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PUBLIC CONCEPTS OF POVERTY: THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' VIEW*

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Every program designed to decrease poverty is based upon assumptions either as to the nature and causes of poverty or what is necessary to help the poor improve their lot (Spilerman and Elish, 1970; Task Force on Economic Growth and Opportunity, 1966; Valentine, 1968). Often these assumptions are only implicit, and supervisors of the program might not even agree with the assumptions if they were stated. Nevertheless, a program would itself make no sense unless certain statements about poverty were true. For example, a program of economic development to increase employment opportunities assumes that, first, much poverty is due to structural features, especially a shortage of jobs in the labor force, and that employment of the poor will be a major factor in decreasing poverty. On the other hand, job training assumes that there are jobs, but that the poor are not qualified to fill the openings.

The amount of support or opposition to programs in the area of poverty depends not only upon cost and apparent effectiveness, but also upon the concepts of poverty extant in the public view. As sociologists are increasingly involved in applied work in the area of poverty, the necessity of knowing the assumptions and concepts found among leaders in the public and private sectors is of paramount importance. Failures in communication and actual disagreements can only be minimized if the sociologist is aware of the implicit assumptions in programs and the often unexpressed concepts held by those who are to accept or reject his recommendations.

The Research Problem

The problem of the research reported in the following pages is to determine the nature of concepts of poverty held by one of the most important groups in the area of poverty programs, the County Board of Commissioners. More specifically, the research problems may be divided into the following parts:

- (1) the nature of explanations of poverty given by county commissioners;
- (2) whether these explanations are structural, or place the responsibility on inadequacies of the individual;
- (3) whether there is a "single factor" concept in explaining poverty, or the recognition of multiple factors;
- (4) the extent to which county commissioners differentiate types of poverty situations as results of differential factors: unemployment (Lumer, 1965), the problems of the aged (Bond, *et al.*, 1954; Loether, 1967; 47-62), recidivism or intergenerational poverty

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(Lewis, 1965; Brainin and Yeager, 1964; Knupfer, 1947; Rodman, 1963; Schneiderman, 1964; Goodwin, 1967), and school drop out (Keyserling, 1964; Task Force on Economic Growth and Opportunity, 1966); Roemer and Kisch, 1968; Sullivan, 1965).

It is important to point out that the research problem in no way relates directly to the "correctness" of the theories or concepts, but rather points to the extent to which such theories are believed by county commissioners and, therefore, would become part of the definition of any situation in which county commissioners participate.

The Importance of the Problem

The dirth of research on the county commissioner is matched by the absence of reporting of their actions and concepts in the press. Actually, the importance of the concepts held by the county commissioners can be established on the grounds of the importance of their power in state politics, their control of budgets for programs for the poor, and by the tendency to submit new programs at the federal level either to their approval or control.

1. Programs which were sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity were, in the early years, based on propositions which are part of the sociologists' definition of the situation for the most part. However, the far more heavily sponsored programs for the poor are those conducted in welfare departments, using mainly state and local funds with some reimbursements from the federal government, and in turn responsible to the County Board of Commissioners. The guidelines themselves are determined to some extent by commissioners, because of their key position in the political structure of the state. The flexibility found in these guidelines consists mainly of definitions of necessities which are open to the discretion of the County Board of Commissioners.

2. Many federal programs are accepted or rejected by the county on the basis of the policy of the County Board of Commissioners. Examples are foodstamps and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program, conducted by the Extension Service. Other federal programs, also accepted or rejected by the Board, are conducted by local persons hired by the Board, responsible to a policy-making body which is approved by the Board, and administered in a manner commensurate with concepts held by Board members. The trend currently is in the direction of this arrangement, rather than away from it.

3. The traditional work with poverty, county welfare, is the greatest effort by far made by our society to improve the lot of the poor. In 1968 in a midwestern state, the time and place of the present research, the total budget for all programs sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity was \$23,084,385. This figure is only slightly more than 11% of the total budget that year for welfare, which was \$206,285,344, and, more dramatically, was only slightly above the administrative costs of the welfare program alone. Several components of the welfare program far exceeded the War on Poverty funds: AFDC, \$40,382,000; Medical care, over \$89,600,000; and assistance to families

in which the head was unemployed, \$28,600,000. The likelihood of new programs replacing county welfare in the near future is small. Such basic institutions do not disappear in a short time because of the interdependence with other institutions. Hundreds of thousands of persons employed in administering welfare would be thrown out of work. The \$89,000,000 for medical assistance assures smaller communities of maintaining hospitals and physicians, since this money goes directly to the agencies involved. The poor must get medical care or not get the aid. For these and other reasons, the welfare program whose policies are set by the County Board of Commissioners would appear to be a major part of the total effort of the society to reduce poverty for some time to come.

The magnitude of the control exercised, formally and informally, by county commissioners is such, then, that to ignore them or to be ignorant of their thinking will greatly increase the difficulties of sociologists being heard by an audience with the clout to adopt and implement sociologically sound recommendations.

The Concepts and Situations

The commissioners were asked in this study to explain poverty-related phenomena in each of four situations: unemployment, second generation welfare recidivism, school drop out, and the need for economic assistance among the aged.

In each of these four situations, the commissioners were presented with four alternative explanations. These concepts or theories were developed out of conversations with county commissioners and other local leaders before the questionnaire was developed. The statements most often heard were then compared to various theoretical approaches found in the professional literature for purposes of classification (Borgatta, 1968; Brachet, et al., 1968:1-17; Schlesinger, 1955; Lumer, 1965). These theoretical positions were then translated back into statements which corresponded as much as possible to the original statements most often made by commissioners and local leaders. The statements are not worded exactly as they appear in conversation, but the problem of validity is great when a correspondence between public statement and sociological concept is sought. This problem is no more or less true of the present research than that found in most attitudinal studies. Each item must both reflect a person's viewpoint and, with at least face validity, be a manifestation of a theoretical construct.

The four concepts included in the study were:

1. The theory of inherent inferiority (Hofstader, 1955; Fishman, 1966:1-22). The assumptions of the inferiority of the poor, in general, and those on welfare, in particular, are expressed in several ways by persons in lay leadership positions. The key expressions in each of several situations are listed as the first explanation offered in the groupings in Tables I through IV. There is some support in the literature for this proposition, and such findings are sometimes known by respondents of the type in this study. For example, a higher incidence

of mental retardation is found among the poor (Harley, 1969; H. Miller, 1965), and scores on IQ tests appear to be correlated in roughly a linear relationship to status variables (Blum and Rossi, 1969). The argument, at its best, would be that humans vary in ability, for whatever reason, and those who are inferior would be sifted to the bottom in the process of competition for status rewards--a social Darwinistic approach (Hofstadter, 1955). It matters little in programs for adults whether this inferiority is biological in nature or due to early care. Researchers who report mental retardation suggest that it is due to lack of adequate pre-natal care and poor nutrition (Miller, 1965; Hurley, 1969). Ryan (1971) has suggested that biological inferiority and "social inferiority" are functional equivalents.

2. The concept of fortuitous misfortune (Mills, 1943; Ryan, 1971: 14). In discussing the causes of poverty with local leaders, the statement that the poor have "bad luck" or are "losers" frequently occurs. Welfare funds are available for the poor who have accidents or illnesses. Research indicates that there is a higher incidence of chronic illness among the poor, they have lower levels of health, their parents are less apt to see that they have vaccinations and immunization shots (and this would mean that as adults they would more likely have these diseases) (Blum and Rossi, 1969; Herzog, 1963; Keyserling, 1964; Lumer, 1965; Roemer and Kisch, 1968).

3. The theory of culture of poverty. The concept of culture of poverty has received much attention in professional literature (Lewis, 1965; Barinin and Yeager, 1964; Knupfer, 1947; Rodman, 1963; Schneiderman, 1964; Valentine, Goodwin, 1967). The theory as expressed by local leaders is much more narrowly defined, and elements of it are sharply distinguished from each other. As used in this study, the culture of poverty refers to belief systems, interests, and goals, and includes such statements as "they don't want to work," "they like it where they are," and "they do not value education."

4. The theory of structural disadvantages. The idea of a social structure at the minimum involves how other people treat the poor, but some expressions were heard to involve systematic discrimination through such "structural" features as criteria in decision-making which excluded the poor from participation in middle class advantages, agency programs (e.g. school curricula) aimed at needs of those who have money, and lack of community resources to solve the problems of the poor. Clearly, however, the greatest number of statements had to do with economic structure, especially the availability of jobs at the local level. Research literature has been amassed over the last four decades to show that not only minority groups but the poor generally are disadvantaged in a wide variety of areas. In more recent literature, it has been found that the poor earn less over their lifetime, fail to meet the ever increasing standards of employment, find the myriad of voluntary organizations aimed at problems which are not theirs, experience disadvantages at the hands of the law, and health practice generally is given less to the poor than to middle class children and adults (Blum and Rossi, 1968; Broom and Selznick, 1968; American Bar Association Series, 1969; Fernbach, 1965).

These four concepts lend themselves to other types of classification which would be useful for sociologists. The first three (inferiority, fortuitous misfortune, and the culture of poverty) represent explanations of poverty resting the responsibility on the characteristics of the individual. Only the fourth concept points to problems in the social and economic structure itself. The findings with respect to this dichotomy are very clear-cut, as will be seen.

Another division of the responses would be into true and false. The approach taken by the researchers on this issue was that statements which depict the situation are not necessarily true but are part of the folk wisdom as reflected by statements made by numerous local leaders in discussions which led to the development of the instrument of observation. Our interest is to identify the structure of beliefs about the poor, and the roles of information, mis-information, selectivity of facts, and folk wisdom handed down through the generations. (For a review of the widespread perceptions of poverty, see Goudy, 1970, "Shoot Them If They Won't Work: A Study of Socioeconomic Status, Economic Aspirations, and Attitudes Toward Poverty, the Poor, and Public Dependence"). As much as county commissioners work with poverty, we found even such basic terms as welfare and poverty to be handled interchangeably in many cases. To make the distinction in our questionnaire would be to introduce meanings not present in the phenomena we are studying.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The Universe of Study

The universe of study consisted of all members of the County Board of Commissioners in a midwestern state. Each county has five such commissioners. A non-voting member of the Board is the County Auditor. We discovered that, although non-voting, the auditor is a most influential member of the board in most counties, due probably to his greater familiarity with the budget. We, therefore, included the responses of the auditors as well as commissioners.

The administration of welfare in the state and the social and economic conditions affecting poverty are so variable throughout the state that a decision was made to include the entire population of 435 commissioners and 87 auditors in the study. A sample might miss some of the more unique situations.

The Mailed Questionnaire

The questionnaire was mailed in four waves and the response rate was 89.5%. Over half of the refusals were newly elected commissioners and auditors who felt they had insufficient experience to respond. No effort was made to convince them that their response was valuable unless the refusal seemed tentative.

Not all of the questions were answered by every commissioner returning a questionnaire, and therefore the non-response rate will vary a small amount from one type of poverty situation to another.

Constructing the Questions

The statements which reflect any one theory differ depending upon the situation which the commissioners are asked to explain. This difference makes comparison of the explanations from one situation to another somewhat hazardous. However, the decision had to be made whether to use consistent statements or to use those statements which most closely reflected the rhetoric of the commissioners themselves. It was decided that the sustained contact with the commissioners made possible by many meetings with them in connection with other responsibilities of one of the authors gave a uniqueness to the present research that should not be neglected. Of the two evils, then, it was decided to surrender consistency in favor of avoiding responses to words and explanations not familiar to the commissioners. One needed research area would be a quasi-replication of the present study using similar or identical statements to reflect any one theory across all of the poverty situations considered.

ANALYSIS

The first problem of the analysis is to determine the extent to which the county commissioners subscribe to each of the four explanations of poverty: inferiority, fortuity, the culture of poverty, and structural factors.

Concepts of Unemployment

The commissioners were asked to explain why many of the people on welfare are unemployed. The responses were quite uniform, with two-thirds of the commissioners subscribing to each of the explanations which attributed unemployment to some characteristic of the individual (see Table I). On the other hand, only slightly more than one-fifth admitted to the unavailability of jobs as a factor in unemployment.

The inadequacies of the employment structure are problems with which the leaders of the county and local communities must concern themselves and for which they feel some responsibility. To subscribe to the structural explanation of poverty would be to admit of failure on the part of local leadership, which includes the respondents themselves. The respondents would also be perceiving behavior quite different than most other members of the society perceive it, which appears to be a "we" "they" orientation (Kaplan and Tausky, 1972; Ryan, 1971; Rytina *et al.*, 1970; Goudy, 1970). An interesting contradiction in the definition of the labor force and employment structure on the part of the commissioners is found in sustained discussion with them. In areas other than poverty and welfare, the structural explanation is found. For example, the "fact" of the need for employment opportunities to retain youth in the community is not only readily admitted but introduced into a conversation by local leaders themselves. However, in these same conversations the immediate transfer of the generalization about "joblessness" to the welfare situation brings an immediate change to explanations of personal responsibility for unemployment on the part of the adult. This same explanation is also found among poor people themselves.

Another possible factor in the overwhelming subscription to the personal explanation as opposed to the structural may be the definition of the structural explanation as questioning the very system through which the commissioners have succeeded in gaining a position of influence and success. Such an imputation is not as uniquely selfish of the commissioners as it may appear since the central concept in this definition is that of achieved status. Sociologists have long been more critical in the selection of research problems and theoretical formulations in the area of ascribed than achieved status, indeed, in the area of poverty itself.

Concepts of Recidivism

The commissioners were asked to explain why many children from welfare families stay on welfare even when they are adults. Previous studies of welfare recidivism in the state in which the data was collected found that 39% of the people on welfare at the time of the study had been children from welfare families, and these studies are well known by commissioners (American Public Welfare Institute, 1961; Harrison, 1955).

The most widely held definition was that of inferiority, with four-fifths subscribing to this explanation (see Table II). Nearly three-fourths of the respondents indicated that the intergenerational welfare recipients "had learned to like welfare," the cultural explanation. Fewer, about three-fifths, felt the explanation rested in the poor health, diet, and living conditions experienced by the intergenerational recidivists when they were children.

The structural explanation was worded: "Many did not get the same advantages as other kids from schools and employers." The proportion subscribing to this structural explanation fell below half, with about two-fifths so responding. Even so, this response was double that found subscribing to the structural explanation of unemployment.

To some extent we may see a tendency to justify the welfare program in comparing the findings in Table II with those in Table I. When the commissioners are faced with the failure of the welfare program in "getting people off welfare," as they are in the question concerning recidivism, the proportion responding to three of the four explanations increases. Such a search for causes somewhat obscured the fact that the structural explanation doubled in popularity. This increase is possibly due to the halo effect of thinking about the second generation welfare recipients in terms of their childhood experiences, as may be seen more clearly in the following question.

Concepts of School Drop Out

The commissioners were asked why children from welfare families drop out of school more often than children generally. The responses clearly indicate the halo effect connected with youth referred to above. The suggestion that these children are less intelligent received approval from only 37% of the respondents, whereas the inferiority notion was accepted by 60% or more of the respondents in all the other

situations in which explanations were called for (Table III). The suggestion that the schools were not geared to the needs of these children was rejected at an even higher rate, with fewer than one-fifth checking this explanation as true. The schools fared even better than the local economy in shedding responsibility for meeting the needs of the welfare family.

The overwhelming response (about 97%) favored the explanation that placed responsibility neither on the children nor on the system but upon the parents of the welfare families: "Many are not taught the value of education by their parents." The second most frequently approved explanation was that of fortuity: "Many have less energy, need glasses, and have other health needs." Although slightly more than half subscribed to this explanation, two comparisons lessen its importance. First, compared to the 96% responding in terms of the culture of poverty, the 51% is hardly impressive. Second, in all three of the other situations (unemployment, recidivism, and the aged, reported below) the fortuity explanation was subscribed to by more than 60% of the commissioners. The general pattern of response in the explanation of school drop out is a tremendous increase in the cultural explanation and the uniform and tremendous decrease in the other explanations.

Concept of the Aged Poor

The commissioners were asked why so many of the aged need economic assistance. Each of the four explanations was subscribed to by at least half of the respondents, but the general pattern was changed greatly. The cultural explanation ("that many never liked work") was the least popular among the explanations and was far less often approved than in any of the other three situations. The structural explanation, on the other hand, was by far the most popular and was subscribed to by more than twice as many commissioners as was the case in explaining any other poverty situation.

The county commissioners are usually thought of as primarily representing the rural population and the aged are much over-represented in the rural areas. Thus, these conditions may represent one explanation of the unusually high proportion of commissioners endorsing the structural explanation. This explanation in reality may be reduced to several alternative patterns. One of these is that commissioners themselves are from among the rural aged, and, therefore, the structural explanation would relieve the respondents' own age-status group of responsibility for their own plight. However, neither age nor status, as measured by educational attainment and occupational status, had much relationship to response pattern. Another version of this explanation is that the greater exposure to the aged poor resulting from the disproportionate percentages of the population to be found in the rural area helps the commissioner "see" the more subtle forces resulting from structure impinging on the life chances of the aged. However, farmers, who were commissioners in the more rural counties, did not respond differently from other commissioners. The realities of the jurisdiction of county commissioners is that only in certain areas, e.g. road building and maintenance, is their limitation set at the city boundary. In the area of welfare, commissioners supervise most of the funds even

in the largest metropolitan area.

It is more probable that the explanation of the endorsement of the structural explanation of poverty among the aged comes from the general cultural milieu in American society. Economists have used the example of how the aged have been "caught" by inflation in order to show the maining of the shrinking dollar with great effect.

Cross classification of the situations and concepts by age, education, and occupation showed very little change in the percentage distribution.

Discussion

Several patterns of response may be inferred from the findings presented above. First, it is obvious that the responsibility for poverty is placed on the individual rather than the social structure in most problems connected with the poor and with welfare. The exception noted is that of the aged, and that may be explained by the general cultural notion resulting, no doubt, from a halo effect surrounding the notion of the aged. If such is the case, why not a similar response connect with youth, who have probably an even greater and brighter halo? The answer may rest in the particular "personal" responses most often endorsed: both "inferior talents" and "liking welfare" come from the parents. In other words, the personal explanation can be endorsed, therefore preserving the sanctity of our mobility system without, in fact, destroying the aura of youth.

A second pattern is that the commissioners do not subscribe to a single, simplistic doctrine to explain all poverty situations. Indeed, the most highly endorsed explanation varies almost completely depending on the poverty situation being explained: a structural explanation of poverty among the aged, with fortuity the second highest; the cultural explanation of school drop out; and the inferiority followed by the cultural explanation of recidivism; and the three personal explanations almost equally endorsed in explaining unemployment.

A third pattern is evidenced by the fact that a simple majority subscribe to at least two and usually three of the explanations for any one situation. The single factor fallacy is not evident. In terms of any educational program with this power group, the finding is of utmost importance. It has been the experience of the present authors that, in an educational setting, persons who subscribe to a single factor explanation are likely to weigh an alternative single factor against the one they presently endorse, and therefore the effort to conceptualize poverty and its associated behaviors as resulting from a complex of factors on the part of the educator is extremely difficult.

Perhaps of paramount importance is the fourth pattern, that the responses of this most important power group seem to reflect the increasing body of research findings which describe other sectors of our population, the belief in achieved status. The greater experience which commissioners have in deciding on programs to resolve the problems of the poor does not in fact seem to give them different perceptions of

priorities and causes. As professionals become more and more involved in the design and conduct of programs for the poor, the discrepancies in concept between the professional and the public are likely to be found between the professional and power groups. There was some early evidence that such might not be the case, but this appears to be more hope than analytical conclusion (Larson and Potter, 1971).

One recommendation of central relevance to sociologists can be easily seen from the above patterns: that whatever sociologicistic explanations seem appropriate in understanding poverty and thus seem a basis for poverty programs need much more effective dissemination than has previously been experienced. It should be noted that the single situation in which the structural explanation of poverty was more highly endorsed than personal ones was essentially economic--that of inflation. It would seem, further, that certain conditions exist which might make such a task easier than previously thought, at least by these authors: commissioners do differentiate poverty situations in terms of explanations; they are not guilty of the single factor fallacy; and they can be educated right along with the public generally, since they seem to endorse concepts held by the public. The documentation of their importance in the decision-making process on poverty programs, presented earlier in this paper, would seem to make them, in the rhetoric of resource development, a most important target group for education in the sociology of poverty.

TABLE I
 COUNTY COMMISSIONERS CONCEPTION OF CAUSES OF POVERTY
 Associated with Unemployment - expressed in percent

WHY ARE MANY OF THE PEOPLE ON WELFARE NOW UNEMPLOYED?	RESPONSE TO STATEMENT (%)		
	TRUE	FALSE	(N)
Inferiority: many are inferior workers	69	31	412
Fortuity: many are ill or handicapped	68	31	409
Cultural: many don't want to work	68	31	421
Structural: there are not enough jobs to go around	22	77	399

TABLE II

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS CONCEPTION OF CAUSES OF POVERTY

Associated with Aged - expressed in percent

MANY OF THE AGED NEED ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE. WHY?	RESPONSE TO STATEMENT (%)		
	TRUE	FALSE	(N)
Inferiority: many were poorly equipped at birth to prepare for economic security	60	40	400
Fortuity: many were ill or handicapped for many years	67	33	387
Cultural: many never liked work	51	49	392
Structural: many were caught by rising costs of living and changing patterns of care of aged parents	82	18	421

TABLE III

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS CONCEPTION OF CAUSES OF POVERTY

Associated with Welfare Recivism - expressed in percent

SOME CHILDREN FROM WELFARE FAMILIES STAY ON WELFARE EVEN WHEN THEY ARE ADULTS. WHY?	RESPONSE TO STATEMENT (%)		
	TRUE	FALSE	(N)
Inferiority: many inherited inferior talents from their parents	82	18	428
Fortuity: many had poor health, diet and living conditions	61	39	392
Cultural: many learned to like welfare	72	28	421
Structural: many did not get the same advantages as other kids from schools and employers	39	61	398

TABLE IV

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS CONCEPTION OF CAUSES OF POVERTY

Associated with School Drop Out - expressed in percent

CHILDREN FROM WELFARE FAMILIES DROP OUT OF SCHOOL MORE OFTEN THAN OTHER CHILDREN. WHY?	RESPONSE TO STATEMENT (%)		
	TRUE	FALSE	(N)
Inferiority: many are less intelligent	37	63	398
Fortuity: many have less energy, often need glasses, and have other health needs	51	49	392
Cultural: many are not taught the value of education by their parents	96	4	434
Structural: schools are not geared to their needs	19	81	385

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