Applied Poverty Research

Edited by
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ROWMAN & ALLANHELD
PUBLISHERS

ROWMAN & ALLANHELD

Published in the United States of America in 1984
by Rowman & Allanheld
(A division of Littlefield, Adams & Company)
81 Adams Drive, Totowa, New Jersey 07512

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Applied poverty research.

Bibliography: p.
1. Poverty–Research–United States–Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Goldstein, Richard, 1964.- . II. Sachs, Stephen M., 1938.- .
HC110.P6A73 1983 305.5'69'072073 83-16126
ISBN 0-86598-137-X

84 85/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume started as a special issue of Policy Studies Journal, though it has grown much larger. The special issue (Vol. 10, No. 3, March 1982) was made possible by funds provided by the Community Services Administration. Although CSA no longer exists we still want to thank them and particularly Robert Clark, Chief of the Evaluation Division at that time. We also thank the Indiana University President's Committee for financial assistance with the word processing, and the Policy Studies Organization and, in particular, Stuart Nagel, Secretary-Treasurer.

Several people provided help and encouragement for the project as a whole and with respect to the choice of articles. Richard Goldstein gives particular thanks to Lou Ferleger, Mike Martin, Bob McShea and Jennifer Wilton. Stephen M. Sachs gives his deepest thanks to Elizabeth Cohen for many ideas, thoughts and inspirations; to his colleagues at I.U.P.U.I.: Jim Simmons, Susan Sutton, Donna Kay Dial, Bob Kirk, Ain Haas, Lory Lampert, Ron Margolin, Ken Berger, Chuck Winslow, and Richard Freeland for numerous comments and suggestions; to Marsha Neawedde for outstanding secretarial support and assistance. Finally, we would like to thank the authors of the articles who put up with several delays and still provided invaluable help in finishing the book.

Richard Goldstein — Brighton, MA
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INTRODUCTION

Richard Goldstein
Stephen M. Sachs

The poor shall never cease out of the land.
Deuteronomy 15:11

For ye have the poor always with you.
Matthew 26:11

The above does not affect the desire of some to abolish poverty and the desire of others to study either poverty or programs aimed at abolishing or alleviating poverty. Poverty has been studied (in the modern sense), in England and in the United States, at least since the latter part of the nineteenth century, but there has been an increase in the amount of this kind of study during the last fifteen years (the "War on Poverty"). One question rarely asked is, "what has been the value (if any) of these studies?"

This volume is a first attempt at investigating this question. The authors of the papers included here have, in several ways, investigated the worth of previous poverty-related research. Sometimes this involves new research as a base for questioning previous research.

Eventually, we want to answer the questions of (1) who has benefited from applied poverty research, and, (2) have the benefits to the poor outweighed the costs to the poor? No single volume can hope to answer these questions in their entirety. This volume does start to answer these questions, however, as well as opening up these questions and providing some ways of examining them, ways which will be pursued in future studies.

It should be noted that the term "research" is, for the purposes of the analyses in this volume, broadly defined to include virtually all collecting, analyzing and communicating of information for the purposes of evaluating and/or making decisions concerning poverty programs. From this perspective, for example, gathering and analyzing data to determine who is poor or eligible for programs constitutes research.

The articles in this volume are divided into sections based upon the type of attack that they provide to the issues. That is, there are a number of different ways that one could look at applied poverty research with the question of who benefits in mind, including:

- o What kinds of limits does the research place on itself (or have placed on it) with respect to the people to be studied and the data to be used?
- o What kinds of limits are placed on the research because of the methodological perspectives adhered to?
- o What kinds of limits are placed on the research because of the policy perspectives adhered to?
- o What kinds of limits are placed on the research because of the philosophical perspectives used or relied upon?
- o What has been the evolutionary history of forms of applied poverty research (or questions orienting or constraining applied poverty research), and how has this limited:
  (a) the forms and types of research attempted, and,
  (b) the types of research results that are possible?
- o What types of applied poverty research will be the next fad, and what does this say about previous research?
- o What is the quality of applied poverty research?

Not all of these questions, nor the others that one could ask, can be answered or even broached in one brief volume. The articles are placed into three sections, which deal, respectively, with:

(1) Measuring Poverty -- how do we determine who the poor are, and what problems, if any, are there with the methods used to make this determination?

(2) Alternative Research Perspectives -- Have there been methodological blinders that affected whole schools of applied poverty research?

(3) Alternative Policy Perspectives -- Policy perspectives here refers to both the policies that are studied and the policy perspective which is inherent in the method of study. This second part of the meaning is closely related to what is called Alternative Research Perspectives (above) in the sense that a research study that studies only individuals, say, is constrained in the types of policies that it can "see" as solutions to the problems studied.

In addition to these three sections, there is also an introductory section comprised of this essay and two others. The first, by Stephen Sachs, reviews various philosophical perspectives on poverty and how these perspectives influence poverty research. The second, by Richard Goldstein, lays out many of the issues that would be involved in a more complete examination of the question of who really benefits from poverty research. Finally, there is a brief concluding section in which we spell out some of the implications of the current situation both for society in general and for social researchers.

In the remainder of this essay, we provide a brief historical background and then spell out some of the overriding issues that are pointed up by this history and by the current situation.

AN HISTORICAL LOOK AT POVERTY RESEARCH

Although modern European poverty policy began in the fourteenth century with prohibitions of beggary, the study of poverty (at least in the West) did not begin until the late eighteenth century. Even these studies are generally not considered to be of acceptable quality today (Hobsbawm, 1968). The earliest attempts to conduct what we would now recognize as poverty studies, including the definition of a poverty line, took place in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. The most famous was conducted by Charles Booth and his colleagues. The first comparable study in the United States was published by Robert Hunter in 1904. (In addition to Hobsbawm, histories can be found in Cullen, 1975; Cole, 1972; Elesh, 1972; Lecuyer and Oberschall, 1978; and Rubinow, 1934.) At this time, there also appeared a number of books describing the conditions of the poor; the most famous are Jacob Riis' How the Other Half Lives, and Jack London's People of the Abyss.

From the turn of the century to today, a great volume of studies of the poor have been published. Virtually all, whatever their differences, have shared several themes, including: an emphasis on a distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor (Gans, 1969; Patterson, 1981); an emphasis on the "culture" of the poor; and, an emphasis on the "prevention" of poverty (Patterson, 1981). In addition, at least with respect to poverty research in the United States, poverty was "re-discovered" many times (Patterson, 1981: 100, 201). The most recent re-discovery is usually denoted by the publication of Michael Harrington's book, The Other America, in 1962.

Whether Harrington's book helped to cause a re-discovery of poverty or just serves as a convenient marker, the period following publication of The Other America did see a rapid increase in poverty research. This increase was, at the least, spurred by funds from the War on Poverty. The increase in research was also spurred by the optimistic belief that success in applied physical science could somehow be transferred to such social problems as poverty. This optimism was signified by the widely asked question, "If they can put a man on the moon, why can't they do something about poverty?" Possibly the best answer, not only to this specific question but to the whole over-optimistic mood, was the (semi-) humorous "who needs poor people on the moon?"

On the question of how much of each re-discovery was really a repeat of the last generation's work and how much amounted to "standing on the shoulders of the last generation", it is instructive to read the article on Poverty in the 1934 Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (Rubinow, 1934). This article compares very favorably with articles written in the 1960's and 1970's, including discussions of economic and non-economic senses of poverty (see the Introduction to the "Measuring Poverty" section, below), a discussion of the alleged causes of poverty, both individual and structural (see the Introduction to the "Alternative Research Perspectives" section, below), and a discussion of some policy implications of these views.

It is impossible here to over-emphasize the importance of some of the recurring trends in poverty research. The distinction between deserving and non-deserving poor makes virtually impossible the elimination of poverty, while the continuing emphasis on culture and on prevention feeds the fuel of programs aimed at changing the poor (as contrasted with programs aimed at ameliorating the situation of the poor). One of the material consequences of this is that we spend much more on poverty programs than would be necessary to eliminate the poverty gap (the gap between poor people's income and the poverty line).[1]

> Senator Abraham Ribicoff, the former Secretary of HEW, indicated in 1972 that there were some 170 anti-poverty programs sponsored by federal money at an annual cost of $35 billion. He noted that if one-third of the money was directed at the poor, there would no longer be any poverty in the nation (unless, of course, the poverty level was revised upward). Thirty five billion dollars is a lot of money, much more than most readers can conceive. Most of it never went to the poor, but to the people who ran the poverty programs. (Ornstein, 1974: 489-490; see also, Patterson, 1981: 113, 137; Plotnick, 1979: 282-3; Tuckman, 1973: 87-90; Tussing, 1975: 7; and Ulman, 1965: xv-xvi.)

Given this, social scientists (among others) must ask themselves what they mean by their desire to eliminate poverty. Some people might see this purported desire as irony. Instead of ending poverty do social scientists actually want to defuse objections to poverty? Before bellowing a "No" in answer to this question, we should at the very least be clear that this is not what we are doing.

That social scientists may be serving the needs of government (Helfgot, 1981:2) or of the wealthy is at least suggested by some German proverbs ("Poverty is the rich man's cow" and "Poverty is the hand and foot of wealth" (quoted in Hobsbawm, 1968:399)) and by Senator Long's comment (during the debate in Congress on President Nixon's Family Assistance Program) that he couldn't "get anybody to iron [his] shirts." (quoted in Patterson, 1981:194)

Further, Herbert Gans (1973: Chapter 4) has pointed out that poverty has many positive functions for the non-poor. Among these is that poverty

> makes possible the existence or expansion of "respectable" professions and occupations, for example, penology, criminology, social work, and public health. More recently, the poor have provided jobs for professional and para-professional "poverty warriors," as well as for journalists and social scientists, this author included, who have

> supplied the information demanded since public curiosity about the poor developed in the 1960s. (Gans, 1973:105)

Gans also points out how other non-poor groups are positively affected by other functions of poverty. (See also Danziger and Haveman, 1978: 12.) For example, it may be advantageous to employers for there to be a sizeable number of low-income people, many of whom are unemployed or under-employed, as a restraint upon worker demands for higher wages. (For a current example, see Williams, 1982.)

In come cases, it may be the existence of something called "research" which serves the needs of government, rather than the actual research. For example, in "What Will They Think of Next?" (1981: 3) it was reported that the state of Illinois is attempting to use the cover of "scientific inquiry" as a way to legitimate a new cost-cutting measure. This is apparently allowed under

> Sec. 1115 of the Social Security Act [which] permits the Secretary to suspend all sorts of beneficiary protections in the interests of scientific inquiry. It is a time-honored ploy of state governments seeking to cut back Medicaid programs to write up the whole idea as "an experiment" and apply for a waiver of the normal rules. Indeed one of the earliest attempts occurred in 1971 in California during the governorship of (you guessed it) R. Reagan.

All of this may point to the validity of characterizing the War on Poverty as a "war on the poor." (Graham, 1967: 224)

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT POVERTY RESEARCH

If poverty can be ended at about one-third of what it costs to fund unsuccessful anti-poverty programs, why don't we just transfer the necessary funds? Why all of the emphasis on the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor? Why are structural causes of poverty ignored in our research and programs especially when our rhetoric recognizes the importance of structure? Why, if we think culture is a (or the) cause of poverty do we not test this supposition? This section briefly examines these four questions. We do not attempt to answer these questions here, but rather we attempt to justify them as legitimate queries and to sketch their implications.

First, what is meant by "structure"? Blau has recently argued that underneath all the different definitions is one common denominator:

> social structure refers to those properties of an aggregate that are emergent and that consequently do not characterize the separate elements composing the aggregate . . . The

> sum of many trees is the same whether each stands in a different yard or they all are crowded together, but only in the latter case do they make a forest. (Blau, 1981: 9-10)

One of the important things to notice about structures is that there is interdependence between the elements that comprise the structure. This can lead to apparent paradoxes. One relevant to the discussion of poverty is

> a meritocracy where occupational chances largely depend on education. This makes every person interested in obtaining as much schooling as possible, raising educational levels, reducing educational inequality, and enhancing educational mobility. But . . . these changes will not appreciably improve chances of occupational mobility or diminish inequality in occupational status if the occupational distribution is exogenously determined by industrial conditions and economic demand. On the contrary, the result is that more education than before is required to achieve a given occupational status, contrary to the interests of job applicants, although it continues to be in the interest of every applicant to maximize his or her education, since doing so improves occupational opportunities, which repeats the process in the next generation by further raising the education needed to have the same occupational chances as one's parents. (Blau, 1981: 7; this example is taken by Blau from Boudon, 1981; see also Schelling, 1978.)

Many authors have recognized the potential importance of social structure in causing poverty (Hodge and Laslett, 1980; Korpi, 1980; Orcutt, et al., 1980; Pettigrew and Back, 1967; Rubinow, 1934). But few have actually studied the effect of structure, though (1) it is possible to do so, and (2) some authors have drawn conclusions to the effect that structure is important solely because they have failed to explain things on non-structural grounds (Abell and Lyon, 1979). However, it has been acceptable to study the effect of poverty programs on structure, particularly on economic growth, and usually to draw conservative conclusions about the alleged deleterious effects on the economy of coddling the poor. (For a less conservative example of this, see Gordon, 1963.) Examples of the few studies of structure include Davidson and Krackhardt (1977), Helfgot (1981), Tuckman (1973), and Wachtel (1971). Helfgot's study is particularly telling because he discusses a case where social scientists recognized the importance of structure in causing a certain problem, but then designed a non-structural "solution". (See especially page 54 in Helfgot, 1981; this example is discussed in detail in the Introduction to Part IV of this volume.)

The lack of sufficient or proper consideration of structural

issues is raised by a number of the papers in this book. For example, Louis Ferleger examines the effect of structural factors in the labor market upon black employment and Harrell Rodgers presents a comparative analysis of European and U.S. poverty programs.

By contrast it may be argued that the lack of consideration of social and economic structural factors in much poverty research is justified because the primary causes of poverty are cultural (Lewis, 1966). If researchers really believe this, however, much of their research and policy-making efforts are misguided.

In Helfgot's example (above), and in most research on the "culture of poverty", a major problem appears to be the unwarranted assumption by social scientists that culture is an ever-present and unchanging feature of a locale or group of people. How else can one explain the failure (pointed out by Gans in 1971 and still true) to study changes in culture when the poor have attained higher incomes (indicated by Thackeray's Becky Sharp saying "I think that I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year"), or the failure to study what happens to behavior when people escape from poverty?

Another possible reason for the relative lack of structural analysis in poverty studies may be the influence of politics upon researchers. First, it may be that those who fund and/or design studies of poverty and poverty programs do not believe that structural solutions are politically feasible. Dixon, Nagorcka and Cutt discuss some circumstances in which they believe that this might be the case in their examination of simulating the impacts of proposed income maintenance programs in Australia. Interestingly, Harrell Rodgers argues from the European experience that whether structural reforms are politically feasible depends at least in part upon the comprehensiveness of the programs (in his second article, "Social Welfare Programs").

Second, it may be that it is in the interests of many of those designing and/or funding poverty research projects to avoid structural considerations. This explanation is consistent with the discussions in the papers by Goldstein and by Neubeck in this volume. We need to consider what is the best explanation of:

- o our failures to perform these kinds of studies;
- o our insistence on distinguishing between deserving poor and undeserving poor;
- o our failure to consider structural explanations;
- o our insistence on poverty programs, rather than just income transfers.

Is it that we have been co-opted?

ETHICS

Two important ethical issues arise in applied poverty research: One, issues spawned by the fact of employment by a

sponsor who is different from the subject of study. Two, "consideration of the consequences of [this] research, including the uses and misuses of scientific knowledge and the ethics of cross-disciplinary research." (Lamberth and Kimmel, 1981)

Too little thinking has gone into the ethical questions raised by allowing someone else, and especially someone who is not the subject of study, to set our research questions and hypotheses. It is not that no thinking has been done about these issues (see Angell, 1967; Glazer, 1972), but that much of our thinking on these issues has been nothing but a retreat behind the wall of "freedom of research." These issues are too large to deal with here, but we should at least realize that we have no right to impose our freedom of research on others' freedom not to be researched, especially since, "Too frequently, problem-oriented studies produce problems rather than alleviate them." (Kleymeyer and Bertrand, 1980; and the studies cited there.) Many of these issues are discussed in Boulay, et al. (1980) and Goldstein (1981), and in much of the debate surrounding the new regulations for the protection of human subjects (Department of Health and Human Services, 1981). One instance of ethical problems of research and their impact is discussed by Joseph Nalven in his article on problems of health involving undocumented Mexicans in the United States.

If our research is not generalizable, either across subjects or across time or across political boundaries (such as States), then it is unethical for us to try and make this kind of generalization. It is also unethical for us to implement the results of shoddy research. Much of our research is effectively worthless because it has never been replicated and it has not been suitably designed. (Datta, 1980; Levitan and Taggart, 1976; see Goldstein's article for more on this.)

CONCLUSION

At a time when social science funding is being cut, is it really appropriate to even investigate the question of who has benefited from poverty research? This question was asked of one of the editors of this volume (RG) by a potential contributor. This person seemed to feel that at a time when the government was making attacks on social science research and social science-associated programs, and being supported in public by social scientists (Mazur, 1981; Wyman, 1982), that what all good social scientists should do is fight back.

We believe, to the contrary, that what is needed is an examination of social science and its effects. If it has had deleterious consequences for people, or even if it has just been a waste of money, then it should not be supported, or at least it should not be supported in the traditional way. This is especially important if we want to fight against other administrative initiatives, initiatives that rather than fighting poverty directly seem actuated by the belief that:

> Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have