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Author(s): Naomi Carmon

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## POVERTY AND CULTURE

### **Empirical Evidence and Implications for Public Policy**

NAOMI CARMON

*Technion—Israel Institute of Technology*

Oscar Lewis's theory of the "culture of poverty" was investigated by interviewing a population of poor young Israelis and their parents. Both the model—that is, the claim that poverty traits and norms in the four spheres of life (individual, familial, communal, and societal) appear simultaneously—and the cultural explanation of the continuity of poverty were rejected. Instead, the situational explanation is supported, according to which the poor are part of the general culture, but adaptation to their situation makes them adopt some other norms that they tend to relinquish when their situation improves. Some implications for social policy are discussed, especially the rejection of the argument that governmental assistance to the poor is dangerous because it leads to dependence, or—because of rising expectations—leads them to rebel.

**The concept** of "culture of poverty" is a controversial issue. Basically, the debate is a theoretical one, but it may also have important implications for social policy. In times of governmental budget cutbacks in many countries, the argument once again is raised that there is no use in investing in the poor because their "culture of poverty" will prevent any change, or, if they do change, they will rebel. To what extent do old and new empirical social studies support these arguments?

The "culture of poverty" was introduced by Oscar Lewis in his anthropological studies of Mexican families (1959, 1961) and of a Puerto Rican family (1965, 1968a), and further developed in his later writings (1966, 1968b, 1969). It aroused criticism and sharp attacks on theoretical grounds (Valentine, 1968; Miller,

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1971) as well as on an empirical basis. The empirical studies focused on two subjects:

*Lewis's model.* Lewis suggested some 70 characteristics of the poor that can be grouped into four clusters: characteristics on the individual level, the family level, the local community level, and the level of the relationship between members of the subculture and the larger society. According to his model, these characteristics appear simultaneously and are functionally related within each cluster and between clusters (Lewis, 1969: 190), and thus create the separate subculture of poverty "which cuts across regional, rural-urban and even national boundaries" (Lewis, 1959: 2). Several field studies found a number of these traits among poor people in different cultures (Schneiderman, 1964; Coward et al., 1974; Papanek, 1975), but the major point in Lewis' model—the simultaneous existence of the characteristics in the four levels—was not empirically tested. In addition, a few studies found characteristics among the poor that contradict the ones suggested by Lewis (Guerrero, 1973; Schwartz, 1975; Perlman, 1975; Wieder, 1981); and significant differences were found in comparative studies of the same traits among poor families of different ethnic groups (Ireland et al., 1969).

*The continuity of the culture of poverty.* Lewis (1965: xiv) claimed that "once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime." In opposition to this cultural interpretation of the continuity of poverty, an alternative situational explanation was presented, according to which the poor are aware of middle-class values and are interested in living according to them. However, the situational stress under which they live causes the poor to "stretch" their values (Rodman, 1963; Della Fave, 1974) and develop additional and/or alter-

native values, which they then may desert when appropriate opportunities arise (Rainwater, 1968; Gans, 1968). The latter theory is supported by several empirical studies (Billings, 1974; Davidson and Krackhardt, 1977).

The discussion of poverty and culture became popular in Israel following the government's announcement in 1977 of Project Renewal, a nationwide program for social and physical rehabilitation of distressed neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> The program aims at improving the standard of living of neighborhood residents and providing them, and especially their children, with better life chances. The issue is: Does such a program have a chance to break the cycle of poverty?

This study is related to this issue and focuses on the following questions:

- (1) Are poor people in Israel characterized by the specific traits that were found among the poor in other countries?
- (2) If this is so, is it "the culture of poverty" according to Oscar Lewis's model? That is, do the poverty characteristics appear simultaneously in all four levels—the individual, the family, the local community, and the level of relationships with the larger society?
- (3) What are the prospects of change? Are the cultural norms of poverty of parents and of their children positively correlated, and therefore would it constitute an almost impossible-to-change cultural heritage? Or are the cultural norms of poverty negatively correlated with life changes (such as higher education and better occupation), thus indicating the validity of the situational theory, according to which there are high prospects of norm change providing that the appropriate environmental changes occur?

## **PROCEDURE<sup>2</sup>**

The population of study consisted of very poor young adults who were raised in poor families and therefore were second generation in poverty. The sample was randomly selected from a list of young couples (married up to 5 years) who had applied

to the Ministry of Housing in the Tel Aviv region for housing allowances and who had received over 1400 points, granted on the basis of very low income per person, high density in the couple's household, and very low income with a large number of persons in their parents' households. In almost all of the selected cases at least one of the spouses had grown up in one of Tel Aviv's distressed neighborhoods, meaning that not only did they come from poor families but also that they had grown up in poor environments.

A total of 73 young women were interviewed. Only women were selected in order to control for the variable of sex and because they were more accessible. We had planned to interview the mother of each young interviewee as well, but some of them did not have living mothers, others (56%) refused to give the addresses, saying that their mothers were "primitive," and several mothers were not found at home. Hence, only 17 mothers were interviewed.

The research tool was a questionnaire with closed questions about demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the family and concerning the attitudes and behavioral patterns attributed to the poor by Oscar Lewis and his followers. Several variables were combined into indices: The components of the poverty indices on the individual level,<sup>3</sup> the family level, the communal level, and the societal level are presented in Table 1. The internal validity (Nunnally, 1967) of each of these indices was checked and found to be between  $\alpha = 0.66$  and  $\alpha = 0.77$ .

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCHED HOUSEHOLDS

Of the 73 households studied, 64 were married couples, mostly with 2 to 3 children, and 9 were one-parent (mother) families with the same average number of children (1 widowed, 5 divorced, 3 separated). The average age of the heads of families

was 25-30 and the average duration of marriage was 6 years (note: They were selected from lists of young couples who applied for housing allowances). All of them lived in neighborhoods within the distressed areas of Tel Aviv.

The median number of school years was 7 (10 in the Israeli population), and 10% of both men and women had only 4 years of schooling or less. Of the husbands, 20% did not work at all and only 40% worked throughout the year; the rest of them worked less than 10 months in the year preceding the interview. (For comparison: The rate of unemployment in the Israeli labor market was 4% to 6%.) Only 12% of the wives worked outside their homes regularly (compared to 40% of women of work age in Israel). Unemployment was mainly due to illness: 24% of the men and 7% of the women were reported as disabled or chronically ill, and another 24% of the men and 37% of the women had some kind of protracted disease.

Only 3 of the working husbands were skilled workers; the rest were unskilled workers in industry and services (compared to 10% unskilled workers in the Israeli labor market). A total of 80% reported that their monthly income from all sources was below the average income for employed workers in the country; two-thirds of these reported half the average income or less. Only one-third of the households were receiving permanent monthly payments from the welfare department, but more than half received other material help (rent subsidies, various fee reductions, and so on). Hence, the sample households clearly represented a poor and disadvantaged population.

#### TESTING LEWIS'S MODEL OF THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

The first research question is whether the interviewees in our sample, who were selected on the basis of being a second generation of poverty, had the cultural and behavioral characteristics that were attributed to poor populations by Oscar Lewis and his followers.

According to the data in Table 1, 10 out of the 12 traits characterize 40% to 70% of the interviewees, which means that

**TABLE 1**  
**Lewis Poverty Traits Among Poor Young Women**

<u>Personal level</u>	<u>Percentage high on scale</u>	<u>Family level</u>	<u>Percentage high on scale</u>
Low self esteem	27	Authoritarianism in child rearing	40
Pessimism	30	Absence of childhood	46
Acceptance of social deviance	44	<u>Communal level</u>	
Loneliness	58	Minimum social contacts	56
Present-time orientation	63	No communal activity	72
Fatalism	66	<u>Societal level</u>	
		Non-participation in institutions	40
		Feelings of relative deprivation	60

many of Oscar Lewis's poverty traits are common among our poor population in Israel, just as they are among the poor in other countries. However, in order to support Lewis's model, the characteristics in the various levels should appear simultaneously. The results of testing this hypothesis are presented in Table 2.

No significant association was found among the individual, familial, and communal levels, but all three correlations with the societal level are relatively high, with two being statistically significant. This last finding may suggest further hypotheses about the impact of having the poverty traits, but it does not change the general conclusion that even though our population was very poor, was a second generation of poverty, and showed many poverty traits, Lewis's model of the culture of poverty was not supported.

#### THE PROSPECTS OF CHANGE

In order to examine the theories that assert the perpetuation of poverty, the following questions should be investigated: (a)

**TABLE 2**  
**Spearman Correlations Among Culture of Poverty Indices**  
**in Lewis's Four Levels**

	Individual	Familial	Communal	Societal
Individual				
Familial	.11			
Communal	.06	.09		
Societal	.47*	.18	.23*	

\* $p \leq .05$ .

Do parents and children share the same social norms? (b) Do changes in life chances of the poor change the social norms accepted by them? To obtain valid answers to these questions, a longitudinal study is required to investigate the parents' social norms when their children are young, and to follow up changes that may occur in the norms of the young generation according to their different life opportunities. We were unable to carry out such an investigation. We were confined to a single point in time, and were able to interview only a very small number of parents. Therefore, our findings on this point are to be viewed only as tentative.

Even though the findings presented in Table 3 are based on the responses of only 17 daughters and their mothers, their consistency seems noteworthy. Although both parents and children were poor and underprivileged, in 10 of the 12 tested traits, the poverty characteristics were more prevalent (considerably so in a few cases) among mothers than among their daughters. The two exceptions differ from the others not only in that the daughters here exhibit higher rates but in that they reflect not resignation but rather a protest against the society.

We interpret these differences between parents and children as contrary to the cultural explanation and in support of the situational explanation of the continuity of poverty. Even though both groups were poor, the children's situation was better than that of their parents in various respects: they were younger and



TABLE 3  
Poverty Traits Among Daughters and Their Mothers  
(in percentages)

Personal level	Daughters	Mothers	Family level	Daughters	Mothers
Low self esteem	24	35	Authoritarianism in child rearing	41	71
Pessimism	35	38	Absence of childhood	53	71
Acceptance of social deviance	47	24	Communal level		
Loneliness	47	76	Minimum social contacts	65	88
Present-time orientation	53	71	No communal activity	71	82
			Societal level		
Fatalism	43	59	Non-participation in institutions	31	53
			Feelings of relative deprivation	47	31

had more years of schooling (50% of the parents had 0 to 4 years at school in contrast to only 9% of the young men and 11% of the young women; none of the parents had gone to secondary school, whereas 17% of the young males and 34% of the young females had at least 9 years of schooling). In addition, they had improved housing conditions—all of them lived in rather new public housing. It seems that the young persons were aware of the opportunities open to them by these advantages and, as a consequence, they were less fatalistic and more socially involved in comparison with their parents.

Trying to corroborate this explanation of the impact of opportunities, we examined the associations between poverty indices and family status within the young population. Family status was operationally defined by two indices: (a) SES—constructed from the level of education of both husband and wife, employment of both, and combined family income;<sup>4</sup> and (b) Welfare Dependency—constructed from responses to questions about current or past acceptance by the family of either permanent or occasional support from the welfare department.

**TABLE 4**  
**Culture of Poverty Indices and Family Status—**  
**Spearman Correlations**

	Individual	Familial	Communal	Societal
SES	-.47*	-.03	-.30	-.61*
Welfare Dependency	.26*	.01	.40*	.32*

\* $p \leq .05$ .

Table 4 supports the hypothesis that improved situation is associated with lower poverty traits. It shows that the higher the SES, the lower the person is on three out of the four poverty indices; also, the more welfare-dependent one is, the higher one places on the same three indices. The familial index is an exception, that perhaps can be explained by the fact that even very poor families in Israel are usually intact and preserve the tradition of love and care between parents and children.

Critics of the cultural explanation of the continuity of poverty assert that the poor are aware of middle-class norms and they would like to behave accordingly, provided the situation enabled it. We have some evidence to back these two assertions as well. When our interviewees were asked to react to the following statement—"everyone can get a job, if one really wants it"—86% responded that it was true. When asked what they would do with a large amount of money if they won it in a lottery, 82% of the respondents said that they would save it for their children and/or for buying a new apartment.

Last but not least in this context is the finding regarding "demandingness." When people argue that the government should provide the poor with more and better services in order to improve their chances in life, a common counterargument is that this will make them more demanding and more dependent.

The answers to our questions about “demandingness” were distributed as follows:

If a family has many young children, who should be responsible for providing them with enough food?

- Mainly the government, or the municipality, or the welfare department 25%
  - Mainly the school, or the kindergarten 6%
  - Only the parents 69%
- 100%

What is the desirable way for young couples to obtain an apartment of their own?

- The government should give a free apartment to each young couple 15%
  - Some of the money should be provided by the government and the rest should come from the couple’s savings and loans 67%
  - The couple should save, take loans, and be helped by family members 18%
- 100%

The above figures show that a substantial majority of our poor population did not express high “demandingness,” even when they were asked about housing ownership, which they lack. Most of them were not “spoiled” even though they had been helped: all of them had been found eligible for subsidized rental public housing and had received it. Moreover, we examined the Spearman correlation between welfare dependency and “demandingness” and found it low (.16) and insignificant. Our interpretation of the above is that even though the poor may behave differently when their situation requires them to do so, they are aware of middle-class norms and tend to express their conformity with them rather than dependency and demandingness.

### SUMMARY AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to undertake an empirical investigation of Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty model and the theoretical controversy regarding the causes of poverty perpetuation. As noted, our data base was limited: a small sample at one point in time. Nevertheless, the findings seem to warrant further comment, at least because of their relevance to basic questions of social policy.

The study showed that the poverty traits found among poor people in many cultures were also common among Israeli poor, but because they did not appear simultaneously in all four spheres of life (individual, familial, communal, and societal), Lewis's model was not sustained. In a comparison between poor mothers and their poor daughters, the poverty-related norms were less common along the latter, supporting the situational explanation of poverty continuity because the younger generation seemed to be aware of its wider opportunities stemming from their younger age, higher education, and better housing conditions. This conclusion is supported by significant correlations within the younger population between high poverty traits and very low SES, as well as dependency on welfare. In addition, the study supported the concept of one culture (as against a separate poverty culture) in that most of its subjects indicated their awareness of selected middle-class norms and asserted that they would behave accordingly if they had the chance. They did not express attitudes of dependency and demandingness.

The message for social policy is that it is worthwhile to invest in improving opportunities; poor people will change their behavior if they have the appropriate chances in life. However, the question is, what such change will bring about for them and for the rest of the society. According to the "rising expectations" theory, "as a group experiences an improvement in its conditions in life it will also experience a rise in its level of desires. The latter will rise more rapidly than the former, leading to dissatisfaction and rebellion" (Edwards, 1927: 30). There is little evidence against the fact that improvements in life conditions

cause rise in desires and often also feelings of relative deprivation. However, consider the following: (a) This rise will probably continue with or without government intervention to improve opportunities, even if only due to impacts of the mass media. (b) This rise does not necessarily bring about rebellion, as is shown by recent history of western countries and also by a few empirical studies (Perlman, 1976). (c) Government intervention and government assistance do not necessarily lead to increased dependency, even in the lower class, as suggested by some of our findings.

My conclusion is that the fear of both rebellion and mass dependency as consequences of government assistance to lower classes has been greatly exaggerated. Throughout recent decades living conditions of all classes have been considerably improved, their desires have increased, and so have their demands from their governments; but these have not prevented most of them from being productive and from remaining loyal citizens. In a recent study of the employed in the United States, Yuchtman-Ya'ar (1983) found that improved situation caused a rise in "expectations" and "entitlements," but that both were also very much attached to reality.<sup>5</sup> If we can accept the notion of a single culture that includes the poor as part of it, then we can conclude that although improving the opportunities open to the poor will cause a rise in their feelings of entitlement, those feelings will remain close to what is attainable and, therefore, they will not rebel. What seems more likely is that many of them will be motivated to increase their personal efforts and enter the middle class, the norms of which they know and generally wish to realize.

## NOTES

1. See Project Renewal description in Carmon and Hill (1984).
2. The empirical data for this study were collected and partly analyzed by my student, Rachel Glazer, and I would like to thank her for her devoted work.
3. Poverty culture on the personal level was a combined index of six variables, the internal validity of which by Nunnally formula (1967: 196) was  $\alpha = .76$ . The scaling of each interviewee was determined by one's answers to the following closed questions

(which were scattered throughout the questionnaire), each of which had 4 alternative answers from which the interviewee had to choose one (the following questions were translated from Hebrew):

#### **Self-Esteem**

1. In general, are you satisfied with yourself?
2. Do you feel that you can do things as well as others can?

#### **Pessimism**

3. Do you expect things to change for the better or for the worse?
4. Do you expect your economic situation to change for the better or for the worse in the coming years?

#### **Acceptance of Social Deviance**

5. "Not everyone is capable of living in accordance with the law"—to what extent do you agree with this statement?
6. Are there many around you who use drugs from time to time?

#### **Loneliness**

7. Do you sometimes feel very lonely?
8. When you need help, do you have someone to turn to?

#### **Present Time Orientation**

9. "A wise person cares for today; tomorrow will care for itself"—to what extent do you agree with this statement?
10. Do you save money?

#### **Fatalism**

11. "A person can do very little to change the fate to which one was born"—to what extent do you agree with this statement?
12. "A person's success depends on his own efforts"—to what extent do you agree with this statement?

4. Even though all the interviewees were part of the lower class, there was variation within the group regarding education, employment, and even income, which ranged from below 5,000 IL to over 15,000 IL.

5. The Yuchtman-Ya'ar (1983) empirical study is based on interviews with employees from a representative sample of households in the coterminous United States. He broke down the term "expectations," as used by the theory of "rising expectations," into three components: "aspirations," "expectancies" (subjectively attainable outcomes),

and "entitlements" (subjectively deserved outcomes), and concentrated on the investigation of the latter two in the domain of earned income. He found that entitlement is the variable significantly correlated with relative deprivation. However, even though the average feeling of entitlement was twice as strong as the feeling of expectancy, both were only somewhat higher (22% and 11%, respectively) than the real income.

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*Naomi Carmon is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Currently she is spending her sabbatical year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For the last four years she has been a Codirector of a comprehensive evaluation study of Project Renewal, an Israeli nationwide program for social and physical rehabilitation of distressed neighborhoods. Her research interests include social aspects of urban planning, with special emphasis on housing and social services for disadvantaged populations, and evaluation methodology of programs for deliberate social change.*