racial inequality—*social structure* and *culture*. Although the book highlights the experiences of inner-city African Americans, it should be emphasized that the complexities of understanding race and racial inequality in America are not limited to research on blacks. Formal and informal aspects of inequality have also victimized Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans. In this book, however, I use the research on inner-city African Americans to elaborate my analytic framework because they have been the central focus of the structure-versus-culture dispute.

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Taking Culture Seriously

The book will likely generate controversy in some circles because I dare to take culture seriously as one of the explanatory variables in the study of race and urban poverty—a topic that is typically considered off-limits in academic discourse because of a fear that such analysis can be construed as “blaming the victim.” Indeed, I develop a framework that integrates structural forces—ranging from those that are racial, such as segregation and discrimination, to those that are non-racial such as changes in the economy—and cultural forces to not only show how the two are inextricably linked, but also to explain why structural forces should receive far more attention than cultural factors in accounting for the social outcomes of poor African Americans and in framing public policies to address racial inequality.

That said, my book examines two types of cultural forces: (1) national views and beliefs on race, and (2) cultural traits—shared outlooks, modes of behavior, traditions, belief systems, worldviews, values, skills, preferences, styles of self-presentation, etiquette, and linguistic patterns—that emerge from patterns of intra-group interaction in settings created by discrimination and segregation, and that reflect collective experiences within

those settings.

I want to avoid limited conceptions of culture defined in the simple and traditional terms of group norms, values and attitudes toward family and work, and also consider cultural repertoires (habits, styles and skills) and the micro-level processes of meaning-making and decision-making—that is, the way that individuals in particular groups, communities or societies develop an understanding of how the world works and make decisions based on that understanding. The processes of meaning-making and decision-making are reflected in cultural frames (shared group constructions of reality).

Racism has historically been one of the most prominent American cultural frames and has played a major role in determining how whites perceive and act toward blacks. In the United States

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today, there is no question that the more categorical forms of racist ideology—in particular, those that assert the biogenetic inferiority of blacks—have declined significantly, even though they still may be embedded in institutional norms and practices.

The vast majority of social scientists agree that as a national cultural frame, racism, in its various forms, has had harmful effects on African Americans as a group. Indeed, considerable research has been devoted to the effects of racism in American society. However, there is little research and far less awareness of the impact of emerging cultural frames in the inner city on the social and economic outcomes of poor blacks.

How Cultural Frames Are Shaped

Note that distinct cultural frames in the inner city have not only been shaped by race and poverty, but in turn often shape responses to poverty, including responses that may contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Indeed, one of the effects of living in racially segregated neighborhoods is exposure to group-specific cultural traits (orientations, habits and worldviews as well as styles of behavior and particular skills) that emerged from patterns of

racial exclusion and that may not be conducive to factors that facilitate social mobility.

However, many liberal scholars are reluctant to discuss or research the role that culture plays in the negative outcomes found in the inner city. It is possible that they fear being criticized for reinforcing the popular view that the negative social outcomes—poverty, unemployment, drug addition and crime—of many poor people in the inner city are due to the shortcomings of the people themselves. Harvard University sociologist Orlando Patterson maintains that there is “a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group’s cultural at-

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tributes — its distinctive attitudes, values and tendencies, and the resulting behavior of its members—and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing.”

Patterson claims that social scientists have shied away from cultural explanations of race and poverty because of the widespread belief, referred to above, that such explanations are tantamount to blaming the victim; that is, they support the conclusion that the poor themselves, and not the social environment, are responsible for their own poverty and negative social outcomes. He colorfully contends that it is “utterly bogus” to argue, as do many academics, that cultural explanations *necessarily* blame the victim for poor social outcomes.

Patterson argues that to hold an individual responsible for his behavior is not to rule out any consideration of the environmental factors that may have evoked the questionable behavior to begin with. “Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways,” he states. “To point out the link between their behavior and

the destructive acts is in no way to deny the causal role of their earlier victimization and the need to address it.” Patterson also contends that a cultural explanation of human behavior not only examines the immediate relationship between attitudes and behavior, but it also looks at the past to investigate the origins and changing nature of these attitudes.

The Perils of the Cultural Argument

The use of a cultural argument, however, is not without peril. Anyone who wishes to understand American society must be aware that explanations focusing on the cultural traits of inner-city residents are likely to draw far more attention from policymakers and the general public than structural explanations will. It is an unavoidable fact that Americans tend to de-emphasize the structural origins and social significance of poverty and welfare.

In other words, the popular view is that people are poor or on welfare because of their own personal shortcomings. A 2007 Pew Research Center survey revealed that “fully two-thirds of all Americans believe personal factors, rather than racial discrimination, explain why many African Americans have difficulty getting ahead in life; just 19% blame discrimination.” Nearly three-fourths of U.S. whites (71%), a majority of Hispanics (59%), and even a slight majority of blacks (53%) “believe that blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation.”

The strength of American cultural sentiment that individuals are primarily responsible for poverty presents a dilemma for anyone who seeks the most comprehensive explanation of outcomes for poor black Americans. Why? Simply because, as noted above, cultural arguments that focus on individual traits and behavior invariably draw more attention than do structural explanations in the United States. Accordingly, I feel that a social scientist has an obligation to try to make

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might be—the phone.

Some research suggests that young people frequently employ the more intimate format of IM to *support* face-to-face relationships. A 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Project study concluded: “For the entire population of those ages 12-17, phone conversations and face-to-face meeting are the most frequently chosen ways to communicate with friends outside of school.”

In our convenience sampled tech usage survey, Instant Messaging was the second “most” used choice for SBU members and first place for non-SBU in their computer use. “Calling people” was by far the most popular phone use for both groups at 62.5% and 53.1%, respectively. The real-time, but more abstracted, Instant

Messaging was a distant second for the SBU and non-SBU respondents for “most” used phone activity (40% and 35.4%).

Conclusions

Although this preliminary exploration of the current and potential role of the Computer Mediated Communication infrastructure of youth culture in the Bronx has raised more issues than it has resolved, we can already identify three useful lessons.

The long-standing relational approach to organizing is not about to be replaced with the Blackberry. Youth organizers and young community leaders will continue to identify issues and recruit leaders and core supporters

knocking on doors, sitting around the kitchen tables, and leafleting on the corners across the street from our overcrowded high schools.

CMC, however, does offer agile ways to transmit *expected* information (e.g., the location of a demonstration) that is part of a plan organized through face-to-face or basic telephone formats.

With thought and creativity, we should be able to marry the relational to the technological. An example of such a marriage would be consciously organized phone trees that link *within* pre-existing networks—e.g., neighbors in a building, active members of committees, Goths—so that news, motivation and mobilization occur along lines of existing personal relationships as well as political affinity. □

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sure that the explanatory power of his or her structural argument is not lost to the reader and to provide a context for understanding cultural responses to chronic economic and racial subordination.

The Causal Flow Between Structure and Culture

Consider, for example, the complex causal flow between structure and culture. In an impressive study that analyzes data from a national longitudinal survey, with methods designed to measure intergenerational economic mobility, the sociologist Patrick Sharkey of New York University found that “more than 70% of black children who are raised in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods, the bottom 25% in terms of average neighborhood income, will continue to live in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods as adults.”

He also found that since the 1970s, a majority of black families have resided in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods in *consecutive generations*,

compared to only 7% of white families. Thus he concludes that the disadvantages of living in poor black neighborhoods, like the advantages of living in affluent white neighborhoods, are in large measure inherited.

We should also consider another path-breaking study that Sharkey co-

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authored with senior investigator Robert Sampson, a Harvard University sociologist, and another colleague, Steven Raudenbush, that examined the durable effects of concentrated poverty on black children’s verbal ability. They studied a representative sample of 750 African-American children, ages 6-12, who were growing up in the city of Chicago in 1995, and followed them anywhere they moved in the United States for up to 7 years. The children were given a reading examination and vocabulary test at three different periods. Their study shows “that residing in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood cumula-

tively impedes the development of academically relevant verbal ability in children.”

Their results reveal: (1) that the neighborhood environment “is an important developmental context for trajectories of verbal cognitive ability”; (2) that young African-American children who had earlier lived in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood had fallen behind their counterparts or peers who had not resided previously in disadvantaged areas by up to 6 IQ points, a magnitude estimated to be equivalent to “missing a year or more of schooling”; and (3) “that the strongest effects appear several years after children live in areas of concentrated disadvantage.” This research raises important questions “about ways in which neighborhoods may alter growth in verbal ability, producing effects that linger on even if a child leaves a severely disadvantaged neighborhood.”

The studies by Sharkey and Sampson and his colleagues both suggest that neighborhood effects are not solely structural. Among the effects of living in segregated neighborhoods over extended periods is repeated exposure to cultural traits—and this would include linguistic patterns, the focus

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of Sampson et al.'s study—that emanate from or are the products of racial exclusion, traits, such as verbal skills, that may impede successful maneuvering in the larger society.

As Sharkey points out, “when we consider that the vast majority of black families living in America’s poorest neighborhoods come from families that have lived in similar environments for generations . . . continuity of the neighborhood environment, in addition to continuity of individual economic status, may be especially relevant to the study of cultural patterns among disadvantaged populations.” Unfortunately, very little research attention has been given to these cumulative cultural experiences.

Thus, in addition to structural influences, exposure to different cultural influences in the neighborhood environment over time has to be taken into account if one is to really appreciate and explain the divergent social outcomes of human groups. But, to repeat, in delivering this message we must make sure that the powerful influence of structural factors do not recede into the background.

The Relative Importance of Culture and Structure

Indeed, a fundamental question remains: What is the relative importance of these two dimensions in accounting for the formation and persistence of the inner-city ghetto, the plight of black males and the breakdown of the black family—three subjects that I focused on in my book. Culture matters, but I

Housing and Civil Rights

Recent advocacy on “affirmatively furthering fair housing” in federal housing programs available at:

www.prrac.org/projects/civilrightshousing.php

would have to say it does not matter nearly as much as social structure.

From a historical perspective, it is hard to overstate the importance of racialist structural factors that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fought so hard against. Aside from the enduring effects of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, public school segregation, legalized discrimination, residential segregation, the FHA’s redlining of black neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s, the construction of public housing projects in poor black neighborhoods, employer discrimination and other racial acts and processes, there is the impact of political, economic and policy decisions that were at least partly influenced by race.

In contrasting the combined impact of the structural factors with cultural factors, it would be very hard to argue that the cultural factors in the black community are equally as important in determining life chances or creating

The political framing of poverty in the New Deal era was quite different from today.

racial group outcomes. For example, if one attempts to explain rapid changes in social and economic outcomes in the inner city, there is little evidence that cultural forces have the power of changes in the economy. We only need to consider the impact of the economic boom on the reduction of concentrated racial poverty in the 1990s to illustrate this point.

Policymakers who are dedicated to combating the problems of race and poverty and who recognize the importance of structural inequities face an important challenge—namely, how to generate political support from Americans who tend to place far more emphasis on cultural factors and individual behavior than on structural impediments in explaining social and economic outcomes. After all, beliefs that attribute joblessness and poverty to individual shortcomings do not engender strong support for social programs

to end inequality. Nonetheless, in addressing the problem of structural inequities it would not be wise to leave the impression in public discussions that cultural problems do not matter. Indeed, proposals to address racial inequality should reflect awareness of the inextricable link between aspects of structure and culture.

Framing Public Policy Discussion

For all of these reasons, it is extremely important to discuss how the issues of race and poverty are framed in public policy discussions. How we situate social issues in the larger context of society says a lot about our commitment to change. A useful example of how this works comes to me from Robert Asen, a professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin. He has reminded me that the *political framing* of poverty—that is, the way in which political leaders formulate arguments about how we as a nation should talk about and address issues of poverty—in the New Deal era was quite different from the political framing of poverty today.

During the New Deal era, the emphasis was on structure—namely, the devastating impact of the economic crisis. Americans clearly recognized that hundreds of thousands of citizens were poor or unemployed mainly because of a severe and prolonged job shortage. In the public arena today, poverty tends to be discussed in reference to individual initiative. This distinction, he points out, reveals how larger shifts in society have influenced our understanding of the nature of poverty.

Therefore, we ought to consider the contingency of political frames at particular moments in time. These “deliberative frames” not only orient our debates on public policy, but they can also be shifted through debate. So, just because cultural explanations resonate with policymakers and the public today does not mean that structural explanations cannot resonate with them tomorrow. To shift political frames,

however, and hopefully provide a more balanced discussion, requires parallel efforts among politicians, engaged citizens and scholars.

In my previous writings, I called for the framing of issues designed to appeal to broad segments of the population. Key to this framing, I argued, would be an emphasis on policies that would directly benefit all groups, not just people of color. My thinking was that, given American views about poverty and race, a color-blind agenda would be the most realistic way to generate the broad political support that would be necessary to enact the required legislation. I no longer hold to this view.

The question is not whether the policy should be race-neutral or universal, the question is whether the policy is framed to facilitate a frank discussion of the problems that ought to be addressed and to generate broad political support to alleviate them. So now my position has changed: In framing public policy, we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty; on the contrary, we should highlight them in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously

confronted and that there is an urgent need to address them. The issues of race and poverty should be framed in such a way that not only a sense of fairness and justice to combat inequality is generated, but also people are made aware that our country would be better off if these problems were seriously addressed and eradicated.

Barack Obama's Speech

In considering this change of frame—indeed, a change of mindset on race and poverty—I am drawn to then-Senator Barack Obama's speech on race given March 18, 2008. His ora-

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tory provides a model for the type of framing I have in mind. In taking on the tough topic of race in America, Obama spoke to the issue of structure and culture, as well as their interaction. He drew America's attention to the many disparities that exist between

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the "African-American community and the larger American community today"—disparities that "can be traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow." He also discussed the lack of economic opportunity among black men, and how "the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families."

However, Obama did not restrict his speech to addressing structural inequities; he also focused on problematic cultural and behavioral responses to these inequities, including a cycle of violence among black men, and a "legacy of defeat" that has been passed on to future generations. And he urged those in the African-American community to take full responsibility for their lives by demanding more from their fathers, and spending more time with their children "reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny."

By combining a powerful discussion of structural inequities with an emphasis on personal responsibility, Barack Obama did not isolate the latter from the former, as is so often the case in the remarks of talk show hosts, journalists, and conservative politicians and commentators. Obama's speech gave an honest appraisal of structural racial inequality as he called for all Americans to support blacks in their struggle to help themselves. To repeat, I feel that this speech could serve as a model for the kind of careful political framing of the issues of race and poverty that we need in this country in order to move forward. □

Resources

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