

REVIEW ESSAYS

Culture, Poverty, and Racial Inequality: A New Agenda?

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Few issues in the study of poverty and inequality in the United States have been as fraught, and as intellectually challenging, as the question of culture and racial inequality. *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, edited by Orlando Patterson with Ethan Fosse, is the latest intervention into this longstanding academic and public discussion, and probably the boldest since William Julius Wilson's introduction to *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). *The Cultural Matrix* (hereafter, *TCM*) represents an important step forward in integrating cultural concepts into the study of poverty, inequality, and race in a way that recognizes both the potential for independent causal effects of culture and the closely intertwined dynamics of culture and structure.

This lengthy (almost 700 pages) and diverse volume can be read in multiple ways and will be of interest to a wide range of scholars of social stratification, race, culture, urban studies, social policy, and social problems. One can see within *TCM* (at least) three distinct but interrelated agendas: (1) applying Patterson's program of cultural sociology, rooted in the concepts of norms and values, to questions surrounding the well-being of contemporary black youth, (2) reinvigorating the role of culture in the study of the lives of black youth more generally through a synthesis of cultural and structural factors, and (3) showcasing a series of state-of-the-art studies on the role of culture in the daily lives of poor black youth and their communities.

Norms, Values, and the Social Problems of Black Youth

One way to read *TCM* is as an effort to apply Patterson's program of cultural sociology

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(presented most comprehensively in a 2014 paper in the *Annual Review of Sociology*) to understanding the cultural views and social problems of contemporary black youth in the United States. Indeed, the chapters authored or co-authored by the two editors could have been assembled into their own stand-alone book. A key part of this agenda is to revive the concepts of values and norms, which Patterson argues have inappropriately fallen out of favor among most cultural sociologists and have been replaced by concepts like toolkits/repertoires, symbolic boundaries, and narratives that are rooted in what I would call a "culture and cognition" approach. From this vantage point, the culture and cognition approach has too easily eschewed the "evaluative" aspects of culture, particularly norms and values.

Although one might disagree with this characterization of the culture and cognition approach to understanding the intersection between culture and inequality, Patterson's exhortation to take norms and values more seriously deserves careful consideration and further empirical attention. Drawing on recent work in social psychology and other disciplines, Patterson explains and further develops conceptual distinctions that may well make norms and values more useful concepts for future scholarship, especially in comparison to the simple uses of those concepts derived from contemporary interpretations of Parsonian sociology. While a full discussion is beyond the scope of this

essay and some simplification in my summaries is necessary, I highlight a few interesting and provocative examples.

One example is the distinction between observational and injunctive social norms, which are defined most broadly as the “shared rules we live by.” Injunctive norms are based on what we feel one ought to do, whereas observational norms are based on what others are actually doing. When applied to the question of out-of-wedlock or early childbearing, this distinction recognizes how multiple norms can coexist. Injunctive norms recognize the desirability of childbearing within marriage, but observational norms recognize that many young people in poor black communities are in fact having children outside of marriage and that such decisions are not stigmatized.

Another example is the distinction between declarative, procedural, and evaluative (norms and values) cognitive knowledge. Declarative knowledge is shared information about the world, whether uniformly known or not, whereas procedural knowledge is about how to go about doing things (scripts, for instance). Patterson and Jacqueline Rivers put this distinction to use in their analysis of participants in a job readiness program for unemployed black youth. While the program participants they study subscribe to the norms and values of the conventional workplace and understand, in a declarative sense, the importance of learning them when searching for a job, they suffer from a deficit of procedural knowledge. They cannot effectively enact those norms and values in practice because they have had no prior experience or socialization in doing so. This moves us toward one possible understanding of the disconnect between close adherence to mainstream or conventional values and actual behavior by arguing that social isolation has prevented these individuals from learning the procedural knowledge necessary to live up to those values and norms.

The analysis of the job readiness program also provides a nice example of the use of the concept of knowledge activation, which helps us to understand how knowledge that individuals seem to have (say, in the context of a qualitative interview) does not get used effectively in a job interview. Patterson and Rivers argue that other forms

of knowledge or behavioral styles may be more readily accessible because they are used more frequently in daily life (they are “chronic”). For the job program participants, this manifested itself in the inappropriate use of “street” styles of interaction, long learned as a survival strategy in violent urban neighborhoods, in the context of a job search when stressful moments emerged. In other words, some forms of knowledge are more cognitively at the ready than others as a result of prior life experiences—code switching is cognitively challenging and requires safe spaces in which to practice.

These are but a few examples, and readers may also find useful Patterson’s discussion of “cultural configurations” (a more sophisticated conception of subculture) as well as his conceptual tools for understanding cultural change and continuity, long a passion of Patterson’s. Surely *TCM*’s application of these conceptual tools to the experiences and behaviors of black youth will jumpstart further intellectual debate about both the concepts themselves (for example, how they differ or not from the other conceptual tools of cultural sociologists) and their ability to explain the behaviors, decisions, and problems of black youth.

Culture, Structure, Poverty, and Race

A second agenda of *TCM* is to provide an integrated account of the intersections between culture and structure in the lives of black youth. Readers will quickly see that the editors and authors, while insisting on some independent role of culture in explaining the problems of black youth, see culture and structure as closely intertwined and mutually constitutive. Sometimes cultural changes enhance or block structural forces, and sometime they mediate the effects of structural changes or disadvantages. The provocative “cultural matrix” in the title quickly becomes a “sociocultural matrix” in Patterson’s remarkable synthesis of decades of research on black youth and poor black neighborhoods more generally that integrates structural factors (including but not limited to segregation and neighborhood violence, school funding and quality, the criminal justice system, and environmental toxins) with cultural factors

(hegemonic masculinity, the black church, hip-hop, mass media consumption, and the ever-looming presence of “the street”).

Much of this discussion will be familiar to those who have followed the literature on urban poverty, including—for example—the importance of segregation, social isolation, and violent neighborhood environments, single-motherhood, exposure to chemical toxins such as lead poisoning, employer discrimination, mass incarceration, and school quality. Yet *TCM* also highlights neglected factors at the intersection between culture and structure. In doing so, *TCM* is careful to specify exactly which cultural values and norms or structural arrangements and positions are at issue, avoiding the trap of discussing culture or structure in overly abstract and general terms.

One example is the possible link between cultural production and consumption of hip-hop music and behaviors in other domains. Patterson argues that hip-hop is especially fascinating because it illustrates the cultural impact of black youth as cultural producers but also propagates and reinforces damaging norms and values related to hegemonic masculinity and violence against women, dominates public images of black youth, and valorizes the “street.” A second example is the role of values and norms regarding gender relations, sexual behavior, and childbearing. Patterson argues that such norms represent an independent effect of culture on family structure carried down across generations from their origins in slavery, but that these effects only came about as the result of changes in sexual norms in the wider U.S. culture, themselves prompted by increased access to abortion and reproductive technology. These challenging hypotheses will surely inspire future empirical work to investigate the possible causal relationships between culture and structure.

Finally, *TCM* is on firmest ground in calling for study of the cultural assumptions and beliefs of policymakers and other elites (see also Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Particularly in light of the recent exposure of the frequency and severity of police violence against black youth, the cultural underpinnings of structural problems deserve greater attention. This idea is well illustrated in the chapter by James

Rosenbaum and colleagues, which argues that elite conceptions of the way higher education ought to work have led to institutions and practices that poorly serve many young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds without any real effects on educational quality or student learning. More generally, *TCM* warns against “policy-oriented tunnel vision” in which single outcomes like student test scores are examined in isolation from other forms of well-being and in which single interventions that only chip away at a small part of a larger set of intersecting problems are dismissed as ineffective at improving the welfare of black youth.

Culture, Black Youth, and Black Communities

A third agenda of *TCM* is to showcase a set of mostly empirical studies that take seriously the role of culture in the daily lives of black youth and black communities. These chapters cover an extensive range of topics, from the nature and consequences of street violence, to neighborhood norms and religious organizations, to hip-hop and popular culture, to educational institutions, work, and marriage. Some of these serve to illustrate the potential power of Patterson’s program of cultural sociology, while others seem only tangentially connected to it. Although some readers might lament the absence of chapters on specific topics such as the role of families in youth socialization and inoculation against experiences with racism or the meanings attached to parenthood and family structure, collectively the papers make a significant contribution to the intellectual project of the volume. Because there are too many chapters to discuss all of them individually, I highlight three of them that I found to be especially noteworthy.

In a chapter that leverages his long-term study of Chicago neighborhoods, Robert Sampson examines continuity and change in one aspect of neighborhood culture: norms toward altruistic or other-regarding behavior. His analysis shows that measures of structural disadvantage and organizational density play an important role in neighborhood variation in these norms. Moreover, Sampson’s analysis also shows that such

norms exhibit a strong correlation over the course of an entire decade net of structural factors, suggesting strong independent cultural continuity in features of a neighborhood's local culture.

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with young men involved in street violence, Joseph C. Krupnick and Christopher Winship examine the social norms of street encounters that help these young men to avoid violent confrontations. They ask why there is not more violence in inner-city neighborhoods. Their micro-sociological analysis proposes that the answer is that well-established norms for casual street encounters provide a structure to such interactions that allows individuals to substitute verbal play for physical altercations. In so doing, Krupnick and Winship illustrate the power of a detailed study of micro-level social norms for explaining individual behavior and patterns of violence in poor neighborhoods.

Drawing on a novel analysis of inner-city students bussed to suburban schools and a comparison group of those who were not, Simone Ispa-Landa shows how schools can act as agents of socialization and cultural transmission for poor students. She finds that the bussed students developed middle-class understandings of authority structures and strategies for navigating these authority structures, providing them with the cultural tools to more successfully interact with authority figures. Specific school personnel were instrumental in such socialization efforts. Ispa-Landa's findings suggest that, under the right circumstances and with deliberate effort, schools can be institutions

of opportunity and cultural cultivation, preparing disadvantaged students to successfully navigate and leverage resources from middle-class institutions.

A New Agenda?

Like any innovative piece of scholarship, *The Cultural Matrix* raises as many questions as it answers. What does it mean to say that culture has an independent effect on black youth in a world in which culture and structure are so closely intertwined, and how would we isolate an independent effect if it exists? What new data need to be collected, and new measurement strategies developed, in order to fully leverage cultural concepts (whether they be values, norms, scripts, frames, narratives, repertoires, or symbolic boundaries) in the study of poverty, inequality, and race? What are the processes of cultural diffusion and cultural isolation that either constrain or enable opportunities for black youth? The theoretical and methodological challenges of an intellectual agenda that can make progress on these questions are deep, but *The Cultural Matrix* provides an exciting point of departure.

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Stem Cell Initiatives as a New Window into Health Disparities

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At a time of profound social inequalities in the United States, high-tech medicine is nonetheless touted for its potential to save all lives through miracle cures. The fact that these types of advances would likely be available only to people who are already privileged by the best health care is rarely

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woven into the narrative about medical progress. In her book *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*, Ruha Benjamin critically examines California's 2004 stem cell initiative as a so-called populist project. By using a lens of health disparities to understand the role of stem cell science, Benjamin deftly analyzes what such funding priorities mean for those who are systematically disadvantaged in society. For those of us working in the sociology of science, knowledge, and technology—or science and technology studies (STS) more generally—this approach to the topic is an innovative and refreshing empirical and conceptual choice. Whereas many STS scholars might select a laboratory for their ethnographic work, Benjamin brackets the science of stem cell research to instead trace how a publicly supported ballot measure engaged, eschewed, and intersected with multiple stakeholder groups within and beyond California. As a result, the book contributes not only to STS but also more broadly to the field of sociology for those with interests in medicine; race, class, and gender; disability studies; political economy; and poverty and inequality.

The context for Benjamin's study is the politically contentious domain of funding for U.S. stem cell research. Given that some of this research utilizes human embryos, stem cell science is entrenched in moral debates about what constitutes human life and is, thus, deeply influenced by abortion politics. Trying to navigate these fraught waters, the government had enacted restrictions on embryonic stem cell research through regulations associated with the receipt of federal funding. Specifically, in 2001 President George W. Bush made it illegal to use federal funds to produce new embryonic stem cell lines and allowed funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to be granted only for research using existing cell lines. In this restrictive environment, California proposed to create its own source of funding for stem cell research through a bond measure allocating nearly \$300 million per year to such science. Through Proposition 71, California citizens voted to approve this massive and unprecedented initiative. To help illustrate the magnitude of California's commitment to stem

cell science, Benjamin points out that the NIH had awarded less than \$25 million in funding to stem cell researchers in 2003. This positioned California as a "colleague and competitor" to national governments around the world (p. 13).

One key question that *People's Science* tackles is how Proposition 71 won ballot approval. Benjamin effectively describes the irony of this massive funding bill winning at the polls. The state of California was already deep in a severe budget crisis, grappling with a housing crisis marked by high rates of foreclosures and a growing gap between the state's richest and poorest residents. In the same election, another ballot measure, Proposition 72, sought to extend health care coverage to address the increasing number of residents who were un- or underinsured. Unlike the stem cell bill, however, California voters defeated Proposition 72. In other words, California voters effectively expressed their support for research purported to bring about future medical advancements while simultaneously rejecting attempts to expand access to present-day, proven therapies to patients in need. Benjamin further situates Proposition 71 within the commercial interests intrinsic to stem cell science, with the initiative explicitly promoting the commodification of research by promising investigators the ability to profit from state-funded discoveries, citing this as the only viable pathway to encourage therapeutic innovations. In spite of all this, Proposition 71 was able to succeed in large part due to its "populist packaging," setting up the semblance of a participatory movement in opposition to President Bush and establishing a "right to research" that putatively could take the politics out of science (pp. 15–16).

While Benjamin tells a fascinating—even if at times somewhat cursory—story about the political machinations undergirding California Proposition 71 and the rollout of its subsequent stem cell agency, the strongest contribution of *People's Science* is in Benjamin's detailed analysis of two of the constituent groups that are implicated in the stem cell initiative: disabled people and racial minorities. In her chapter on disability, Benjamin beautifully compares the perspectives of two advocates. The first, a father whose

adult son suffered a spinal cord injury and is wheelchair bound, supports the stem cell initiative as a patient advocate because of the promise of science to cure people who are victims of their disabilities and to return them to "normal." The other, a disability rights and racial justice activist with muscular dystrophy, criticizes Proposition 71 for its contribution to the devaluation and marginalization of people with disabilities while simultaneously noting that "there are a lot of people that make money off of disability" (p. 69). By contrasting these two perspectives through the narratives of two impassioned advocates, Benjamin illustrates the complexity of what is at stake as stem cell research is constructed as a biomedical solution to what many individuals perceived as disabled would instead consider a civil rights problem.

Benjamin's exploration of the intersection of race and the stem cell initiative weaves together an empirically grounded portrait of existing stem cell therapies for sickle cell disease and an astute analysis of the biomedical community's claim that African Americans are distrustful of research. In spite of both the populist rhetoric of Proposition 71 and the calls for attention to diversity in the rollout of the initiative, sickle cell disease was excluded from any funding in the first grant cycle and was not represented on the state's governing board, unlike 29 other disease conditions. In clinics, researchers note that there is a high rate of African American families consenting to store cord blood after the birth of an unaffected child because of its potential therapeutic use for a sibling with sickle cell disease. Yet, as Benjamin documents, only 6 percent of sickle cell patients or their caregivers agreed to a cord blood transplant when there was a good match between affected and unaffected siblings. This indicates that many African American families may not be eager to undergo experimental stem cell procedures.

While researchers seem to interpret this as a sign of African American families' distrust of research, Benjamin persuasively argues that this should instead be thought of as "ambivalence in action." Detailing stories from families with whom she met, she illustrates how caretakers perceived the research options as having uncertain benefits to sickle cell patients yet exposing their loved ones to

known risks that were higher than standard (non-research) therapies. Highlighting one caregiver in particular, Benjamin writes, "What might be regarded as her 'distrust' toward medical studies, in other words, could be understood otherwise: as her trust *in* something other than an experimental method" (p. 122, emphasis in original). Benjamin then makes a powerful case for "depathologizing" distrust in the medical realm. She argues that framing African Americans and others as "hard to reach" populations blames those groups as if they are self-selecting rather than systematically marginalized by mainstream biomedicine. It also leads to "medical racial profiling" as researchers scramble to meet federal and state guidelines mandating they enroll minority patients in their clinical trials. In this environment, distrust is perhaps warranted, Benjamin asserts, given the context of unequal free-market medicine that structures health care in the United States.

People's Science is a thoughtful exploration of how public support for research can contribute to longstanding social and health inequalities. By connecting the dots between state politics, clinical treatments, and the lived experiences of disadvantaged minorities in the United States, Ruha Benjamin offers her readers something truly novel here. It is also important to note that she does so through clear and accessible writing that integrates her ethnographic work with myriad secondary sources documenting California's stem cell initiative. Although it is not an in-depth ethnography, *People's Science* delivers a keen social analysis that integrates the approaches of disability studies, gender studies, and critical race theory into the study of science policy.