CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POOR: A CONTINUING FOCUS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Though most social scientists acknowledge that the general population in the United States accepts individualistic explanations of poverty, a recent study (Henslin and Roesti, 1976) claims that social scientists conversely hold predominantly structural explanations of poverty. The present study questions this conclusion with an analysis of poverty articles in five major sociology journals from 1965 and 1975. The data show that though social scientists may at times make structural theoretical statements, their research overwhelmingly focuses on the characteristics of the poor in explaining poverty. The data also show that this type of poverty research has been increasing, and that government funding for poverty research goes almost exclusively to research focusing on characteristics of the poor or poverty programs. In understanding reasons for this focus on the poor in poverty research, the data suggests we must go beyond any individualistic value orientations among sociologists and also see the effects of funding and dominant research methods.

Time and again the affects of the dominant ideology of individualism on our views of social problems in this country have been noted (Huber and Form, 1973; Mills, 1943; Gouldner, 1968). But despite substantial research showing that the general public, including the poor themselves (Feagin, 1972; Kerbo, 1976; Kerbo, Silverstein, and Snizek, 1977; Huber and Form, 1973; Ryan, 1971), and even sociologists (Huber and Form, 1973; Pease, Form, and Huber, 1970; Bottomore, 1966), tend to blame the poor or focus on individual characteristics of the poor in “explaining” poverty, a recent study (Henslin and Roesti, 1976) concluded that works on poverty published by sociologists in at least one journal (Social Problems) tend to take a “structural” rather than an “individualistic” orientation.1

At the time this study by Henslin and Roesti was published I was engaged in a similar research project focusing on the general field of social stratification. This

1I would like to thank L. Richard Della Pave, Richard Shaffer, Kathy Kerbo, Sara Pawlan for their comments and assistance in this research; also Diane Goldman for her careful editing and typing of the manuscript.
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project has since been completed, and what follows is an analysis of sociological research on poverty contained in five major journals in sociology between 1965 and 1975. Data is presented pertaining to (1) the number of poverty articles published in these journals, (2) their individual or structural focus, (3) extent of government funding, and (4) the trends in the above from 1965 to 1975. In addition to re-examining Henslin and Roesti’s conclusion about the dominant focus of poverty articles, the present study will offer some tentative suggestions as to why the study of poverty represented in these five journals maintains its present focus.

METHODS OF STUDY

Articles in five major journals in sociology (American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, Social Forces, Sociological Quarterly, and Social Problems) were examined for the years 1965 through 1975. Of a total of 2,487 articles, 67 (3 percent) were found in the area of poverty. Though a reading of the abstract (or further if no abstract, or if classification was problematic), an examination of the data presented, and an examination of notes on funding sources the poverty articles were coded as to subject matter, type of article (theoretical, empirical, or methodological), level of data analysis (individual or structural), and the existence of government funding.

Special emphasis was given to whether the research or theoretical arguments focused on the characteristics of the poor (individualistic orientation) or the characteristics of the broader social, political, or economic conditions affecting poverty (structural orientation). More specifically in this study, my concern was with whether the data presented (or in a few cases the theoretical arguments with “dataless” articles) dealt primarily with some characteristic of the poor such as values, child-rearing methods, time orientations, etc.; or whether the data presented dealt primarily with conditions such as unemployment, the structure of capitalism, industrialization, or power structures. Examples of the first type of study would include much of the culture of poverty research; an example of the second type would be Piven and Cloward’s (1971) macro analysis of welfare systems.

Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the primary focus of an article is individualistic or structural, especially if this determination is made through an examination of only theoretical arguments or the general discussion of the implications of findings. Few sociologists, almost by definition, work exclusively on an individualistic level of analysis. For even if the sociologist is concerned primarily with a social psychological analysis, there is usually an assumption that individual characteristics are somehow connected (however vaguely) to social structural arrangements. Thus, we may find a mix of analytical levels, with either an individual or structural level providing the primary analytical focus.

In line with this discussion it should be noted that Henslin and Roesti’s (1976:71) “structural orientation” defined (see footnote 1) as a “holistic view” focusing on “interacting social units” would seem to include Oscar Lewis (1965) culture of poverty view, which weakly suggests that this culture of poverty is ultimately related to structural causes. But the predominant thrust of research from this culture of poverty perspective has been how characteristics of the poor them-
selves cause or perpetrate a cycle of poverty (Valentine, 1968; Ryan, 1971). On the question of policy implications as well it is easy to ignore any vague structural discussion related to the causes of poverty when data is presented suggesting a tie between individual characteristics and poverty (see, Caplan and Nelson, 1974. Thus, in the present study I have chosen to operationalize an individual or structural level of analysis by focusing on the data presented rather than theoretical statements about poverty in empirical articles (which include 84 percent of the articles examined). It is the data presented in a research paper which generally define the problem context and often explicitly or implicitly suggest policy implications.

Table 1. Poverty Articles by Journal and Subject, 1965 to 1975

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<td>of Poor</td>
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<td>Structural Causes</td>
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<td>Poverty Programs</td>
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<td>General Discussion</td>
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FINDINGS

The overall findings on the general subject matter of the articles dealing with poverty in these five journals are contained in Table I. Consistent with the descriptions of the field outlined above, and contrary to Henslin and Roesti's (1976) conclusions, it can be seen that when the research did not concern poverty programs (28 percent), the overwhelming majority (58 percent overall) were concerned primarily with characteristics of the poor. Only 10 percent of the total poverty articles examined were primarily concerned with structural conditions (i.e., contained structural theoretical explanations of poverty and/or macro level data).

Considering each of the five journals separately (Table 2), we must agree with Henslin and Roesti (1976:57) that relatively few of the articles in Social Problems dealt with poverty (38 of 429 for the period under study). But we must also agree with Huber and Form (1973:39) that Social Problems has published more articles on poverty than other major sociology journals. Among the five journals, however,
we find a consistent stress on characteristics of the poor (except for the *American Journal of Sociology* which published only three) rather than characteristics of the social, economic, or political system.

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In Table II the data are presented by year for the five journals. Generally, we find the overall number of poverty articles increasing. But this increase has only been with articles stressing characteristics of the poor and those dealing with poverty programs. Of considerable interest is the finding that articles dealing with structural causes of poverty disappeared almost completely between 1967 and 1972 (with one in 1970), with the "strongest" period only in 1965 (N=3).

**SUGGESTED REASONS FOR THE STRESS ON INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Our final concern pertains to the question of why there is the overwhelming stress on the characteristics of the poor among research published in these journals. Besides the old answer citing the individualistic values dominant in this country, does the data give any other clues? And it must be stressed that the data can give only clues to answering this question. But the clues are strong enough to merit further discussion.
The first clue can be gained by looking at our trend analysis (Table II). There it was found that the number of poverty articles has been increasing since 1965, especially those dealing with poverty programs and the characteristics of the poor. Noting that what was known as the “War on Poverty” came into existence at about this time, and further noting that this “War on Poverty” generally assumed that poverty could be reduced by focusing on characteristics of the poor (Jencks, et al., 1972; Shostak, Van Til and Van Til, 1973;90; Moynihan, 1973), it can be suggested that government policy is somehow linked to the number and type of poverty research published in these five journals. This link is made more explicit when we consider government funding patterns outlined in Table II. Almost all of the government funding noted in these articles (49 percent of all poverty articles) went to research dealing with poverty programs or characteristics of the poor (94 percent); with the number of funded articles generally increasing since 1966. Only two articles focusing on macro causes of poverty were funded in this 10-year period.

Another clue to why this stress on characteristics of the poor can be gained by examining the general type of articles published in these five journals. A clear majority of 84 percent were empirical (i.e., contained qualitative data) and only 19 percent primarily theoretical or non-quantitative. Of the articles dealing with poverty programs or characteristics of the poor (n=58), 88 percent were empirical and only 14 percent theoretical. Of the articles dealing with macro causes of poverty (n=7), three were theoretical and only four empirical.

It has been widely noted (for example, McCartney, 1970; Liska, 1977; Snizek, 1975) that in an attempt to be more “scientific” the discipline of sociology turned to individual level data that could be more easily quantified and statistically manipulated. There has been a clear bias toward this type of research being published in major sociology journals (McCartney, 1970). Only recently have new methods for the quantification of macro level data been perfected (see for example, Heise, et al., 1976; Chirot, 1976; Zaret, 1978; Simonton, 1976), and macro level analysis employing the quantification of comparative and historical data in the area of social stratification been published extensively (for example see, Rubinson, 1976; Hewitt, 1977; Chase-Dunn, 1975; Wright and Perrone, 1977).

Thus, it can be argued that as with other areas of study in sociology (see Gallinher and McCartney, 1973), research on poverty has focused on individual level data collection in an attempt to be more empirical (and as a result more publishable, McCartney, 1970). And it should also be noted that in addition to government policy needs favoring individual level data collection, government funding of social science research has strongly favored research employing complex data analysis (Pfeffer, et al. 1974; McCartney, 1970; Useem, 1976 a,b) which until recently has usually required individual level data. It seems, therefore, that government policy needs, the types of research receiving government funding, and sociologists’ attempts to be more “scientific” have converged to favor an individual focus in poverty research. Useem (1976 a,b) concludes that government funding patterns in sociology have affected paradigm development in many areas of sociological study (also see McCartney, 1970). And as research by Snizek (1975) has shown, a stress on individual level data collection promotes the dominance of micro level theoretical explanation (rather than theory guiding research methods).
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CONCLUSION

With respect to the level of analysis in most poverty research, we must agree with Lee and Lee (1975) that sociologists have generally neglected macro level causes of social problems. In addition, we must agree with S. M. Miller (1976) that this is not likely to change, but if anything increase. This is suggested by the finding of a growing number of poverty articles focusing on the characteristics of the poor.

In concluding, I believe that as a discipline sociology provides a disservice by implicitly supporting the dominant individualistic beliefs about poverty. The result is that a false hope is supported suggesting that poverty can be easily reduced, or reduced at all for that matter, by dealing primarily with characteristics of the poor rather than characteristics of the more general social, political, and economic system. As Caplan and Nelson (1974:104) put it, "Once a social problem has been certified and translated from political to psychological terms, the authorities can control those involved under the guise of being helpful or even indulgent."

FOOTNOTES

1 As Henslin and Rosett (1976:71) state, "If an article presented a holistic view of a social problem, emphasized a distinctive pattern of interacting social units, analyzed factors that brought the problem into existence, or focused on any aspect of structural arrangements, the article was coded as representing a structural orientation. Conversely, articles that stressed the importance of the individual participants' motivations, beliefs, perceptions, adjustment patterns, or other orientations, actions, or interactions in the formation, evolution of, or reaction to the social problem being discussed were coded as representative of individualistic orientations."

2 It should be noted here that the articles were coded by volume rather than precisely by year. Thus, for example, journals such as Social Forces which do not run their volumes in a yearly sequence, the volume falling in the years 1964-65 was coded as 1965.

3 For this study book reviews, comments, editorial introductions, and essay reviews were excluded in the coding of articles.

4 The data collection was completed by the author over about a one-year period using a redesigned check list. In order to determine the reliability of the coding procedure, a student assistant was employed to independently re-examine a total of ten volumes picked at random. The result was an interviewer reliability of 91 percent for the coding of poverty articles.

5 The sub-categories here were studies of the amount of poverty, studies of characteristics of the poor, structural conditions related to poverty, research on poverty programs, and a residual category of general discussion of poverty.

6 For coding purposes an article was listed as having government funding if in the notes the author(s) specified such funding by a government agency (which is required when reporting government funded research). It should be noted that this is a relatively "conservative" definition of government sponsored research because this coding excluded articles containing data taken from already existing data sets which were originally government funded. Also, it should be pointed out that funding from university faculty research grants, private foundations, and private industry were not coded in this procedure.
7 Some of course may object to the method of operationalizing an individual or structural focus used in the present study by arguing that even macro level theory can suggest micro level empirical observations, or that even individual level data can lead to structural theoretical explanations of poverty. But, in addition to what has been noted above, with the study of poverty this possible objection is weakened with a recognition that with the exception of a "vaguely formulated" culture of poverty theory (which usually leads to a focus on the characteristics of the poor), no general theory of poverty has wide recognition among sociologists (see Rossi and Lyalls, 1976:136), much less a macro or structural theory.

8 It must be pointed out here that one of the articles focusing on characteristics of the poor was judged to contain such an extensive theoretical discussion, while also presenting data, that it was coded as both theoretical and empirical. Thus, the percentages sometimes total slightly higher than 100 percent.

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