

Reconsidering Culture and Poverty- Article Review

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Received date : April 04,2018; Accepted date : June 07,2018; Published date: June 14, 2018.

Citations: Paul Andrew Bourne, Reconsidering Culture and Poverty- Article Review. J.Journalism and Intellectual Property,DOI: <http://doi.org/06.2018/1.10003>.**Copyright :** © 2018 Paul Andrew Bourne et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

The authors—Small, Harding and Lamont—examined the issues of culture and poverty from an in-depth constructivist paradigm. They expanded the discourse of poverty by evaluating the matter from an historical perspective. By so doing the authors perused historical literature on the study of poverty, the historical premise of the issues and provided balanced perspectives—giving historical framework, contemporary perspectives and providing justification for their disparities. Small, Harding and Lamont expanded the discourse of poverty by highlighting cultural stereotypes, researchers' unconscious acceptance of the historical subjectivity, and indicating how elitists have framed and biased the discourse of poverty. The authors argue that the concept of "culture of poverty" which was promoted by scholars as Oscar Lewis (1966) and Ryan (1976) that some people are poor because their cultural-orientation and that simply changing their culture will transform them into other social classes—lower-middle class to upper class—is by a cultural stereotype.

Culture of Poverty: Article Critique

When anthropologist Oscar Lewis forwarded the concept of 'culture of poverty' in 1961, Patterson opined that it was "'an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society, [but] once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on children" (14). The discourse of a culture of poverty means that poverty can be a continued reality for some people and that this is culturally self-reinforced as a result of structural conditions in the society (13). A distinguished Caribbean Professor of Economics postulated that social inequalities that were instituted in the Caribbean have accounted for the state of the people, which he published in a book entitled 'Persistent Poverty'. Simply put, structural and socio-economic conditions have been employed and continue to be used to maintain social poverty. When one examines the wealth in the Caribbean during slavery, there is evidence that poverty was widespread among the slaves. This accounted for the development of places to include Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies, as the slave sought economic survivability in a wealthy society (3, 7, 8, 19). On examination of the socio-economic programmes prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, scholars have forwarded that they have resulted in underdeveloped nations (1,6,15,17,20).

Small et al. rationale for a 'culture of poverty,' is encapsulated in the fact that even with education and other material resources, many people in poverty have NOT been able to transition into lower-middle class or even the upper class. Such a theorizing debunks the economic argument that education is a factor in economic growth and development, which means it is a tool that can be used to change people's current social condition (5,23). contended that such a paradigm (culture poverty) is more in keeping with a support of the oppressive and exclusionary economic system that caused them to remain poor—the issue of structural-poverty that is subtly interwoven in the social system and prevents social mobility by way of material-deprivation as well as political marginalization (17). They showed that contemporary scholars (researchers) do not subscribe to the aforementioned cultured stereotype and have been able to stare clearly away from the structural and cultural explanations of poverty . In fact, economists like Todaro and Friedman have argued that education is a tool of social mobility, which means people's social conditions can be directly changed by the introduction of training and skills development.

Milton Freidman (1955) in an article titled '*The Role of Government in Education*' posited that:

"A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens. Education contributes to both. In consequence, the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to the child or to his parents but to other members of the society; the education of my child contributes to other people's welfare by promoting a stable and democratic society. Yet it is not feasible to identify the particular individuals (or families) benefited or the money value of the benefit and so to charge for the services rendered. There is therefore a significant "neighborhood effect" (Friedman, 1955)

Dr. Friedman's argument forwards that training and skills development of humans positively contribute to individual and societal development. He opined that the value of educating a child does not end with the individual but extends to the society, which would have violated the 'culture of poverty' paradigm. Friedman's theorizing dates back to the 1950s and it is still relevant in the 21st century societies. Lee said that:

During the period from 1945 to 1961, before the economic boom, the available data indicate that Korea substantially expanded education.

As Table 2 shows, school enrolments at all levels increased extremely rapidly from 1945 to 1965, except during the period of the Korean War (Lee, 1993).

Professor Michael Todaro stated that “there are non-economic variables, values, attitudes and institutions” (23) that are critical to development. Such theorizing somewhat violates ‘structural poverty’ or ‘culture of poverty’ paradigm and this is further reinforced by Lee’s writing on changes in Korea by way of increased spending on training and skills or education. Education is therefore an economic good and its utility will develop the human capital as well as being crucial to economic and social transformation of the individual and the society. It is this premise why some scholars and writers argue that education is the gateway to economic growth and development (Almendarez, 2011; Todaro, 2000). Rasheed (1998) in “Development” wrote, “Generating and sustaining high growth rates, eradicating poverty and promoting human development require deliberate far-reaching transformations that go well beyond the standard economic reform measure.” This position is shared by Professor of development economic Michael Todaro. He (later) argued that although economic progress is significant for development, development also relies on political system, social characteristics, governance, integration, investing in human development and boosting self-reliance.

Professor Todaro purported that there are three (3) objectives of development. Firstly, to “increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life – such as food, shelter, health, and protection. Secondly, to raise the levels of living, including, in addition to higher incomes, the better jobs, better education, and greater attention to cultural and humanistic values, all of which will serve not only to enhance material well-being also to generate greater individual and national self-esteem. Finally, he purported the aim of expansion of social choices.” Based on Professor Todaro’s position on development, this includes the improvement in the quality of life of people through social, political and economic determinants. Todaro’s perspective refutes the ‘culture of poverty’ paradigm simply because poverty can be reverse by way of education.

The contemporary scholars have injected cultural analysis to the study of poverty from which emerged a different set of explanations for the poor in society. They opined that for decades, the discourse on poverty has tended to blame the victims instead of a system that intention create socioeconomic deprivation. As a result, contemporary scholars have removed the ‘blame the victim’ theorizing from the analyses of poverty discourse. They have been able to identity three areas in the culture-poverty discourse—1) how people cope with material deprivation – sustained material deprivation by the social system, 2) a study of culture in order to debunk the cultural stereotype of poverty, and 3) examining culture to clarify and develop an understanding of the constitutions of poverty. This had led to the rise of totally different paradigms-perspectives and set of findings to differ from the traditional culture of poverty scholarship.

Small, Harding and Lamont showed that policy-makers have their value-orientation (bias) that they oftentimes impose upon policy implementation. They believed that if these elitists take a culture of poverty perspective simply because they do not want to examine the reality of their policies on people. The authors brought to the forefront of the discussion how elitists’ policies have framed and continued the poverty reality in society; yet, by blaming the victim, they sideline the real reason for poverty of some people. However, they contended that if they were to take another perspective on the reason for poverty, then, policy implementations and frameworks would be totally different. The absence of this would account for how poverty is perpetuated in social system—denial because of value-orientation and self-gratification. The authors succinctly captured the matter more ably than I this way, “Both the discourse and the policy reflect deeply held (if often inconsistent) assumptions about the goals of policy and especially about work

responsibility, service, agency, ‘deservingness’, and the structure of opportunity”. Hence, there is a need to change cultural attitude that this holds the keys to understanding a clear and more objective assessment of poverty. Why? Because “People who care about policy should also be concerned with culture because it shapes how policy elites make decisions affecting the poor” The reality is, the poverty discourse and its inter-correlation with policy is critical to understanding the phenomenon of poverty and how biases paradigm of policy-makers will not be effective in reducing or alleviate the poverty pandemic in society.

The authors forwarded that “...invocations of culture would be more compelling if they were informed by the much more sophisticated culture literature that has developed over the past three decades or so”. Simply put, failure to understand the real cultural underpinnings of people-context, will not provide the knowledge on how to address their situations. So, holding the wrong perspective, bias, on people will NOT only retard real change; but it will not alleviate the issue that it seeks to change. A reason for such a perspective is simply because value-orientation guides policy and therefore the wrong paradigm will address the matter thereby and not with objective truths.

One of the objective truths that has been long established is relationship between education and development. According to Dr. Rodney, “Development in human society is a many sided process. At the level of the individual it implies increase in skill and capacity and material wellbeing”. It can be deduced from Rodney’s perspective that human capital can be improved and this transformation holds the key to economic and social development of the individual and the wider society. This means from a macroeconomic perspective, human capital can be improved by way of productivity, technological innovations, increased know hows, and these are poverty reduction strategies. From a microeconomic standpoint, education creates labour market options (i.e., employability), improves earning options and capabilities and these offer a way out of poverty (4). It is upon this premise that the World Bank argue for the investment in education as a poverty reduction mechanism.

Conclusion

Small, Harding and Lamont borrowed value-orientation from Talcott Parsons and ably used it to enlighten the discourse of policy alleviation (or not). They believed that people’s value system will guide their actions and can be used to validate a perspective, and so they will interpret the world and all therein from this paradigm. Hence the concept of culture has been framed by people’s value-orientation over the decades and set a premise for choices and decisions—this is framed many studies over the decades as well as policies to alleviate poverty. Nevertheless, alternative modes of research from values have been used to frame a new thinking on the matter which is contrary to the culture poverty perspective.

Education is a process of social and physical transformation. Although it may be costly to invest in each individual, it is a social good outweigh the initial private cost. Education improves the social capital of the individual and the society, which means that its benefits transform one’s current inabilities and social conditions. Education, therefore, is a key for social mobility and this offers insights into how it may retard poverty. Minorities are less likely than hegemonic class to have private health insurance and other provisions including money to change their present situation, and so it is education that provide the engine that changes social realities. Simply put

“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities” (Townsend 1979: 31)



Townsend's outlook as well as that of Friedman, Todaro and others provide evidence that education transforms the human capital and this transformation is what holds the key to poverty reduction and retardation.

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