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THE CULTURE OF POVERTY AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES.

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WITH OSCAR LEWIS' CONCEPT OF A "CULTURE OF POVERTY" AS A FRAME OF REFERENCE, THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE NATURE OF POVERTY AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES AS PORTRAYED IN NOVELS, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, AND SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES. THE POOR WHO LIVE IN THIS "CULTURE OF POVERTY" LOSE THEIR PLACE IN SOCIETY AND, OVER GENERATIONS, FAIL TO BECOME EFFECTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN GROUPS OF INSTITUTIONS BEYOND THEIR NUCLEAR FAMILIES OR SLUM. IN THE PAPER LOWER-CLASS NEGROES MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM A RURAL (FORMERLY SLAVE) BACKGROUND TO A MODERN URBAN SETTING, AND WHOSE FORMER TRADITIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS HAVE BEEN SHATTERED (AND NEW ONES NOT DEVELOPED), ARE DISCUSSED IN TERMS OF PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMIC LIFE, FAMILY LIFE, RELATIONSHIP TO INSTITUTIONS (EDUCATIONAL, MEDICAL, SOCIAL, GOVERNMENT AND LEGAL, NEGRO MOVEMENTS), AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS. REFERENCES ARE INCLUDED. (AF)

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THE CULTURE OF POVERTY AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES

by

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THE CULTURE OF POVERTY AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES

The present "war on poverty" has brought to the attention of the American public the prevalence of poverty in our "affluent society." The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of poverty among American Negroes as it is portrayed in novels, autobiographies, and sociological studies. The frame of reference for this investigation will be Oscar Lewis' concept of a "culture of poverty" (1961; 1964).

Although Lewis' definition of a "culture of poverty" is based on his study of families in Mexico, he feels that "the culture of poverty has some universal characteristics which transcend regional, rural-urban, and even national differences" (1961, p. xxv). Lewis defines the culture of poverty as "a way of life characteristic of poor, illiterate slum dwellers who do not effectively participate or belong to groups or institutions beyond the nuclear family and slum to which they belong." He feels that a culture of poverty comes into existence as a result of great social change and disorganization in which old traditions and memberships are shattered. A group of poor people literally lose their place in society and over generations, fail to become effective participants or members of groups or institutions beyond their nuclear families or slum. Not all poor people belong to the culture of poverty, for as soon as one finds forces at work toward group solidarity, one is moving away from the culture of poverty (1965).

Lewis lists over sixty traits of the culture of poverty which are of varying degrees of importance and need not all be present in order to have a culture of poverty. For ease of discussion, these class traits will be dealt with in this consideration of the culture of poverty under the following headings:

1. Physical environment
2. Economic life
3. Family life

4. Relationship to institutions
    a. educational
    b. medical
    c. social
    d. government and legal
    e. Negro movements
5. Psychological characteristics

The specific traits outlined by Lewis which seem pertinent to each heading will be listed at the beginning of each section of the discussion. One can assume that information was not available in the literature about those traits which are listed but not discussed in the text. A discussion of the class characteristics will be followed by a discussion of the effect of racial discrimination on the culture of poverty among American Negroes.

Before proceedings to a discussion of the class traits of the culture of poverty as they exist among American Negroes, it is necessary to define the segment of the Negro population under discussion. This paper is concerned with lower-class Negroes who are making the transition from a rural (formerly slave) background to a modern urban setting. It is concerned with the lower-class urban Negroes whose former (maybe generations ago) traditions and memberships have been shattered, and who have not developed a new set of traditions and memberships. Drake and Cayton give the following description of three separate segments of the lower-class Negro population in Chicago:

> Basic to (the lower-class world) is a large group of disorganized and broken families, whose style of life differs from that of the other social classes, but who are by no means "criminal" except so far as the children swell the ranks of the delinquents, or the elders occasionally run afoul of the law for minor disdemeanors.
>
> Existing side by side with these people is a smaller, more stable group made up of "church folks" and those families (church and non-church) who are trying to "advance themselves."
>
> In close contact with both these groups are the denizens of the underworld--the pimps and prostitutes, the thieves and pickpockets, the dope addicts and reefer smokers, the professional gamblers, cutthroats, and murderers. The lines separating these three basic groups are fluid and shifting...(1945, p.600).

The first group described is the segment which exhibits traits of the culture of poverty. Neither the "respectable lowers" or the criminal element are of concern in this presentation. Thus, any further reference to lower-class people, unless otherwise noted, will refer to the urban lower-class group of "disorganized and broken families" described by Drake and Cayton.

Physical Environment

1. Crowded quarters
2. Lack of privacy
3. Local residence a kind of small community
4. Local community acts as a shock absorber for rural migrants to city
5. Stable residence
6. Daily face-to-face relations with same people
7. Gregariousness
8. Lifetime friendships

Living quarters of lower-class Negroes are of poor quality and are usually overcrowded. Drake and Cayton outline the housing situation in Chicago in 1945 as follows:

> The dominant household pattern for older, established families was the flat of three to six rooms in which family, boarders, lodgers, and impecunious relatives lived doubled up, overcrowded, and without privacy....The bulk of the lower class, however, was getting used to "kitchenette" living.... Building after building in these areas was cut up into "kitchenettes," for an enterprising landlord could take a six-room apartment renting for $50 a month and divide it into six kitchenettes renting at $8 a week, thus assuring a revenue of $192 a month! For each one-room household he provided an ice-box, a bed, and a gas hot-plate. A bathroom that once served a single family now served six. A building that formerly held sixty families might now have three hundred (1945, p. 576).

Stringfellow gives a more recent and a more colorful description of a tenement in Harlem.

> The stairway smelled of piss.
>
> The smells inside the tenement...were somewhat more ambiguous. They were a suffocating mixture of rotting food, rancid mattresses, dead rodents, dirt, and the stale odors of human life.
>
> This was to be home. It had been home before for a family of eight--five kids, three adults....The place, altogether, was about 25 x 12 feet, with a wall separating the kitchen section from the rest. In the kitchen was a bathtub, a tiny rusty sink, a refrigerator that didn't work, and an ancient gas range. In one corner was a toilet with a bowl without a seat. Water dripped perpetually from the box above the bowl. The other room was filled with beds: two double-decker military cots, and a big ugly convertible sofa. There wasn't room for anything else. The walls and ceiling were mostly holes and patches and peeling paint, sheltering legions of cockroaches (1964, p.2).

In addition to the crowded quarters, which allow little privacy, and the generally poor facilities, rats and bugs are commpn in lower-class housing. Dick Gregory (1964, p. 40) makes the following comment in his autobiography: " Mother had to make deals with the rats: leave some food out for them so they wouldn't gnaw on the doors or bite the babies. The roaches, they were just part of the family."

Slum neighborhoods seem to form small, loosely organized communities. There is some visiting and lending back and forth, children play together on the streets and form local gangs, parents shop in the same stores and socialize in the local taverns. Contrary to Lewis' findings in Mexico, these loosely organized communities in American Negro slums tend to be rather unstable. Lower-class Negroes tend to be quite mobile. Ethel Waters (1951, p. 8) comments, "my childhood was almost like a series of one-night stands. I was shuttled about among relatives, boarded out, continually being moved around...." Silberman gives the following example of the mobility of the school population in slums in New York City:

> Three elementary schools in New York...had a 100 per cent turnover in student population between the beginning and the end of the 1939-60 school year; in forty-three schools, the turnover ranged between 70 per cent and 99 per cent" (1965, p. 265).

Economic Life

1. Constant struggle for survival
2. Absence of savings
3. Chronic shortage of cash
4. Absence of food reserves in the home
5. Frequent daily food purchases in small quantities
6. Raising of animals
7. Use of second-hand clothing and furniture
8. Unemployment and underemployment
9. Low wages; miscellany of unskilled occupations
10. Child labor
11. Higher proportion of gainfully employed (because of working women and child labor)
12. Spontaneous informal credit devices
13. Borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest
14. Pawning

Life for lower-class Negroes is a constant struggle for survival. They have no savings and there is a constant shortage of cash. Providing the basic necessities of food, shelter, and clothing is their primary concern. Ethel Waters (1951, p. 46) states that for her mother and aunts "each day was a scuffle, a racking struggle to keep alive. When people are in that situation the problems of a child must seem very unimportant. All that counts is eating and keeping a roof over your head."

Hunger is very real to lower-class Negroes. They cannot afford to put in a stock of groceries; they must buy in small quantities as they can afford. When money is scarce, there is often not enough to eat. Ethel Waters (1951. p. 23) describes learning to steal before she was of school age in order to get enough to eat. Richard Wright describes his hunger as follows:

> Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at

> my elbow when I played, standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent. Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still the clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but a little later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached. I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me (1964, p. 21).

Shelter also presents problems. Lower-class Negroes have to pay very high rates for the small apartments and poor facilities available to them. Silberman (1965, p. 320) relates the fact that "although nearly 25 per cent of Woodlawn's residents receive some form of welfare, they pay an average of $84 a month in rent--more than $10 above the city average...." Residential segregation restricts the supply of housing units available to Negroes, and when the demand for housing is great, rent rates remain high. The combination of high rent and a scarcity of cash makes the chance of eviction a constant threat.

Lower-class Negroes must struggle to remain properly clothed. Richard Wright (1964, p. 31) tells that he started school at a later age than was usual because his mother could not afford the clothes to make him presentable. Dick Gregory (1964, p. 43) describes washing out his shirt and socks every night because they were the only ones he owned. He had to wear them to school wet some days if the fire went out during the night. Clothes are often hand-me-downs from white employers and must be made to do whether they fit properly or not.

The employment situation is largely responsible for the subsistence level of living among lower-class Negroes. As Drake and Cayton (1945, p. 582) point out, "Negro men have suffered from irregularity of employment and from actual unemployment more than any other segment of America's

lower class." As a result, Negro women are the main wage earners in many families. Work is more readily available to lower-class Negro women, but they must take menial work and they receive very low pay. Children often begin work at a very early age in order to contribute something to the family income. They sell newspapers, shine shoes, run errands, and do other odd jobs. Lower-class children also tend to quit school and enter the full-time labor force as soon as possible. Racial discrimination is an important factor in the employment situation and will be dealt with later in this paper.

Welfare payments contribute greatly to the income of lower-class Negroes. In Woodlawn, a Chicago Negro slum, "nearly 25 per cent of the area's residents receive some sort of welfare" (Silberman, 1965, p. 320).

The literature reviewed revealed no evidence of two sources of money common to the culture of poverty in Mexico: spontaneous informal credit devices (tandas) and borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest. Five common sources of money and goods seem to be: (1) pawning, (2) extension of credit by local store keepers, (3) time payment buying--with rates of interest often very high, (4) exchange of goods and services with neighbors, (5) assistance from one's extended family.

Family Life

1. Emphasis upon family solidarity (only rarely achieved)
2. Authoritarianism
3. Mother-centered families
4. Male superiority (machismo)
5. Corresponding martyr complex among women
6. Free unions
7. Abandonment of mothers and children
8. Predominance of nuclear family
9. Extended family ties quite strong
10. Violence in training of children
11. Wife beating

12. Violence
13. Early initiation into sex
14. High incidence of alcoholism

The lower-class Negro family is characterized by great disorganization. As Drake and Cayton (1945, p. 587) say, "Some couples manage to stick it out and maintain a stable, unbroken home, but this is not the typical lower-class pattern."

There is a historic base for the family disorganization of American Negroes as a race. Family life was greatly restricted during slavery. To begin with, there was a disproportionate ratio of women to men in early slave days. The few Negro women available often had to be shared with the slave holders. Slaves were sold individually without concern for family ties among the slaves, and little family life was allowed even if a slave family remained with one owner. The children were often cared for by an older woman who was unfit for service in the fields. Any family life which was present, revolved around the women.

Economic factors have favored the continued importance of women in lower-class Negro families, in contrast to the culture of poverty in Mexico as described by Lewis. Drake and Cayton summarize the situation as follows:

> Since slavery, Negro men have never been able, in the mass, to obtain good jobs long enough to build a solid economic base for family support....It has always been their wives and girl friends who, working as servants in white families, have "brought home the butter in the bag." Thus, both husband and children come to look to their women as the ultimate source of support....Lower class men are thus in a weak economic position vis-a-vis their women and children. Male control loosened, the woman becomes the dominant figure (1945, p. 583).

With the common absence of a man in a lower-class Negro household, the woman takes over the complete responsibility for her family.

A woman's strong economic position and importance as responsible head of the household is tempered by her affectional and sexual needs.

Her "need for a man" makes her somewhat dependent on and submissive to men. This dependence on a man is often transferred from one man to another, resulting in a series of short-lived unions as each man leaves or is kicked out. Thus, although a man is insecure in his economic power and lacks a position of authority and responsibility in the home, he gains some authority and power, however short-lived, through his sexual and affectional position. The woman, however, tends to remain the central figure in the lower-class Negro family.

Free union tends to be the common form of joining lower-class Negro men and women. This allows the forming or breaking of a union at will, without legal technicalities.

Abandonment of women and children is common. Duke's mother, in The Cool World, makes this comment:

> "I only wanted but the one husband you father but things got too much for him an he ran off an lef me. Things always get too much for men. They thinin all day of whut they comin home to an one time they jus don come home" (Miller, 1959, p. 54).

An attitude of "love 'em and leave 'em" is described as being common among lower-class Negro men (Drake and Cayton, 1945, p. 584).

Free unions are often broken by the woman. Lower-class Negro women are characterized by the attitude of "I'll let him love me (and I'll love him) until he doesn't act right. Then I'll kick him out" (Drake and Cayton, 1945, p. 584). There is little evidence of the martyr complex, described by Lewis, among lower-class Negro women in the United States. They remain quite independent in spite of some sexual and affectional dependence on men. The "long-suffering" wife is quite uncommon, for, as previously mentioned, a woman kicks her husband out if he "don't act right."

Regardless of how a free union is broken, new partners seem to be readily available. Louis Armstrong (1954, p. 26) states that his mother "had enough stepfathers to furnish me with plenty of trousers. All I had to do was turn my back and a new pappy would appear." Any continuity of family life through this changing of partners is provided by the mother. The children stay with their mother and some family ties with the woman's mother are usually maintained. The maternal grandmother, in fact, often plays an important role in the family.

Childhood in lower-class families seems to be characterized by early independence. Most mothers have to work, and the children are often left to their own devices since there is no money available for babysitters or nursery school. Ethel Waters (1951, p. 1) states, "Nobody brought me up. I just ran wild as a little girl." At the age of three, she and her younger cousin Tom explored the streets alone. She tells of the following activity becoming common by the time she was six years old:

> A bunch of us would often sleep all night out on the street, over the warm iron gratings of bakeries or laundries. Our families didn't care where we were, and these nesting places, when you put your coat under you, were no more uncomfortable than the broken-down beds with treacherous springs or the bedbug-infested pallets we had at home (Waters, 1951, p. 16).

Beating is the common means of training and disciplining lower-class children. Edward's mother in Children of Bondage (Davis and Dollard, 1964, p. 89) comments, "I always did whip him a lot to make sure he was a good boy." Davis and Dollard add:

> If Edward is not a very good boy, it is certainly not for lack of beatings. His mother whipped him unmercifully from the beginning but she now thinks there was something wrong with the plan. She says, "He'll go do the same thing you whipped him for doing" (1964, p. 90).

Lower-class children are also exposed to and initiated into many aspects of adult life at an early age. Ethel Waters describes her sex

education as follows:

> In crowded slum homes one's sex education begins very early indeed. Mine began when I was about three and sleeping in the same room, often in the same bed, with my aunts and my transient "uncles." I wasn't fully aware of what was going on but resented it. By the time I was seven I was repelled by every aspect of sex (1951, p. 19).

Sexual experience also begins at an early age. Davis and Dollard give the following account of Edward's sexual experience:

> He said that he had learned the difference between boys and girls very easily, in fact had always known it. He had heard the fellows talking about such things. He himself had started "doing it" with girls when he was about eight (1964, p. 84).

In The Cool World (Miller, 1959, p. 41), Duke, a 14-year-old boy, tells about his gang's acquisition of a girl as their gang whore.

Lower-class children live in an atmosphere of violence. Drake and Cayton describe violence in a Chicago slum as follows:

> Brawls were frequent, often resulting in intense violence. A supper interrupted by the screams of a man with an ice-pick driven into his back might be unusual--but a fight involving the destruction of the meager furniture in these households was not uncommon (1945, p. 572).

Dick Gregory gives the following account of a beating his father gave his mother after he had been home for only one day after one of his long absences:

> He beat her all through the house, every room, swinging his belt and whopping her with his hand and cussing her and kicking her and knocking her down and telling her all about his women....The kids were crying and hollering....He left her on the floor, dirty and crying, came over and whopped me across my face so hard that when I knocked into the wall the pictures fell right off their hooks....And then they were in the kitchen and Big Pres was crying and kissing my Momma and saying he was sorry and how he was going to take care of us and give up his women and get a job....I got up off the floor and I walked into that kitchen. Big Pres was sitting at the table with his face in his hands, and Momma was standing over him, stroking his head. They both were crying. I took down the butcher knife off the wall, the big one with the black handle, and swung at his head. Seen plenty of people swing knives in the taverns and I knew how to cut. Swung right at his head, everything I had, I swung for every kid in the whole world who hated his no-good Daddy.
>
> Momma grabbed my wrist with both her hands and twisted the knife out of my hand (1964, p. 34-36).

Training in self defense is a necessary part of a child's life. Richard Wright (1964, p. 24) relates the story of his training at the age of five. He had been sent to the store to get some groceries, but had been beaten up on the way by a group of boys who took his money. When he returned home, his mother handed him a stick and some more money. She told him not to return home until he had gotten the groceries.

The lower-class child is exposed to the heavy use of liquor and drugs at an early age, as well. Drinking and drunkenness are very prevalent among lower-class Negroes. The beer parlors and saloons are described by Davis and Dollard (1964, p. 73) as being the "social clubs of the lower-lower-class people." Marajuana, cocaine, and heroin are readily available in slum neighborhoods, and children soon become exposed to their use.

Relationship to Institutions

1. Low level of education and literacy
2. Use of herbs for curing
3. Relative higher death rate
4. Lower life expectancy
5. Higher proportion of individuals in the younger age group
6. Belief in sorcery and spiritualism
7. Critical attitude toward some of beliefs and values of dominant class
8. Members attempt to utilize and integrate into a workable way of life the remnants of beliefs and customs of diverse origins
9. Cynacism which extends even to the church
10. Limited membership and participation in both formal and informal associations
11. Hatred of police
12. Political apathy
13. Cynacism about government
14. Mistrust of government and those in high position
15. Provincial and locally oriented
16. Marginal to national institutions (social security, labor unions, banks, etc.)

Educational. Davis and Dollard (1964, p. 266) report that lower-class parents "have attended only a few grades in school and the educational goal they set for their children is not much higher than their own." Several factors in addition to low educational goals contribute to the ineffectiveness of school for lower-class Negroes. In the first place, the school facilities tend to be old and rundown. The policy of city school boards is such, that the newest and most inexperienced teachers are often assigned to slum schools. These teachers are usually not especially interested in slum children and their special problems. Dick Gregory makes the following comment about one of his teachers:

> The teacher thought I was stupid. Couldn't read, couldn't spell, couldn't do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn't concentrate because you were so hungry, because you hadn't had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime, would it ever come? (1964, p. 44).

Teachers are underpaid and are rarely trained to work with slum children. In a study of Negro slum classrooms, Deutsch (Silberman, 1965, p. 265) found that "even the best teachers frequently had to spend as much as 75 per cent of their time maintaining discipline, leaving only 25 per cent for actual instruction."

The great mobility of the school population, which has already been dealt with, creates problems for the schools. In addition, truancy is a very common activity. Claude Brown (1965, p. 17) tells of playing hookey on his second day in school and frequently thereafter.

The children's lack of motivation contributes greatly to the ineffectiveness of the schools. Lower-class Negro children realize, when they are still very young, that an education will be of little use to them in getting a job. This aspect of racial discrimination will be dealt with later in this paper.

Medical. The use of herbs for curing is mentioned in Louis Armstrong's autobiography (1954, p. 20), but there is no evidence of this practice in later writings. Lower-class Negroes make use of the free clinics and hospitals which are available in urban areas in case of serious illness, but they seem to receive little regular medical attention.

Statistics show that Negroes have generally poorer health than Caucasians in the United States. This would seem to be largely due to class, rather than racial factors. A much larger percentage of nonwhite families live in poverty than do white families, and poor health goes hand in hand with poverty. In addition to receiving little regular medical attention, people living in poverty are often characterized by factors which contribute to generally poor health, such as, inadequate diets, poor habits of personal cleanliness, and poor sanitation conditions.

The life expectancy of Negro males is 60.9, compared to 67.5 for white males. The life expectancy of Negro females is 66.5, compared to 74.4 for white females (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1965, p. 53). The death rate for Negroes is 10.1 per 1,000; the death rate for whites is 9.5 per 1,000. The infant mortality rate for Negroes is 41.5 per 1,000 live births; the infant mortality rate for whites is 22.2 per 1,000 live births (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1965, p. 56).

Several communicable diseases are more common among Negroes than whites. The incidence of pulmonary tuberculosis is three times higher among Negroes; the death rate is four times higher (Pettigrew, 1964, p. 82). Although statistics on venereal disease are poor, "the available data suggest high Negro rates of syphilis and its complications. Public health data for 1960-1961, for instance, indicate a Negro incidence rate ten times greater than the white and a death rate almost four times greater" (Pettigrew,

1964, p. 86). The death rate of Negroes from complications of communicable childhood diseases is at least twice as high as the rate for whites (Pettigrew, 1964, p. 88).

Social. Although religion is an important element in the commonly held stereotype of the lower-class Negro, religion is not important in the life of members of the culture of poverty. The "respectable lowers," or the upper-lower-class people, are the "church people." Mrs. Martin's situation in Children of Bondage seems typical of the religious affiliation of the segment of the lower class under discussion.

> Mrs. Martin says she is a Baptist and was baptized as a young girl in a river in the country. But she is not actually welded into the life of her community through her church. Indeed, she is not a member of any church, in the sense of going regularly, being known to the congregation, holding church office, or paying dues. She just goes once in a while to a neighboring Baptist church, and then again to a Sanctified church around the corner (Davis and Dollard, 1964, p. 75).

A belief in sorcery and spiritualism is more common for lower-class Negroes. Claude Brown (1965, p. 21) tells that his mother thought someone had "worked roots on him" to make him so bad. Davis and Dollard (1964, p. 266, 87) speak of magic being an accepted classway among lower-class Negroes and tell of Mrs. Martin instilling a fear of spooky and supernatural events in Edward.

Claude Brown discusses religion as being an answer to a need for some people.

> I stayed away from that religious thing and let Carole go on and walk that way if she wanted to. I felt that this was something she needed, the way everybody in Harlem needed something. Some people needed religion. The junkies needed drugs. Some people needed to get drunk on Saturday night and raise hell. A lot of people needed the numbers (1965, p. 203).

It does seem that each segment of the lower class has its own outlet, an

outlet which could be viewed as a means of answering a "need." The "respectable lowers" have the church; the lower class has its beer parlors and "the numbers"; the "criminal element" has drugs.

Government and Legal. Lower-class Negroes' relationship with police and lawyers seems to be tainted by racial factors. It is the common feeling that if Negroes are involved in some trouble, the police knock heads together first and ask questions later. Louis Armstrong (1954, p. 167) describes a head whipping his wife received when she was picked up by the police. "She did not dare report that to the captain of the police because that same cop would have laid for her when she got out of jail and given her another head whipping." Claude Brown (1965, p. 93) remarks about a lawyer his family had in an injury suit, "Nothing in the world could have made me believe that cat was on our side. We weren't even people to him, so how the hell was he going to fight our fight?"

Duke's mother's comment in The Cool World summarizes rather well lower-class feelings about the government and taxes.

> "It a shame to GOD to make a woman work so an then they go and take all that money outa my pay for the taxes an this and that and the other thing. Whut they want taxes from me for when they never give me nothin? No, Nothin. But this. Roaches and rats. Roaches and rats. Aint nothin decent in our lives" (Miller, 1959, p. 54).

Claude Brown makes the following evaluation of those in high positions:

> Nobody seems to care much about Harlem, not the people who could do something about it, like the mayor or the police....Harlem was getting fucked over by everybody, the politicians, the police, the businessmen, everybody (1965, p. 190).

In Duke's words in The Cool World:

> "He don't know the world run by crooks pushers and hoods from the top to the bottom. In the White House and in the vegetable stores on the corners all of them got big hands in the pie. Its no world to be nice in. If you want the littlest crumb from the pie you got to fight you way to it" (Miller, 1959, p. 126).

Thus, it appears that lower-class Negroes do not effectively participate in national or local institutions. Their relationship to these institutions is marked by feelings of mistrust, hatred, cynacism, and anger. They realize that the "cards are stacked against them," so they struggle on from day to day having as little contact with the middle-class, institutionalized world as possible.

Negro Movements. Only two organizations were described in the literature which seem to be reaching lower-class Negroes: the Black Muslims and TWO (The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago). Claude Brown discusses the Black Muslim movement in Harlem and gives some indication of the source of its drawing power.

> The Black Muslim movement was closer to most Harlemites than any of the other organizations, much closer than the NAACP or the Urban League. These were the people who were right out there in the street with you. They had on suits, but their grammar wasn't something that would make the average Negro on the street feel ill at ease. The words that they used were the same words that the people on the street used. You could associate these people with yourself; you knew some of them. Since the leaders of this group had come from the community the crowd could identify with these people more readily than they could with anybody else. The Muslims were the home team. They were the people, talking for everyone (1965, p. 336).

Silberman (1965, p. 325) describes Alinsky's organization of TWO as being "the classical approach of trade union organization: he appeals to the self-interest of the local residents and to their resentment and mistrust of the outside world, and he seeks out and develops a local, indigenous leadership." Alinsky's four-step approach is as follows: (1) discover local grievances, (2) pinpoint indigenous leaders, (3) meet with the indigenous leaders to discuss the communities problems and plan an attack on them, and (4) take some action that can lead to visible results (Silberman, 1965, p. 327). This approach seems to be quite successful in arousing some sort of community concern and action among lower-class Negroes.

Psychological Characteristics

1. Little sense of history
2. Not class conscious
3. Feeling of inferiority and personal unworthiness
4. Strong feeling of marginality
5. Strong feeling of helplessness
6. Strong feeling of dependency
7. Resignation and fatalism
8. Strong present-time orientation with little ability to defer gratification
9. High tolerance for psychological pathology

Due to the great intertwining of class and racial factors in the psychological characteristics of the lower-class Negro, this topic will be dealt with in the discussion of the effect of racial discrimination on lower-class Negroes

It is difficult to assess the effect of racial discrimination on the culture of poverty among American Negroes at the present time from the information given in novels, autobiographies, and sociological studies. The problem of racial discrimination is in a great state of flux due to agitation on the racial issue by integration and rights movements. This discussion, therefore, will not attempt to give a factual account of the situation as it exists today, but will deal with the effect of racial discrimination up through the late 1950's.

Institutionalized Differential Treatment and Inequality of Opportunity

The treatment accorded to Negroes in the South is described rather vividly in Black Like Me by John Griffin (1961). Griffin, a white man, traveled through the South with his skin artificially darkened in order to find out first hand how Negroes are treated. Examples of segregation and the provision of separate facilities for Negroes in the South are numerous, but only a couple of situations cited by Griffin will be included in this duscussion. Griffin (1961, p. 55) comments, "Though

nominally segregation is not permitted on interstate buses, no Negro would be fool enough to try to sit anywhere except at the rear on one going into Mississippi." While in the streets of New Orleans, Griffin got thirsty and asked a Negro friend of his where he could ge a drink. The friend replied, "You've got to plan ahead now....You can't do like you used to when you were a white man. You can't just walk in any place and ask for a drink or use the rest room" (Griffin, 1961, p. 26).

Differential treatment of Negroes is found in the North as well as the South. A friend of Claude Brown's gives this analysis of the situation in New York:

> "Yeah, Sonny, don't ever go to jail in this state, because they even have segregated jails....Yeah, they put the white boys one place and they put the niggers in another section. The niggers get all the shitty jobs, and the white boys...man, they live good. It's just like it is out here."
>
> "Damn, man. It can't be that bad. In jail, everybody's doing time."
>
> "Yeah, man, but everybody isn't doing the same kind of time. There's white time in jail, and there's nigger time in jail. And the worst kind of time you can do is nigger time. They've got more niggers up there than anything else, but niggers ain't got no business in jail. They gon get fucked over worse than anybody" (Brown, 1965, p. 239).

Negroes are forced to live within restricted geographical areas in most cities. Apartments and houses in "white" sections of urban centers are rarely available to Negroes, regardless of a Negro's socio-economic standing. Although middle and upper-class Negroes are thus forced to live in the same restricted geographical area as lower-class Negroes, there tends to be some rough class division within the residential area.

Education is described by Newton and West (1963, p. 466) as being "less available, less accessible, and especially less adequate for the nonwhite child than it is for the white child." In 1960, 23.5 per cent of nonwhite

persons 25 years of age and over had completed less than five years of school, compared to 6.7 per cent of white persons (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1965, p. 112). The median years of school completed by nonwhite males (25 years of age and over) in 1959 was 7.6, compared to 11.1 years for white males. The median for nonwhite females was 8.4 years, compared to 11.6 years for white females (Newton and West, 1963, p. 468). Part of this discrepancy in schooling can be attributed to the larger lower-class element of the nonwhite population than that of the white population, but racial factors also contribute to the discrepancy in schooling. At the turn of the century, education of Negroes was nearly non-existent. In fact, "any education of Negroes was forbidden by law in some states" (Silberman, 1965, p. 287). Since that time, the "separate but equal" doctrine has continued to affect the education of Negroes.

Employment is greatly affected by racial discrimination. Unemployment is about twice as high among nonwhites as it is among whites (Keyserling, 1964, p. 53). One Negro male in nine is out of work (Silberman, 1965, p. 41). Negroes are also subject to unstable employment. Historically, Negroes have been the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Only 50 per cent of Negro men worked steadily at full-time jobs in 1961, compared to two-thirds of white men (Silberman, 1965, p. 237). "Negroes tend to be paid less than whites, even for the same jobs--and Negroes are concentrated very heavily in low-paying unskilled and semi-skilled occupations" (Silberman, 1965, p. 237).

Education is of little use to Negroes in getting jobs. Negroes are largely restricted to unskilled and service occupations even though they may have the required skills for better jobs. Griffin quotes a Negro's comment as follows:

> "You take a young white boy. He can go through school and college with a real incentive. He knows he can make good money in any profession when he gets out. But can a Negro--in the South? No, I've seen many make brilliant grades in college. And yet when they come home in the summers to earn a little money, they can't get jobs according to their education or capabilities. No, they have to do the most menial work. And even when they graduate it's a long hard pull. Most take postal jobs, or preaching or teaching jobs. <u>This is the cream</u>. What about the others?" (1961, p. 41).

This situation holds true in the North as well. James Baldwin, who was raised in the North, was encouraged to quit school by his father. Baldwin says, "I refused, even though I no longer had any illusions about what an education could do for me; I had already encountered too many college graduate handymen" (1964, p. 31).

Incomes reflect the employment situation of Negroes. More than 43 per cent of nonwhite families lived in poverty in 1963, compared to less than 16 per cent of white families (Keyserling, 1964, p. 37). The median income of nonwhite families in 1963 was $3,465; the median income of white families was $6,548. Families with incomes under $4,000 during 1963 comprised 56.6 per cent of nonwhite families, compared to 24.1 per cent of white families. Incomes under $1,000 were recorded for 9.2 per cent of the nonwhite families, compared to 3.2 per cent of white families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1965, p. 342).

<u>Differential Treatment of Negroes at the Interpersonal Level</u>

Examples of the differential treatment accorded Negroes at the interpersonal level range from "hate stares" to lynchings. This type of differential treatment seems to be most common in the South, although more subtle forms may be practiced in the North.

The "hate stare" was experienced by Griffin in his travels through

the South. He tells of buying a bus ticket from the clerk at the counter as follows:

> She answered rudely and glared at me with such loathing, I knew I was receiving what the Negroes call "the hate stare." It was my first experience with it. It is far more than the look of disapproval one occasionally gets. This was so exaggeratedly hateful, I would have been amused if I had not been so surprised (1961, p. 53).

On the actual bus trip into Mississippi, Griffin (1961, p. 64) tells that the bus stopped for a rest stop, and all of the white people (who were sitting at the front of the bus) got off the bus. When the Negroes moved to the front of the bus and started to leave, the bus driver stopped them and asked them where they thought they were going. He told them to return to their seats and not to move until they got to their destination.

Richard Wright describes an incident when he failed to say "sir" to a group of white boys in a car. One of the boys threw a whiskey bottle at Wright, causing him to fall of his bicycle, and then commented:

> "Nigger, ain't you learned no better sens'n that yet?...Ain't you learned to say sir to a white man yet?...You sure ought to be glad it was us you talked to that way. You're a lucky bastard 'cause if you'd said that to some other white man, you might've been a dead nigger now" (1964, p. 200).

Another incident described by Richard Wright in his autobiography is the lynching of his uncle. Wright's uncle failed to return home one morning after work. Word came at dusk that he had been shot by a white man and that his "kinfolks" were also in danger. Wright then relates the following:

> Before dawn we were rolling away, fleeing for our lives. I learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. He had been threatened with death and warned many times to leave, but he had wanted to hold on a while longer to amass more money....This was as close as white terror had ever come to me and my mind reeled. Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence (1964, p. 63).

Griffin's treatment by whites presents an interesting sidelight on the alleged immorality of Negroes. He tells of hitchhiking to Mobile. After it got dark, white men started giving him rides. Griffin makes this comment about the men who picked him up:

> It quickly became obvious why they picked me up. All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book--except that this was verbal pornography. With a Negro, they assume they need give no semblance of self-respect or respectability.... All showed morbid curiosity about the sexual life of the Negro (1961, p. 91).

One man told Griffin how "all of the white men in the region craved colored girls." This man hired Negro women both for housework and in his business. He made this comment to Griffin:

> "And I guarantee you, I've had it in every one of them before they ever got on the payroll....What do you think of that?"
> "Surely some refuse," I suggested cautiously.
> "Not if they want to eat--or feed their kids," he snorted. "If they don't put out, they don't get the job" (Griffin, 1961, p. 108).

Griffin also describes a notice in a colored rest room which was a list of prices a white man would pay for various types of sensuality with various ages of Negro girls. Griffin offers this summary of the situation:

> This is one of the sources of Negroes chafing at being considered inferior. He cannot understand how the white man can show the most demeaning aspects of his nature and at the same time delude himself into thinking he is inherently superior. To the Negro who sees this element of the white man's nature--and he sees it much more often than any other--the white man's comments about the Negro's alleged "immorality" ring maddeningly hollow (1961, p. 87).

Negroes' Reaction to Treatment by Whites

The treatment accorded Negroes, especially that at the interpersonal level, has resulted in specifiable reactions of Negroes to whites, especially in the South. Negroes, for instance, have learned to intuit what behavior is expected of them by whites. That is, they have learned to "stay in

line." Richard Wright (1964, p. 200) expresses his experience in this way, "I was learning rapidly how to watch white people, to observe their every move, every fleeting expression, how to interpret what was said and what left unsaid." Griffin (1961, p. 45) adds, "The Negro learns this silent language fluently. He knows by the white man's look of disapproval and petulance that he is being told to get on his way, that he is 'stepping out of line.'"

Negroes have also learned what to say in order to please white people. White people often think that they know and understand Negroes, but as Griffin (1961, p. 132) states, they don't realize that "the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is." As Dr. Bledscoe says in Invisible Man, "Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!" (Ellison, 1952, p. 107). Negroes have had to learn to hide their true feelings in order to say and do things to please white men. The "good nigger" learns to accept everything with a grin and a "yes, sir!" in spite of his true feelings.

The common occurrence of stealing on the part of lower-class Negroes is also dealt with in the literature as a reaction of Negroes to their treatment by whites. Richard Wright describes the situation as follows:

> No Negroes in my environment had ever thought of organizing, no matter in how orderly a fashion, and petitioning their white employers for higher wages. The very thought would have been terrifying to them, and they knew that the whites would have retaliated with swift brutality. So, pretending to conform to the laws of the whites, grinning, bowing, they let their fingers stick to what they could touch. And the whites seemed to like it....Whites placed a premium upon black deceit; they encouraged irresponsibility; and their rewards were bestowed upon us blacks in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior (1964, p. 219).

James Baldwin makes this comment:

> Negro servants have been smuggling odds and ends out of white homes for generations and white people have been delighted to have them do it, because it has assuaged a dim guilt and testified to the intrinsic superiority of white people (1964, p. 36).

Psychological Characteristics of Lower-Class Negroes

Lower-class Negroes have little historical sense of worth. Slavery blotted out the Negroes' African cultural heritage and provided nothing to take its place. When slavery was abolished, American Negroes began their life as free citizens of the United States with no cultural or racial pride and little sense of personal worth. Little pride or sense of worth has been developed in lower-class Negroes since that time. James Baldwin makes the following observation:

> Negroes in this country...are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black....Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it (1964, p. 40).

As Griffin (1961, p. 47) states, "The Negro is treated not even as a second-class citizen, but as a tenth-class one. His day-to-day living is a reminder of his inferior status."

Lower-class Negroes have no plans and little hope for the future. Davis and Dollard say of Edward:

> The long-range goals do not seem to be "there" in his world; he does not see other people in his class attaining them, or practicing the behavior required of him, and he feels his parents and teachers are "crazy" when they demand it of him (1964, p. 269).

James Baldwin (1964, p. 32) comments, "One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation." Regardless of their efforts, lower-class Negroes remain marginal to middle-class

white culture. Their historical helplessness to alter their situation has made attitudes of resignation and fatalism common.

With little sense of past or hope for the future, lower-class Negroes live mostly in the present. They accept their position and the label of inferiority attached to their race with a certain amount of fear of doing otherwise. This fearful acceptance of the life allowed Negroes by white society is expressed by Claude Brown.

> I could sense the fear in Mama's voice when I told her once that I wanted to be a psychologist.
>
> She said, "Boy, you better stop that dreamin' and get all those crazy notions outta your head." She was scared. She had the idea that colored people weren't supposed to want anything like that. You were supposed to just want to work in fields or be happy to be a janitor (1965, p. 281).

The futility of striving for anything better is voiced by Duke in The Cool World.

> "Blood got one sister a nurse an a brother at Fisk University learning to be a doctor or somethin. Man I dont see it workin they asses off like that. No point workin like that when they can take it all away from you when ever they feel like it you know" (Miller, 1959, p. 22).

Thus, lower-class Negroes tend to restrict themselves to the daily struggle to keep alive. They find pleasure where they can and develop a high tolerance for psychological pathology in order to continue functioning in their environment.

A review of the literature on lower-class Negroes reveals examples of a majority of the traits of the culture of poverty listed by Lewis. This description of the culture of poverty among American Negroes differs from Lewis's description of the Mexican culture of poverty principally in three areas. Stability of residence is the first difference which was discussed.

Whereas lower-class Mexicans tend to maintain stable residences (which tend to lead to daily face-to-face relations with the same people and life-time friendships), lower-class American Negroes tend to have very unstable residence patterns.

The difference in stability of residence could be partially responsible for the second discrepancy noted between the Mexican and American Negro cultures of poverty, the difference in sources of money. The spontaneous informal credit devices (tandas) organized in Mexican neighborhoods depend upon the stable residence of its participants. The unstable residence patterns of lower-class American Negroes, make such organizations impossible. The lack of evidence of the practice of borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest might be explained by the prevalence of time-payment buying in the United States.

The major difference found between the culture of poverty in Mexico and in the United States is the difference in position of men and women in the family. The man is the authoritarian head of his household in Mexico. Male superiority is upheld by the culture of poverty and a martyr complex is common among the women. In lower-class American Negro culture, the woman is often the chief wage-earner as well as the responsible head of the family. Lower-class Negro men's status is lowered accordingly. Women remain rather independent in their relationship with men, and one sees little evidence of a martyr complex. This situation is largely due to historical factors and the effects of racial discrimination.

The general effect of racial discrimination on the culture of poverty among American Negroes seems to be one of magnifying or intensifying class traits already present. Racial discrimination presents added difficulties

in housing, employment, family life, and one's relationship to institutions. That is, the situation is difficult to begin with, but racial discrimination makes it worse. This seems to be especially true in the area of psychological characteristics. Feeling of inferiority, marginality, helplessness and other psychological traits noted by Lewis in the Mexican culture of poverty seem to be magnified or intensified by the effect of racial discrimination in the culture of poverty among American Negroes.

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