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Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty

By WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON

In recent decades, discussions of race, inequality, and family hardship have consolidated around two opposing perspectives—the one held by those who would support a mainly structural explanation for chronic hardship versus

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that of those who espouse cultural explanations. This article is an attempt to demonstrate the importance of understanding not only the independent contributions of social structure and culture, but also how they interact to shape different group outcomes that embody racial inequality.

We should be clear about what we mean by these two important concepts of social structure and culture. Social structure refers to the way social positions, social roles, and networks of social relationships are arranged in our institutions, such as the economy, polity, education, and the organization of the family. A social structure could be a labor market that offers financial incentives and threatens financial punishments to compel individuals to work; or it could be a “role” associated with a particular social position in an organization such as a church, family, or university (e.g., pastor, head of a household, or professor) that carries certain power, privilege, and influence external to the individuals who occupy that role (Alexander and Thompson 2008).

When we talk about the impact of social structures, we are making explicit references to the forces they set in motion, given specific social circumstances, that affect human behavior. Basically, two types of structural forces contribute directly to racial group outcomes such as differences in poverty and employment rates: social acts and social processes. The term social acts refers to the behavior of individuals who occupy particular positions within society. Examples of social acts are stereotyping; stigmatization; discrimination in hiring, job promotions, housing, and admission to educational institutions; and exclusion from unions, employers’ associations, and clubs when any of these are the acts of individuals or groups exercising power over others.

Social processes refers to the “machinery” of society that exists to promote ongoing relations between members of the larger group. Examples of social processes that contribute directly to racial group outcomes include laws, policies, and institutional practices that exclude people on the basis of race or ethnicity. These range from explicit arrangements, such as Jim Crow segregation laws and voting restrictions, to more subtle institutional processes, such as school tracking that purports to be academic but often reproduces traditional segregation, racial profiling by police that purports to be about public safety but focuses solely on minorities, and redlining by banks that purports to be about sound fiscal policy but results in the exclusion of blacks from home ownership. In all of these cases, ideologies about group differences are embedded in organizational arrangements.

Many social observers who are sensitive to and often outraged by the direct forces of racism, such as discrimination and segregation, have paid far less attention to those political and economic forces that indirectly contribute to racial inequality. I have in mind political actions that have an impact on racial group outcomes even though they are not explicitly designed or publicly discussed as matters involving race, as well as impersonal economic forces that reinforce long-standing forms of racial inequality. These structural forces are classified as indirect because they are mediated by racial groups’ position in the system of social stratification (the extent to which the members of a group occupy positions of
power, influence, privilege, and prestige). In other words, economic changes and political decisions may have a greater adverse impact on some groups than on others simply because the former are more vulnerable as a consequence of their position in the social stratification system. These indirect structural forces are often so massive in their impact on the social position and experiences of people of color that they deserve full consideration in an attempt to understand the factors leading to differential outcomes along racial lines.

*Culture,* on the other hand, refers to the sharing of outlooks and modes of behavior among individuals who face similar place-based circumstances (such as poor segregated neighborhoods). Therefore, when individuals act according to their culture, they are following inclinations developed from their exposure to the particular traditions, practices, and beliefs among those who live and interact in the same physical and social environment (Hannerz 1969). This definition is not limited to conceptions of culture defined in the simple and traditional terms of group norms, values, and attitudes toward family and work. It also includes 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). In this article I will use the generic concept of *cultural traits* to refer to one or more of these different but related components of culture.

There are two types of cultural traits relevant to the study of race and urban poverty: one represents national views and beliefs on race and the other embodies patterns of intragroup interaction in settings created by discrimination and segregation and that reflect collective experiences within those settings. When we talk about the impact of cultural traits, we are also making explicit references to the forces they set in motion, given specific social circumstances, that affect human behavior.

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. At its core, racism is an ideology of racial domination with two key features: (1) beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another and (2) the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the way that members of the “inferior” race should be treated in this society as well as to explain their social position as a group and their collective accomplishments. In the United States 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. An example would be school tracking, the practice of grouping students of similar capability for instruction, which not only tends to segregate African American students but often results in placing some black students in lower-level classes even though they have the cultural capital—requisite skills for learning—to compete with students in higher-level classes.
However, there has emerged a form of what Lawrence Bobo and his colleagues refer to as “laissez-faire racism,” a perception that blacks are responsible for their own economic predicament and are therefore undeserving of special government support (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). The idea that the federal government “has a special obligation to help improve the living standards of blacks” because they “have been discriminated against for so long” was supported by only one-fifth of whites in 2001 and never has been supported by more than one-quarter of whites since 1975. Significantly, the lack of white support for this idea is not related to background factors such as level of education and age (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997).

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 traits in the inner city on the social and economic outcomes of poor blacks. Note that distinct cultural traits in the inner city have not only been shaped by race and poverty but, in turn, often shape responses to poverty, including, as we shall soon see, responses that may contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

Nonetheless, although culture matters, from a historical perspective it is hard to overstate the cumulative impact of structural impediments on black inner-city neighborhoods. We have to consider, of course, the racialist structural factors such as the enduring effects of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, public school segregation, legalized discrimination, residential segregation, the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining of black neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s, the construction of public housing projects in poor black urban neighborhoods, employer discrimination, and other racial acts and processes. But we also have to take into account the impact of political, economic, and policy decisions that were at least partly influenced by race, as well as those that are nonracial, such as the effect of impersonal changes in the economy on poverty and joblessness in the inner city (Wilson 2009).

Nonetheless, despite the obvious fact that structural changes have adversely affected inner-city neighborhoods, there is a widespread notion in America that the problems plaguing people in the inner city have little to do with racial discrimination or the effects of living in segregated poverty. For many Americans, it is the individual and the family who bear the main responsibility for their low social and economic achievement in society. If unchallenged, this view may suggest that cultural traits are at the root of problems experienced by the ghetto poor, because most Americans tend to focus on the outlooks and modes of behavior shared by many inner-city residents.

Culture provides tools (habits, skills, and styles) and creates constraints (restrictions or limits on outlooks and behavior) in patterns of social interaction. These constraints include cultural frames (shared group constructions of reality) developed over time through the processes of meaning making (shared views of how the world works) and decision making (choices that reflect shared definitions of
how the world works). For example, in the inner-city ghetto, cultural frames define issues of trust—street smarts and “acting black” and “acting white”—that lead to observable group characteristics.4

One of the effects of living in a racially segregated, poor neighborhood is the exposure to cultural traits that may not be conducive to facilitating social mobility. For example, some social scientists have discussed the negative effects of a “cool-pose culture” that has emerged among young black men in the inner city, which includes sexual conquests, hanging out on the street after school, party drugs, and hip-hop music. These patterns of behavior are seen as a hindrance to social mobility in the larger society (Majors and Billson 1992; Patterson 2000, 2006).

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 policy makers 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. Perhaps this tendency is rooted in our tradition of “rugged individualism.” If, in America, you can grow up to be anything you want to be, then any destiny—even poverty—can be viewed through the lens of personal achievement or failure. Certainly it is true that most Americans have little direct knowledge or understanding of the complex nature of race and poverty in the inner city, and therefore broad-based explanations that focus on the cultural traits of individuals and families are more likely to gain acceptance.

We can easily see that explanations focusing on the traits of the individual, including individuals’ outlooks and patterns of behavior, dominate American thinking. Consider studies of national public opinion. After analyzing national survey data collected in 1969 and 1980, James R. Kluegel and Eliot R. Smith concluded that “most Americans believe that opportunity for economic advancement is widely available, that economic outcomes are determined by individuals’ efforts and talents (or their lack) and that in general economic inequality is fair” (Kluegel and Smith 1986, 37). Indeed, responses to questions in these two national American surveys revealed that individualistic explanations for poverty (e.g., lack of effort or ability, poor moral character, slack work skills) were overwhelmingly favored over structural explanations (e.g., lack of adequate schooling, low wages, lack of jobs, etc.). The most frequently selected items in the surveys were “lack of thrift or proper money management skills,” “lack of effort,” “lack of ability or talent,” “attitudes from one’s family background that impede social mobility,” “failure of society to provide good schools,” and “loose morals and drunkenness.” Except for “failure of society to provide good schools,” all of these phrases point to shortcomings on the part of individuals as the causes of poverty. The Americans who answered the survey considered structural factors, such as “low wages,” “failure of industry to provide enough jobs,” and “racial discrimination,” least important of all. The rankings of these factors remained virtually unchanged between 1969 and 1980.
A 1990 survey using these same questions, reported by Lawrence Bobo and Ryan A. Smith (1994), revealed a slight increase among those who associate poverty with institutional and structural causes, especially the “failure of industry to provide enough jobs.” Nonetheless, Americans remained strongly disposed toward the idea that individuals are largely responsible for their economic situations. In the three times the survey was administered—1969, 1980, and 1990—the most often selected explanation was “lack of effort by the poor themselves.” In fact, across all three surveys, more than nine out of ten American adults felt that lack of effort was either very or somewhat important in terms of causing poverty. Fewer than 10 percent felt that it was not important.

The weight Americans give to individualistic factors persists today. A 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center 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 percent), a majority of Hispanics (59 percent), and even a slight majority of blacks (53 percent) “believe that blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation.”

These findings on the importance of individualistic causes of poverty contrast sharply with those in a survey conducted in twelve European countries (England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, Austria, and Italy) in 1990 (Commission of the European Communities 1990). A substantial majority of the citizens in each of these countries favored structural over individual explanations for the causes of poverty and joblessness in their own nations. Given the rising ethnic and racial tensions between host populations and migrants of color from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, we might have expected these attitudes to shift closer to those held by Americans. However, a 2007 survey of twenty-seven European Union member states revealed that only one in five European Union citizens supported the idea that people live in poverty because of “laziness and lack of will power.” Thirty-seven percent viewed “injustice in society” as the cause of poverty. 20 percent attributed the cause to “bad luck,” and 13 percent found that poverty “is an inevitable part of progress” (Commission of the European Communities 2007). The attitudes of ordinary European citizens and public rhetoric in the EU focus much more on structural equities at large, not on individual behavior, to explain the causes of poverty and joblessness. Obviously, citizens in other Western democracies do not share the American emphasis on explanations that highlight the traits of individuals for the problems of poverty.

The strength of American cultural sentiment that individual traits 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 cultural arguments that focus on the traits and behavior of individuals and families will invariably draw more attention than structural explanations in the United States. Accordingly, I feel that a social scientist has an obligation to try to make 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.

Let me pursue this idea by first considering the neighborhood effects research that focuses on concentrated poverty. Hundreds of studies have been published on the effects of concentrated poverty in neighborhood environments since the late 1980s. The research suggests that concentrated poverty increases the likelihood of social isolation (from mainstream institutions), joblessness, dropping out of school, lower educational achievement, involvement in crime, unsuccessful behavioral development and delinquency among adolescents, nonmarital childbirth, and unsuccessful family management (Small and Newman 2001). In general, the research reveals that concentrated poverty adversely affects one’s chances in life beginning in early childhood and adolescence.

Some scholars, however, have been concerned that these studies reached conclusions about neighborhood effects based on data that do not address the problem of self-selection bias, a term used in research to describe the effect of people grouping themselves together based on common characteristics. Proponents of self-selection bias argue that the effects we attribute to poor neighborhoods may instead be caused by the characteristics of families and individuals who end up living there. In other words, they believe that disadvantaged neighborhoods might not be the cause of poor outcomes; rather, families with the weakest job-related skills, with the lowest awareness of and concern for the effects of the local environment on their children’s social development, with attitudes that hinder social mobility, and with the most burdensome personal problems are simply more likely to live in these types of neighborhoods.

Indeed, some scholars even maintain that neighborhood effects disappear when researchers use appropriate statistical techniques to account for self-selection bias. Because the appropriateness of measures capturing neighborhood effects is not discussed as a major problem in such studies, a point that I will soon discuss, they fail to capture the most obvious empirical fact: living in a ghetto neighborhood has both structural and cultural effects that compromise life chances.

Arguments about self-selection bias were not seen as seriously challenging conclusions about neighborhood effects until the publication of the research on the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment, a housing pilot program undertaken by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) between 1994 and 1998. The MTO program was in fact inspired by the Gautreaux program, an earlier effort to assist minorities who wished to leave the inner city. The Gautreaux program was created under a 1976 court order resulting from a judicial finding that the Chicago Housing Authority deliberately segregated black families through its site selection and tenant selection policies and that HUD knowingly funded such violations of civil rights. Named for Dorothy Gautreaux, who initiated the original lawsuit, the program sought to remedy previous segregation by offering black public housing residents a chance to obtain subsidized housing throughout the greater Chicago area. By the time the Gautreaux program ended in 1998, it had placed seventy-one hundred families, with more than half relocating to white suburbs.
As the program unfolded, it allowed researchers to systematically compare the education and employment experiences of those families who had been assigned to private subsidized housing in the suburbs with those of a comparison group with similar characteristics and history who had been assigned to private apartments in the city. Research on this program reveals that the families who were relocated to housing in the suburbs experienced significantly higher rates of employment, lower school dropout rates, and higher college attendance rates.\(^6\)

Although some believed that the Gautreaux program removed the selection bias problem in a quasi-experimental way, “critics were not mollified” because the selection of participants and their placement in new neighborhoods were nonrandom (Clampet-Lundquist and Massey 2008). That is, “the Gautreaux program was the result of a court-ordered desegregation ruling and not a research experiment” (Keels et al. 2006), so some argued that self-selection was still a factor. After all, Gautreaux participants were persons struggling to leave poor inner-city neighborhoods. Some might argue that perhaps they were successful in their new setting not because they were no longer defeated by structural factors but because they had the gumption to fight their way out of the ghetto in the first place.

These criticisms were addressed in HUD’s MTO demonstration program. More specifically, from 1994 to 1997, HUD conducted a lottery that awarded housing vouchers to families living in public housing developments in high-poverty neighborhoods in five cities—Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Families who entered the lottery, thus indicating their desire to move, were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One was awarded housing vouchers that could be used to rent in the private market in any area, one was awarded housing vouchers that were restricted to private rentals in low-poverty neighborhoods, and one did not receive either of the two vouchers and was therefore treated as a control group to be compared with the other two groups.

The MTO interim evaluation studies were considered superior to the research on the Gautreaux program—as well as other research on neighborhood effects—because they were based on data from a randomized experimental design that eliminated the self-selection bias “that had made it difficult to clearly determine the association between living in poor neighborhoods and individual outcomes” (Kling et al. 2004, 31). The reports and publications on the interim evaluation, which was finalized in 2003, provided mixed evidence for neighborhood effects when comparing the group whose MTO vouchers were restricted to low-poverty areas with the group that did not receive vouchers. On one hand, during the five-year period following random assignment, the MTO movers who relocated to low-poverty areas were more likely to experience improvements in mental health and less likely to be obese, and girls experienced a significant reduction in “risky behavior” (that is, drinking, taking drugs, engaging in sex, and so on). On the other hand, research investigators found no evidence of an impact on employment rates and earnings or of any marked improvement on the educational or physical health outcomes of children and young men. These mixed results have led some, including reporters, to question whether there really are enduring negative effects of living in poor segregated neighborhoods.
However, although the research on the MTO experiment is rigorous, serious problems with the design of the experiment limit the extent to which one can generalize about neighborhood effects. First of all, the treatment was weak. That is, the voucher was only restricted for one year, and the restrictions were based on neighborhood poverty, not racial composition. Indeed, many MTO movers relocated to neighborhoods that were not significantly different from the ones they left. For example, three-fifths of MTO families entered highly segregated black neighborhoods. Such neighborhoods tend to be considerably less advantaged than integrated areas. Sociologist Robert Sampson analyzed the neighborhood attainment of all Chicago MTO families and found that after approximately seven years, although the voucher winners resided in neighborhoods with poverty rates somewhat lower than the neighborhoods of control families, both groups had clustered in segregated black neighborhoods that were still considerably poorer than what an overwhelming majority of Americans will ever experience—neighborhoods with poverty rates of roughly 30 percent (Sampson 2008).

One of the major differences between Gautreaux and MTO was that many Gautreaux families with vouchers moved to white suburban areas that were significantly less impoverished than their previous neighborhoods. In addition, at the time of the experiment’s interim evaluation, as many as 41 percent of the MTO families who entered low-poverty neighborhoods subsequently moved back to more disadvantaged neighborhoods. Because of such extensive out-migration, these MTO families accumulated relatively little time in areas of low poverty and correspondingly did not have an extended opportunity to experience life in low-poverty neighborhoods that were racially integrated (Sampson 2008; Clampet-Lundquist and Massey 2008).

Moreover, nearly three-quarters of the children in the MTO experiment remained in the same school district, often in the same schools, at the time of the interim evaluation. Stefanie DeLuca’s comment on the MTO parents in Baltimore, reveals that school choice was a low priority for some parents. “It is quite striking,” she states, “how little some parents thought that school mattered for learning, relative to what the child contributed through hard work and a ‘good attitude’” (DeLuca 2007, 25). Furthermore, as pointed out by Quigley and Raphael (2007), the experiment did not improve accessibility to employment opportunities for MTO movers because their new neighborhoods were no closer to areas of employment growth. Finally, a number of the projects that housed many participants prior to their MTO relocation were torn down during the time of the experiment, forcing individuals in the control groups to also move and thus making it difficult to determine differences between voucher families and those without vouchers.

Rather than concluding from this research that neighborhoods do not matter, it would be prudent to simply state that although the MTO research raises questions about the extent to which neighborhoods affect the social outcomes of children and adults, it certainly does not resolve these questions. The MTO is best viewed as a policy experiment rather than a measure of social processes. We learn a lot from the MTO regarding how helpful it would be to offer ghetto residents
housing vouchers with restricted use based on neighborhood poverty for one year. What the MTO tells us little about is the effect of neighborhoods on the development of children and families.

I think that overall, quantitative studies generate mixed or weak findings about the effects of living in poor segregated neighborhoods because of crude or inadequate measures to capture neighborhood effects. If a random experiment or even a nonexperimental study could be generated that would allow researchers to capture the impact of a range of factors distinguishing different neighborhoods, including identifying factors that are cumulative over time, there would be significantly different findings on the impact of living in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods. Allow me to elaborate briefly.

In an impressive study that analyzes data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a national longitudinal survey with methods designed to measure intergenerational economic mobility, Patrick Sharkey found that “more than 70% of black children who grow up in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods remain in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods as adults” (Sharkey 2008, 931). 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 percent 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 (Sharkey 2008).

This persistence of neighborhood inequality raises serious questions about studies on neighborhood effects. Many of these studies substantially underestimate the racial inequality in neighborhood environments because they use a single point in time, or a single generation, measure of neighborhood poverty or income (Sharkey 2008). Sharkey suggests, therefore, that the focus of the research on neighborhood effects might be shifted to an examination of how the effect of living in poor neighborhoods over two or more generations differs from short-term residence in such neighborhoods. This brings us back to another shortcoming of the MTO experiment. Sharkey states,

The difficulty with interpreting the results from the MTO as estimates of “neighborhood effects” lies in the conceptualization of a move to a new neighborhood as a point-in-time “treatment.” This perspective ignores the possibility that the social environments surrounding families over generations have any lagged or cumulative influence on family members, and it ignores the complex pathways by which this influence may occur. For instance, the neighborhood may have an influence on an individual’s educational attainment in one generation, in turn influencing the individual’s occupational status and income as an adult, the quality of the home environment in which that individual raises a child, and the developmental trajectory of that child. These indirect pathways are obscured in observational studies that control for a set of covariates such as education or the quality of the home environment, and they are impossible to assess in experimental approaches such as MTO. (Sharkey 2008, 963)

We should also consider another path-breaking study that Sharkey coauthored with senior investigator Robert Sampson and another colleague, Steven
Raudenbush, that examined the durable effects of concentrated poverty on black children’s verbal ability (Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush 2008). They studied a representative sample of 750 African American children, ages six to twelve, who were growing up in Chicago in 1995, and followed them anywhere they moved in the United States for up to seven 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 cumulatively impedes the development of academically relevant verbal ability in children”—so much so that the effects linger on even if they leave these neighborhoods (Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush 2008, 846).

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 six “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” (Sampson, Sharkey and Raudenbush 2008, 852). Sampson, Sharkey and Raudenbush (2008) argue that if researchers were trying to determine the extent to which neighborhoods affect children’s verbal ability by randomly providing housing vouchers to black children who grew up in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods and who took a test measuring verbal ability before they moved, and then comparing the results of the same test a few years later after the children had resided in better neighborhoods, the conclusion would very likely be that there are no neighborhood effects. Why? Because there would be no difference in verbal ability linked to their movement to a better neighborhood, since verbal abilities would have already been formed.

The notion that the children’s verbal ability was not affected by their early years in a disadvantaged neighborhood would be quite misleading, they point out, because it does not take into account the significant lagged effect of living in concentrated-disadvantage neighborhoods—effects that linger even after environmental conditions improve. Accordingly, they remarked, “it follows that residential mobility programs for those who grow up in poverty do not necessarily provide the appropriate test of the causal effect of neighborhood social contexts” (Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush 2008, 852). In other words, the lack of evidence for neighborhood effects in the MTO evaluation does not necessarily suggest the absence of cumulative neighborhood effects.

The studies by Sharkey and by 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 (including linguistic patterns, the focus of Sampson’s study) that emanate from or are the products of racial exclusion—traits such as poor 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 and social norms among disadvantaged populations” (Sharkey 2008, 964).

Unfortunately, very little research has focused on these cumulative cultural experiences, and it is sometimes difficult to separate cumulative cultural experiences from cumulative psychological experiences. Take, for example, repeated experiences of discrimination and disrespect that a lot of blacks share. As University of Wisconsin sociologist Erik Olin Wright has pointed out, if these experiences are systematic over an extended time, they can generate common psychological states that may be erroneously interpreted as norms by social investigators because they seem to regulate patterns of behavior (Erik Olin Wright, private communication, May 7, 2008). Resignation as a response to repeated experiences with discrimination and disrespect is one good example. Parents in segregated communities who have had such experiences may transmit to children, through the process of socialization, a set of beliefs about what to expect from life and how one should respond to life circumstances. In other words, children may be taught norms of resignation—they observe the behavior of adults and learn the “appropriate” action or response in different situations independently of their own direct experiences. In the process, children may acquire an inclination to interpret the way the world works that reflects a strong sense that other members of society disrespect them because they are black.

The impact of chronic economic subordination and displays of disrespect on people’s inclinations and emotional states may depend partly on the cultural resources they have to interpret what has happened to them, such as a cultural framing designed to fend off insults that promotes strong feelings of racial pride within the community. Over time, “the shared psychological dispositions can become crystallized in cultural products and practices” (Wright, private communication).

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 does not recede into the background.

The Relative Importance of Structure and Culture

In addition to making sure that the structural effects of living in poor neighborhoods are not dismissed or treated lightly, it is also important to be clear that structural factors are likely to play a far greater role than cultural factors in bringing about rapid neighborhood change. Persuasive evidence for this argument is provided in two studies by University of Texas social scientist Paul Jargowsky. First,
in *Poverty and Place* (1997), Jargowsky reveals that in metropolitan areas around the country, changes in economic activity were related to both rapid increases and decreases in neighborhood poverty. Economic booms sharply decreased ghetto poverty in the Southwest in the 1970s and in the Northeast in the 1980s. A rise in the overall mean income resulted in sharp declines in ghetto poverty concentration among blacks.

As Jargowsky correctly observes, “A self-sustaining neighborhood culture implies that levels of neighborhood poverty would respond slowly, if at all, to increased economic opportunity” (Jargowsky 1997, 186). However, not only is this assumption undermined in *Poverty and Place*, but a later report that Jargowsky prepared for the Brookings Institution also revealed that the number of people residing in high-poverty neighborhoods decreased by 24 percent, or 2.5 million people, from 1990 to 2000 because of the economic boom, particularly in the last half of the 1990s. Moreover, the number of such neighborhoods in the country—the study defined them as census tracts with at least 40 percent of residents below the poverty level—declined by more than a quarter (Jargowsky 2003).

In 1990, almost a third of all American blacks lived in such neighborhoods; the 2000 figure was 19 percent. Yet despite this significant improvement, African Americans still have the highest rates of concentrated poverty of all groups in the United States. In part, the state of inner-city ghettos is a legacy of historic racial subjugation. Concentrated-poverty neighborhoods are the most visible and disturbing displays of racial and income segregation. And the dramatic decline in concentrated poverty from 1990 to 2000 cannot be explained in terms of culture. Rather, these shifts demonstrate that the fate of African Americans and other racial groups is inextricably connected with changes across the modern economy.

Jargowsky’s data bear this out. The declines in concentrated poverty in the 1990s occurred not just in a few cities but across the country. By contrast, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., were two of the few central cities that experienced a rise in concentrated poverty during the 1990s. Jargowsky advances three arguments to account for the divergent trend in Los Angeles: (1) the destructive riot after the Rodney King verdict in 1992; (2) the number of Latino immigrants from Mexico and other Central and South American countries into high-poverty neighborhoods was significant; and (3) “the recession in the early 1990s was particularly severe in Southern California, and the economic recovery there was not as rapid as in other parts of California” (Jargowsky 2003, 9).

In Washington, the devastating fiscal crisis from the early to mid-1990s resulted in drastic reductions in public services and an erosion of public confidence in the district’s government. This development contributed to “a rapid out-migration of moderate- and middle-income black families, particularly into suburban Maryland counties to the east of the central city. The poor were left behind in economically isolated neighborhoods with increasing poverty rates” (Jargowsky 2003, 9).

Virtually all racial and ethnic groups recorded improvements in the 1990s. The number of whites living in high-poverty neighborhoods declined by 29 percent (from 2.7 million people to 1.9 million), and the number of blacks decreased by
36 percent (from 4.8 million to 3.1 million). Latinos were the major exception to this pattern because their numbers in high-poverty areas increased slightly during the 1990s, by 1.6 percent. However, this finding should be placed in the context of Latino population growth: the number of Latinos overall increased dramatically over those years, by 57.9 percent, compared with 16.2 percent growth for African Americans and only 3.4 percent for whites. In particular, low-skilled immigrants drove Latino population growth. For all races, the greatest improvements against poverty concentration were in the South and Midwest, and the smallest were in the Northeast, mirroring wider economic trends.

Thus, the notable reduction in the number of high-poverty neighborhoods and the substantial decrease in the population of such neighborhoods might simply be blips of economic booms rather than permanent trends. Unemployment and individual poverty rates have increased since 2000, and there is every reason to assume that concentrated poverty rates are on the rise again as well, although data on concentrated poverty for this period will only become available in the 2010 census.

The earlier increase in concentrated poverty occurred during a period of rising income inequality for all Americans that began in the early 1970s. This was a period of decline in inflation-adjusted average incomes among the poor and of growing economic segregation caused by the exodus of middle-income families from inner cities. What had been mixed-income neighborhoods were rapidly transformed into areas of high poverty. Undoubtedly, if the robust economy of the late 1990s could have been extended for several more years rather than coming to an abrupt halt in 2001, concentrated poverty in inner cities would have declined even more. Here once again we see the importance and power of structural forces—in this case impersonal economic forces—on significantly changing concentrated poverty.

Toward a Holistic Social Policy Approach

Policy makers dedicated to combating the problems of race and poverty and who recognize the importance of structural inequities face a major challenge: how to generate political support from Americans, who tend to place far more emphasis on cultural traits and individual behavior than on structural inequities in explaining social and economic outcomes. After all, beliefs that attribute joblessness and poverty to individual shortcomings, including those that represent cultural traits, do not engender strong support for social programs to end inequality. But in addressing the problem of structural impediments, it would not be wise to leave the impression in public discussions that cultural problems do not matter. Even though more weight should be given to structural causes of inequality because they continue to play a far greater role in the subjugation of black Americans and other people of color, proposals to address racial inequality should reflect awareness of the inextricable link between aspects of structure and culture.
Given the foregoing analysis, I think that the problems of race and urban poverty can be most effectively addressed with a holistic approach—an approach that recognizes the complex web of structural and cultural factors that create and reinforce racial inequality. From a social policy perspective, I would like to briefly discuss a very successful program that epitomizes the type of holistic approach I have in mind—the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ). This is an apt example because the Obama administration is currently designing what it calls “promised neighborhoods” patterned after the HCZ in twenty cities across the country.

The HCZ was developed by the visionary Geoffrey Canada, whose mission was to flood a number of blocks in Harlem with educational, social, and medical services to create a comprehensive safety net for the children in that area (Tough 2008). More specifically, the HCZ is a ninety-seven-block laboratory in central Harlem that combines two reform-oriented charter schools with a web of community services designed for children from birth to college graduation in order to provide a supportive and positive social environment outside the schools (Dobbie and Fryer 2009). Canada was able to get corporate leaders to support him, and he now has an annual budget of roughly $64 million.

HCZ features more than twenty programs that represent a combination of structural and cultural interventions to help and empower individuals who live in these ninety-seven blocks. Included in these investments are programs ranging from family and health programs and community programs to childhood programs such as Head Start; after-school programs that include tutoring, dance, and karate; and an all-day prekindergarten program called Harlem Gems, which has a 4:1 child to adult ratio. The intensive curriculum in the Harlem Gems “is designed to increase socialization skills, build routines, and begin development of the language and pre-literacy skills students need in kindergarten. The Gems program incorporates a number of nontraditional subjects such as Spanish and French, and strongly encourages parents to volunteer at the school and become more involved in their child’s education” (Dobbie and Fryer 2009, 6).

While most of the community programs represent structural interventions, and some combine structural and cultural interventions such as the Harlem Gems, one notable community program, the Baby College, is clearly cultural in orientation. The Baby College is a nine-week workshop for expectant parents and those with children up to age three. The curriculum is based on the writings and counsel of the pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and features subjects that range from handling parental stress to discipline and parent-child bonding, including attempts to encourage parents to read to their children (Brazelton 1992).

The school investment features the Promise Academy charter schools, a major structural intervention. Promise Academy 1 opened in 2004 with elementary and middle schools; Promise Academy 2 opened in fall 2005 with an elementary school. As Dobbie and Fryer (2009) point out, the Promise Academies will enroll new kindergarten and sixth-grade cohorts they are each year until a full K-12 set of charters. Students in the Promise Academies are in school 60 percent longer than students in regular public schools, including an extended school day, with coordinated after-school tutoring and additional classes on Saturdays for students.
who need remediation in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics skills, and a very short summer vacation (Dobie and Fryer 2009).

As Dobbie and Fryer point out, “A slew of anecdotal evidence suggests that the HCZ approach is working. For six straight years, 100 percent of pre-kindergarteners in the Harlem Gems program were school-ready. Eighty-one percent of parents who have attended The Baby College report reading to their child more often than they previously read to them” (Dobie and Fryer 2009, 7). However, this is not the most rigorous evidence for the success of the program, because the children enrolled in Harlem Gems and the parents enrolled in the Baby College were not randomly selected. In other words, there could be some self-selection bias here. The most rigorous evidence for the success of the program comes from a random assignment evaluation by the Harvard economist Roland Fryer (Wright, private communication). Fryer took advantage of the fact that HCZ’s charter schools are required to select students by lottery. This allowed him to create a treatment group and a control group. The treatment group is composed of students who were selected by the lottery, and the control group consists of students who were lottery losers.

The preliminary results of this evaluation are spectacular. Here, we have kids from some of the most impoverished backgrounds, mostly from poor single-parent families, whose scores on the cognitive tests far exceed those of children in the public schools of New York, including the children who did not make the lottery. The math scores are especially dramatic and compare favorably with those of children who live in upper-middle-class suburbia. Of the children in the third grade, who benefited from entering the program when they were in kindergarten, 100 percent of the students in Promise Academy 2 scored at or above grade level on the 2008 statewide math test. And 97 percent of the third graders in Promise Academy 1 scored at or above grade level in math. Moreover, 87 percent of the students in the eighth grade at the Promise Academy 1 middle school scored at or above grade level in math, even though they did not have the benefit of early exposure to the charter school.

But HCZ is also enormously successful in improving the scores on the statewide ELA tests in the elementary schools. Improvements in the ELA scores in the middle schools were notable but less dramatic. As I indicated above, living in poor segregated neighborhoods for long periods has an adverse affect on verbal ability, as measured by the cognitive tests. And these effects linger on even after these children leave these neighborhoods. So it is much more difficult to overcome the effects of living in chronically economically poor segregated neighborhoods on verbal skills of older children. Nonetheless, even the ELA scores of students in the HCZ were significantly higher than those in the control group, and, to repeat, the ELA scores for those in the academies’ elementary schools were especially dramatic. And now Geoffrey Canada and his staff have decided to select children for this program from a lottery at the time they are born. As this program continues, the ELA scores will undoubtedly improve significantly for those beyond elementary school because they will have the benefit of the
earliest exposure to HCZ. This is very important because beginning at the earliest point possible in a child’s life would be an effective way to offset the cumulative effects of living in poor segregated neighborhoods discussed above.

Roland Fryer has pulled together a team of economists and sociologists to analyze the comprehensive sets of quantitative and qualitative data they are gathering in the evaluation process, including data that examine both the structural and cultural impacts of the evaluation. The ultimate goal is to provide a comprehensive theory to explain the overall success of this program, based on a careful analysis of the quantitative and qualitative evidence. Ultimately, this theory will provide the guidelines for scaling up the program in the form of the twenty promised neighborhoods the Obama administration wants to develop across the country.

Conclusion

A complex web of racialist and nonracialist structural forces have adversely impacted life in inner-city black neighborhoods. Yet a number of studies have raised questions about the real effects of living in such neighborhoods, including the widely cited studies on the MTO experiment. However, I highlighted two pathbreaking studies that advance serious questions about the extent to which the MTO captured the effects of living in poor neighborhoods. These two studies provide compelling evidence for considering the cumulative effects of residing in poor segregated neighborhoods. They also provide direction for much-needed research on the cumulative effects of living in poor segregated neighborhoods. Some of these effects are obviously structural (e.g., vicinity to jobs and enrollment in low-quality schools), but others are cultural, such as prolonged exposure to cultural traits that originate from or are the products of racial exclusion (e.g., the development of language skills and the influence of norms of resignation in response to repeated experiences of discrimination and disrespect).

Also, if one attempts to explain rapid changes in social and economic outcomes, there is little evidence that cultural forces carry the power of structural forces. We need only to consider the impact of the economic boom on the reduction of concentrated racial poverty in the 1990s, as discussed in this article, to illustrate this point. Although cultural forces play a role in inner-city outcomes, the evidence suggests that they are secondary to the larger economic and political forces, both racial and nonracial, that move our American society. Indeed, structural conditions provide the context within which cultural responses to chronic economic and racial subordination are developed.

Finally, from a public policy perspective, the studies discussed in this article suggest a systemic approach that recognizes the complex web of structural and cultural factors that create and reinforce racial inequality. And I highlighted the HCZ as an excellent example of this approach and one on which the Obama administration is modeling the creation of a national program of “promised neighborhoods” to address chronic racial and economic subordination.
Notes

1. I first discussed the concepts of indirect and direct forces of racial inequality in my contribution to a coauthored introduction to the volume America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences (Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell 2001).

2. My discussion in this section on the concept of “culture” owes a great deal to the work of Lamont and Small (2008).

3. For a review of the literature on school tracking, see Jane Free (2004).

4. There is mixed evidence for the outcomes of “acting white” as it applies to education. One of the best-known studies of this concept is Fordham and Ogbu (1986). They studied African American students at a high school in Washington, D.C., and concluded that the fear of acting white was one of the major factors undermining student achievement. In contrast, Prudence Carter’s (2003, 2005) studies have not supported the idea that students who avoided “acting white” held lower educational aspirations. Roland Fryer (2006) presents yet another perspective. He found that a high grade point average (GPA) presents a social disadvantage for Hispanics and blacks in public, integrated schools, but he saw no such effect in schools that were segregated (80 percent or more black) or private. He also noticed a marked difference in this effect among black boys and black girls; black boys in public, integrated schools were particularly susceptible to social ostracism as their GPAs increased and were penalized seven times more than black students (including both genders) overall.


7. Sampson and his colleagues created a composite measure of verbal ability based on results from two widely used tests given to their subjects—the Wide Range Achievement Test reading examination and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children vocabulary test (Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush 2008).

References


