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Is the "Underclass" Really a Class?

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The concept of an "underclass" departs from previous determinations of social class based on criteria of education, occupation, and income in favor of the more subjective and less quantifiable criteria of the degree of social dislocation and the departure of a population from middle class norms and values. A study reviews current definitions of "the underclass"; contrasts this class description with "the poor" in the 60's and before; and suggests that "the underclass" is a pejorative label which has the effect of "blaming the victim", and has negative implications for the formulation of public policy directed toward the population thus labeled.

Introduction

Social class has traditionally been determined by the application of three basic criteria: education, occupation, and income; in which one is the cause and the second is the effect of the third. (Duberman, 1976) Examples of this tripartite analysis can be seen in W. Warner's six-part classification scheme; August Hollingshead's five strata classification; and in Gilbert Kahl's recently developed five part index based on the three factors of capital/property, labor, and government transfers. (Warner, 1949; Hollingshead, 1958; Gilbert and Kahl, 1990)

Recently, however, a new social class description, most commonly designated "the underclass", has emerged in the literature. The criteria by which this "class" has been delineated, however, depart from the usual relatively objective, quantifiable factors of education, occupation, and income utilized by Warner and Hollingshead; or the more recently employed factors of capital/property, labor, and government transfers suggested by Gilbert and Kahl. The criteria employed in consigning people to "the underclass" are based on the more subjective, less quantifiable factors of the degree of social dislocation, and the

divergence of this population from Middle Class norms and values.

Purpose of this article

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the term "underclass" is not really a class description at all. Rather it is a pejorative label, applied to a particular sub-group among our nation's poor who have reacted to their poverty in ways that threaten those who enjoy a privileged status in contemporary American society. Second, it is to suggest, as others have warned, that "references to the underclass will add nothing to our understanding of poverty, but will erode public confidence in our ability to do something about it." (Edelman, 1987) Finally, it is to suggest that a decision to maintain or abandon the concept of the "underclass" has profound implications for public policy.

Definition of the "Underclass"

The underclass has been defined as "a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with the behavior of the general population" (Wilson, 1987) It has been suggested that the "underclass" is a "concept which captures the mixture of alarm and hostility which tinged the emotional response of more affluent Americans to the poverty of blacks increasingly clustered and isolated in postindustrial cities", and to the behaviors which these affluent Americans associated with the urban ghetto such as "heightened sexuality expressed in teenage pregnancy; females leading households; welfare dependence; drug abuse, and violent crime." (Katz, 1989)

In articles about the "underclass" appearing in general circulation news magazines between 1977 and 1987, the following descriptive words and phrases were employed: "intractable," "socially alien," "the unreachable," "rampaging members of the underclass," "totally disaffected from the system," "aliens in their own country," "defined primarily by their deviant values," "a second nation," "urban knots," and "enclaves of permanent poverty and vice." ("Time", 1977; "U.S. News and World Report", 1986; "Fortune". 1987) A United States Senator, promi-

nently associated with the Liberal wing of the Democratic party warned in a speech about "the great unmentioned problem of America today; the growth, rapid and insidious, of a group in our midst, perhaps more dangerous, more bereft of hope, more difficult to confront than any for which our history has prepared us. It is a group which threatens to become what America has never known—a permanent underclass in our society." (Edward Kennedy, 1978)

In an article which predated, but also presaged, the formal delineation of that category of class stratification known as the "underclass", David Matza spoke of what he designated "the disreputable poor" in an article by that same name. He defined the "disreputable poor" as "that people who remain unemployed or casually or irregularly employed, even during periods approaching full employment and prosperity; for that reason, and others, they live in disrepute . . . a persistent section of the poor who differ in a variety of ways from those who are deemed resistant and recalcitrant. . . . The disreputable poor are an immobilized segment of society located at a point in the social structure where poverty intersects with illicit pursuits. They are, in the evocative words of Charles Brace, 'the dangerous classes' who live in 'regions of squalid want and wicked woe.'" (Matza, 1966)

In Matza's definition of the "disreputable poor" we find three components in the definition of what later theorists would term the "underclass." None of these factors was present in the traditional indexing of classic social stratification theory. First, there is the idea of putative status. The members of the "underclass" are held in "disrepute" by those in the social strata above them. Second, there is the idea of geographical clustering in predominately urban enclaves. Members of the "underclass" are portrayed as huddling in "regions of squalid want and wicked woe" which serve as the "gang headquarters" of the alienated and potentially violent masses. Finally, there is a moralistic component. The members of the "underclass" are "located at a point in the social structure where poverty intersects with illicit pursuits."

"Underclass" Revisited

Once the three factors of "putative status," "geographical clustering", and "moralism" have been introduced we have strayed significantly from classic social stratification theory. For now social dislocations are not seen as being symptomatic of a person's being relegated to a social class on the basis of inequality of opportunity, and the resultant deprivations in education, occupation, and income. Rather, these social dislocations are seen as being the qualifiers for a person's being relegated to a particular social class known as the "underclass" in the first place. It's a classic case of "blame the victim."

Richard Gahey refers to the concept of the "underclass" as "poverty's voguish stigma." He places the formulation of the concept in historical perspective, arguing that "the word 'underclass' is a destructive and misleading label that lumps together different people who have different problems . . . It is the latest of popular labels (such as "lumpen proletariat", "undeserving poor", and "culture of poverty" that focuses on individual characteristics, and thereby stigmatizes the poor for their poverty." (Mc Gahey, 1982)

But even the framer of the concept of a "culture of poverty", Oscar Lewis, argues for an emphasis on structural change rather than the development of social competence in those people living in poverty who would later be termed the "underclass." He insists that "the crucial question from both the scientific and the political point of view is: How much weight is to be given to the internal, self-perpetuating factors in the subculture of poverty as compared to the external, societal factors? My own position is that in the long run the self-perpetuating factors are relatively minor and unimportant compared to the basic structure of the larger society." (Lewis, 1961)

Now, certain it is that there are those who believe they have unearthed "internal, self-perpetuating factors in the subculture of poverty." Edward Banfield comes up with a whole "laundry list" of characteristics descriptive, in his opinion, of those who would later be described as the "underclass." He lists such attributes as: "lack of future orientation; fatalism; passivity; impulsivity; lack of self-discipline; inability to postpone

gratification; resistance to routine; promiscuity; inability to sustain relationships; anti-socialism; paranoia; and orientation toward revenge upon those perceived to be enemies." (Banfield, 1967)

The key question, however, is whether these characteristics which might, admittedly, be found more extensively among those described as the "underclass" are personality characteristics, the possession of which insures you a reserved seat in the ghetto congregation of the chronically unemployed (and, therefore, chronically poor), or are they admittedly maladaptive responses to a person's having been denied the opportunities which would allow him or her to embrace the "Protestant Ethic" and middle class values and norms?

In other words, are the dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes which have been used to define the "underclass" innate traits of character possessed by the urban poor which leave them alienated from middle class values and norms? Or, are they, rather, reactions of the poor to having aspired to the living out of these middle class norms and values; having measured themselves by the litmus test of that value system; and then having been confronted with social restraints which assure that they will fail the litmus test they've employed in self evaluation, and leave them with little or no hope that they will ever pass? Might it not be that far from being alienated from middle class norms and values, the members of the so-called "underclass" have embraced them so passionately that they feel their sense of failure in meeting them more acutely?

Leonard Goodwin examined attitudes toward work among a quite diverse population, ranging from members of the "upperclass" to members of the so-called "underclass." He summarized his findings by stating that "everyone, from the welfare mother to the suburban white woman, had the same deep commitment to the work ethic. Where they differed was not in wanting to work, but in their estimation of the chances of success in doing so. The welfare mothers, the sons from fatherless families, genuflected before the Protestant Ethic, but had little confidence that they could act upon it." (Goodwin, 1972)

Another study, this time of unemployed black males "hanging out" on an urban street corner, came to a similar conclusion.

"There are both constant failure and the constant fear of failure among these men," the study concluded, "It is not, as some social scientists suggest, that they are 'present oriented', lacking the 'future orientation' of the stable worker who internalizes the "Protestant Ethic." The difference has to do not with their different future orientations, but with their different futures. It can be argued that it is precisely because these black men accept the values of the larger society, but are not given a serious opportunity to achieve them that they live as they do. For someone who has a real chance to work at decent wages, simply hanging out would be neurotic, irrational conduct. For one who does not—who lacks a future to which he or she can orient—it can be a way, if not of coping, then of disguising one's fate as a freely-chosen, purposely irresponsible life style." (Liebow, 1967)

The Era of the "Sixties"

Of course, it might be argued that if issues of economic inequality were the only factors in the emergence of a sub-group of poverty-stricken people showing a high degree of social dislocation and dysfunction, how is it that there was a period of relative stability in ghetto areas prior to 1960, and how was it that a black middle class managed to emerge from the economic restraints characteristic of those ghetto areas then just as now?

First, there was more economic opportunity available to the unskilled workers who comprised the bulk of inner city ghetto dwellers prior to 1960 than there is today. As we have moved to greater reliance on automation in industrial processes; have moved, in general, to a service economy; and have moved our industrial plants out of the inner city areas where they were once located into suburban industrial parks inaccessible to public transportation; the door of economic opportunity has closed even more securely in the face of inner city unskilled workers.

Second, the civil rights revolution has done much more to increase opportunities for minorities who have already achieved middle class status than it has for those who haven't. More housing is available to middle class blacks who can afford to move out of the ghetto than there was prior to 1960. Through affirmative action programs white collar, executive, and pro-

Professional slots are more readily available to people of color. Avenues are open to participation in the political structures which help mold their future which weren't prior to 1960. At the same time, few significant advances have been made in advancing the cause of the ghetto-dwelling poor.

Third, the flight of the middle class minorities from the ghettos, made possible by the gains of the civil rights movement, left in the ghetto areas only those who were unable to meet middle class aspirations, and thus acted out their sense of failure in a variety of socially dysfunctional ways. This, in turn fed the denial system of the middle class power structure, and permitted the more affluent to impute an even more devalued status to those still left in the ghetto, and to absolve themselves from taking the steps necessary to secure a more just distribution of wealth, and the expansion of economic opportunity.

Fourth, the greater accessibility of the mass media to residents of the ghetto, and especially television, confronted the poor through such vehicles as popular situation comedies with a picture of the kind of affluent middle and upperclass life style which they saw, not without reason, as being closed to them. This reinforced their sense of despair about the seemingly unbridgeable gap between rich and poor in this country, and their sense of hopelessness that this situation was ever likely to change.

Fifth, the wholesale introduction of drugs, especially of cocaine and "crack cocaine", with the huge economic rewards made possible from the most minimal of investment; the violence and crime associated with its use, and the protection of its sales territories; the dislocation of family life resulting from its use; the high rates of incarceration of inner city males on drug charges, and the subsequent barriers to employment erected by the acquisition of a criminal record has brought a whole new demonic dimension to the plight of the urban poor.

In a perverse way, the drug culture, which may be one of the most influential factors in indicating the line of demarcation between the life of the "deserving poor" in the pre-1960's ghetto, from the so-called "underclass" of today's ghetto, might well represent the triumph of the ghetto dweller's "responding to middle class incentives in terms of the opportunities available,"

in which drug dealers become the true entrepreneurs, realizing great profits from minimal investments.

And yet this aberrant behavior which may well be the most important component in the social dislocation which characterizes the life of the poor in our urban ghettos today, and earns them the title of "the underclass" has a way of taking on a life of its own, and turning back on itself, so that the victims who temporarily become the victimizers end up being even more tragically the victims in the end. High crime rates; transmission of potentially fatal diseases; depletion of already meager community resources; loss of incentive; and the destruction of any visible sense of a commonweal can all be the direct results of this central reality in urban ghetto life as we enter the decade of the nineties.

Policy Implications for the "Nineties"

What, then, are the policy implications for all that we have discussed?

First, there can be no shrinking from the truth that it is economic inequities that are at issue in the phenomenon of what has been described as the "underclass" in American society, and that this is the target at which intervention should be directed. Back in the sixties Gladwin warned that "since poverty is viewed nowadays more as a disabling way of life than as unbalanced income distribution, it should come as no surprise that the current emphasis is on people and the development of their social competence rather than on structural change." (Gladwin, 1967) The concept of the "underclass" as currently defined, perpetuates this misguided emphasis in public policy. For to describe a maladaptive response to an ongoing reality of diminishing economic opportunities as a generationally, if not hereditarily, transmitted "culture of poverty" is to blame the victim for his or her victimization. And to define a particular subculture of the poor as a "class" not in terms of education, employment, or income; but, rather, in terms of the social dislocations which are the symptoms of having regularly received a grade of "F" in the litmus test of middle class aspirations, is to hand the middle class power structure a tranquilizer which can

return members of that class into their own ideological dream worlds, and blind them to the role they play in maintaining a society in which extremes of poverty and wealth continue to co-exist. Given the resources of this nation there is no earthly reason why there should be the extremes of wealth and poverty which presently exist. Is there any reason beyond the naked self-interest of those who are bent on maintaining their positions of privilege and power in the more affluent sectors of American society?

I am reminded of a story told at the orientation at the School of Social Work of which I am a graduate. It concerned two social workers, one of whom busied him/herself with saving people in danger of drowning as they were being swept along by the swift currents of a nearby river, and pulling them safely to the shore; while the other went upstream to find out who was throwing them in. There is a need for all of us in the social services to spend more time "up stream", analyzing and doing battle with those unjust economic structures in our society which aid in creating and maintaining the plight of those who have been pejoratively dismissed as the "underclass" in our nation's cities.

But we also need to take seriously the role of alienation and marginalization in the maintenance of the so-called "underclass." An important role for us in the social service system will continue to be supporting and facilitating the participation of the poor in their own self-determination. Community organization directed toward the goal of participant democracy should be a major weapon in the social services' arsenal of interventions. We must focus on those interventions which will be most likely, in Rainwater's very incisive words, "to signal a change in the social equilibrium of failure." (Rainwater, 1970)

Conclusion

The term, "underclass", is a pejorative term. It is not a description of class in any traditional sense of that word, but is rather a moralistic judgment pronounced on the powerless by the powerful. As such, it has no legitimate place in the vocabulary of social stratification. References to the "underclass," as Dr. Edelman has so presciently warned, "will add nothing to

our understanding of poverty, but will erode public confidence in our ability to do something about it . . . and may reinforce the misguided belief that poverty is the product solely or primarily of individual pathology, ignoring the institutional forces in our society which help perpetuate deprivation." (Edelman, 1987)

It is not the alienation of the urban poor from middle class values and aspirations which has earned them the pejorative label of the "underclass." In fact, it is precisely the internalizing by the urban poor of those values, and the sense of failure they have encountered in realizing them, that has given birth to the social dislocations which have caused them to be labeled as such. It is time we stopped urging the poor of our country to dream of a future, and started redirecting our efforts to the creation of a future worth their dreaming about. It is time we stopped "blaming the victim," and started to work on removing the barriers which remain to there being "liberty and justice for all" in our nation. Labeling the poor of our inner cities as the "underclass" on the basis of the social dislocations they've exhibited in response to their economic deprivation is really no answer at all.

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