

Social theory and the concept 'underclass'

Wilson, William Julius

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wilson, W. J. (2006). Social theory and the concept 'underclass'. In K.-S. Rehberg (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München. Teilbd. 1 und 2* (pp. 90-104). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-145477>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Social Theory and the Concept ›Underclass‹

William Julius Wilson

Introduction

The use of the concept ›underclass‹ has been the subject of considerable debate among scholars of urban poverty. Many question the meaning of the term and its value as a social category, and react critically to the way the term has been appropriated by those intellectuals and journalists whose ideological views and orientations strongly influence their perceptions of the urban poor (Hughes 1989; Aponte 1990; Katz 1993; Gans 1995; O'Connor 2001).¹ However, in their critical commentary the scholars of urban poverty do not address, in theoretical terms, the scientific import of the concept ›underclass‹ that is, its role in the description, explanation and prediction of social behavior. Rather they object to the way the term is used to label a subgroup of the urban poor whose cultural traits are thought to be different from those of the larger society.

In this paper, I consider whether a theoretically defined concept of underclass – as opposed to the nonsystematic and atheoretical usages – can be helpful in social scientific discourse. But first, by way of background, let me examine briefly the various ways the term ›underclass‹ has been used in published writings down through the years.

The Underclass in Historical Perspective

Invidious comparisons between the cultural traits of certain segments of the poor and those of the larger society have a long history in western industrialized countries. For many decades, the British establishment publicly expressed concerns

¹ Several empirical assessments of the size and growth of the underclass by social scientists did appear in the late 1980s, but rather than help to draw attention to the underlying causes of chronic poverty, these studies tended to contribute to the perception that as a group the underclass was synonymous with deviant behavior (see e.g. Ricketts/Sawhill 1988; Nathan 1986).

about those elements among the poor – variously labelled »the lumpen«, »the rabble«, »the vagrants«, and »the dangerous« classes – who were described as morally deficient and a potential threat to the social order of British society. Moreover, these »social outcasts« were seen as different from other poor British citizens who, despite their poverty, tended to conform to societal norms. Likewise, in the United States, the early poor laws clearly distinguished two groups among the poor – the incapacitated and the able-bodied. The amount and type of aid the able-bodied poor could receive was limited as the laws drew distinctions between the »deserving« and »undeserving« poor (Katz 1989).

With the dawn of the industrial revolution, European social scientists began to associate the experiences of poverty with the technological revolution, which had changed the processes of work, especially manual labor. Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, first used the label »underclass« in this connection to describe the increasing polarization of American society (Myrdal 1962). Myrdal argued that because of inadequate schooling and a paucity of marketable skills, as well as a lack of government support, a growing segment of the disadvantaged were consigned to the very bottom of the economic class structure. Myrdal never intended the concept of »underclass« to be a generic label for a host of cultural and behavioral traits that supposedly differentiate a certain segment of the poor from the rest of society.

In the 1960s a number of liberal scholars in the U.S. associated the impact of economic restructuring and long-term joblessness not only with the limited life chances of the most disadvantaged segments of urban America, but also with cultural behavior (i.e., the sharing of outlooks and modes of conduct) in the inner-city ghetto (Clark 1965; Rainwater 1966; Liebow 1967; Hannerz 1969). These writers demonstrated that it is possible to be aware of the importance of macro-structural economic constraints (i.e., avoid the extreme notion of a »culture of poverty«) and still »see the merits of a more subtle kind of cultural analysis of life in poverty« (Hannerz 1969: 182).

A cultural analysis of life in poverty is perhaps best captured through the kind of ethnographic research conducted by scholars such as Hannerz (1969), Liebow (1967) and Rainwater (1966), where an attempt was made to study empirically the influence of cultural patterns on individual and group outcomes, given certain social and economic constraints. However, the controversy over the Moynihan Report (1965) on the black family in the late 1960s abruptly interrupted such studies. Indeed, in the aftermath of the controversy, empirical research on the inner-city ghetto in general decreased sharply throughout the 1970s and first half of the 1980s (Wilson 1987).

The harsh criticism of the Moynihan report – which devoted far more attention to his unflattering depiction of the inner-city African-American family than to his historical analysis of the special plight of black families and his proposed remedies –

proved to be too intimidating to scholars, especially to liberal scholars. Accordingly, in the early 1970s, social scientists were hardly motivated to research the structural and cultural roots of ghetto social dislocations. In an effort to protect themselves from the charge of »blaming the victim« or of racism, liberal social scientists tended to avoid describing any behavior that could be construed as stigmatizing or unflattering to people of color. Accordingly, for several years, and well after this controversy had subsided, the problems of social dislocation in the inner-city received scant research attention (Wilson 1996).

Until the mid-1980s, the void was partially filled by journalists and conservative intellectuals who tended to highlight and reach conclusions about the behavioral and cultural »deficiencies« of the inner-city poor – frequently referred to as the »underclass« – without the benefit of systematic empirical research or carefully constructed theoretical frameworks (Time 1977; Gilder 1981; Murray 1984; Auletta 1985; Mead 1986).

Against this setting my book *The Truly Disadvantaged* was published in 1987. The relationship between economic restructuring, long-term joblessness, and cultural behavior – previously highlighted in the writings of the liberal scholars in the 1960s (Clark 1965; Rainwater 1966; Liebow 1967; Hannerz 1969) – was once again strongly emphasized. However, in spelling out this relationship, I also explicitly used the concept »underclass«, described as a heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are (1) outside the mainstream of the American occupational system – including those »who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency« (Wilson 1987: 8) – and (2) share the same social milieu.

Regarding the sharing of the same social environment, I stated: »It is true that long-term welfare families and street criminals are distinct groups, but they live and interact in the same depressed community and they are part of the population that has, with the exodus of the more stable working- and middle-class segments, become increasingly isolated from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior« (Wilson 1987: 8).

I argued that the existence of maladaptive behavior and culture was a response to social structural constraints, including constraints imposed by the decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor.

I wrote *The Truly Disadvantaged* with two main objectives in mind: (1) to encourage serious scholars to return to a systematic study of ghetto life and (2) to elaborate on a theory of the social transformation of the inner-city. In this paper I present a more refined concept of the »underclass« which derives its meaning from this theory. In the process I show how a theoretically defined concept of underclass can be

helpful in social scientific discourse, despite the ongoing controversy and debate concerning its meaning and value as a social category.

A Theory of the Social Transformation of the Inner City

I advanced the argument in *The Truly Disadvantaged* that historical discrimination combined with migration from the rural South to large metropolises kept the urban black population relatively young and created a problem of weak labor-force attachment that has made them particularly vulnerable to the industrial and geographic changes in the economy since the early 1970s. Innovations in technology, the shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, the relocation of manufacturing industries out of central cities, the increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, and periodic recessions have elevated the rate of black joblessness (unemployment and nonparticipation in the labor market), despite the passage of legislation against discrimination and the creation of affirmative action programs.

The growth in joblessness has in turn helped generate a rise in the concentration of poor blacks with accompanying increases in single-parent families, and the receipt of welfare. These problems have been particularly noticeable in the inner-city ghetto neighborhoods of large cities, not only because the vast concentrations of impoverished minority families and individuals there, but also because these neighborhoods have become less diversified and isolated in ways that make them more vulnerable to the impact of the continuing economic changes.

Since the early 1970s, a significant out-migration of working- and middle-class families from inner-city neighborhoods combined with rising numbers of poor residents due to escalating rates of joblessness have resulted in heavy concentrations of ghetto poverty. The number of census tracts with poverty rates of at least 40 percent – a threshold definition of »high poverty« areas – has risen precipitously.²

² Social scientists tend to use census tracts as proxies for neighborhoods. And census tracts with poverty rates of at least 40 percent are defined as ghetto or high poverty neighborhoods. For example, in Chicago we found that 82 percent of the residents who live in high poverty census tracts inhabit the South and West sides of the city in areas most of which have been overwhelmingly black for half a century and more. These tracts make up the historic core of Chicago's black ghetto. An additional 13 percent live in immediately adjacent tracts. Thus, when we contrast high-poverty areas with other areas in the inner city we are in effect comparing ghetto neighborhoods with other black areas, most of which are moderately poor, that are not part of Chicago's traditional black belt (Wacquant/Wilson 1990). Using the same rationale on a national level, Jargowsky and Bane (1990) state: »Based on visits to several cities, we found that the 40 percent criterion came very close to identifying areas that looked like ghettos in terms of their housing conditions. Moreover, the areas selected

The diminishing presence of middle- and working-class families has also weakened an important social buffer that served to deflect the full impact of the prolonged high levels of neighborhood joblessness stemming from uneven economic growth and periodic recessions.

In earlier decades, most of the adults in ghetto neighborhoods were employed. And black working- and middle-classes provided stability in these neighborhoods. They invested their economic and social resources by patronizing neighborhood stores, banks, churches and community organizations, and by sending their children to the local public schools. In the process they reinforced societal values and norms, and made it meaningful for the more disadvantaged in these segregated enclaves to envision the possibility of some upward mobility.

However, the inner-city ghetto today features a group of residents, the underclass, whose major predicament is rising joblessness, a trend that is strengthened by growing social isolation. The contact between groups of different class and racial backgrounds has decreased because of the out-migration of higher income families, resulting in greater adverse effects from living in impoverished neighborhoods. These concentration effects, reflected, for example, in the self-limiting social dispositions of inner-city residents, are created by inadequate access to job networks and jobs, the lack of access to quality schools, the decreasing availability of suitable marriage partners, and lack of exposure to conventional role models and informal »mainstream« social networks.

Accordingly, the arguments presented in *The Truly Disadvantaged* to account for the recent increases in social dislocations in the inner-city ghetto are complex. They cannot be reduced to the easy explanations of racism advanced by those on the left, or of »culture of poverty« posited by those on the right. Although historic racism created the ghetto and although contemporary discrimination has undoubtedly aggravated the economic and social woes of its residents, an adequate understanding of the sharp increase in these problems requires the specification of a complex web of additional factors, including the impact of shifts in the modern American economy.

It is not explicit in this summary of *The Truly Disadvantaged* that social structural, cultural, and social psychological variables are integrated into my theoretical framework.³ A more formal statement of this framework is that a structure of inequality has evolved which is linked to contemporary behavior in the ghetto by a combination of opportunities, constraints and social psychology.

by the 40 percent criterion corresponded rather closely with the judgments of city officials and local census bureau officials about which neighborhoods were ghettos« (pp. 8–9).

³ In the ensuing discussion in this section, I benefited from Zelditch's formal explication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1989).

The exogenous factors, representing the sources of the concentration of black ghetto poverty, include racial discrimination, changes in the economy that have restructured occupations and relocated industries, and political processes (affirmative action programs and anti-bias legislation) that have had the unanticipated consequence of increasing the class divisions among urban African Americans.⁴ The endogenous factors created by these exogenous determinants include demographic variables such as urban migration, age structures, and the pool of marriageable men, and economic factors such as employment and income distributions.

The endogenous determinants also include social isolation, which is a characteristic feature of the social environment of the urban underclass. Social isolation deprives inner-city ghetto residents not only of economic and social resources, including conventional role models whose presence buffers the impact of neighborhood joblessness, but also of cultural learning from mainstream social networks that facilitates economic and social mobility in modern society. The lack of economic and social resources in the neighborhood, the declining presence of conventional role models, and circumscribed cultural learning produce outcomes that restrict social advancement. Some of these outcomes are structural (weak-labor force attachment and lack of access to informal job networks) and some are social-psychological (limited aspirations and negative social dispositions).

These theoretical issues should be kept in mind as I attempt to more fully establish the role of the concept ›underclass‹ in the description, explanation and prediction of social behavior.

Labor-Force Attachment and the Inner-City Social Environment

I argued in *The Truly Disadvantaged* that the central problem of the underclass is joblessness, a problem that is rendered even more severe by an increasing social isolation in impoverished neighborhoods, as reflected, for example, in the weakening of the informal job information network systems. In Martha Van Haitsma's

⁴ The point here is that the elimination of racial barriers creates the greater opportunities for the talented, more educated, and better-trained, minority group members because, as James Fiskin (1983) has pointed out, they possess the resources to compete most effectively. These resources derive from a variety of advantages made possible or provided by their families including financial means, schooling and peer groups. However, if the more advantaged members of minority groups profit disproportionately from policies that enhance individual opportunity, they also benefit disproportionately from policies of affirmative action based solely on their racial group membership. Minority individuals from the most advantaged families tend to be more heavily represented among those of their racial group most qualified for college admissions, higher paying jobs, and promotions.

(1989) conceptual explication of my theory, the relationship between the social environment and experiences in the labor market is more sharply delineated. She distinguishes those persons with weak attachment to the labor force and whose social environment »tends to maintain or further weaken this attachment« (Van Haitsma 1989: 28). I would like to incorporate this more explicit conception by referring to the neighborhood as the social environment.

The term weak labor-force attachment as used here does not imply a desire or willingness to work. Rather, weak labor-force attachment implies the marginal position of people in the labor force because of restricted job opportunities – including those that result from changes in the demand for labor and from racial discrimination – and/or limited access to the informal job network systems.

To understand the unique position of members of the underclass, it is important to comprehend how their neighborhood context aggravates their weak attachment to the labor force. »Environments with low opportunity for stable and legitimate employment and high opportunity for alternative income-generating activities, particularly those which are incompatible with regular employment perpetuate weak labor force attachment,« states Van Haistma (1989: 7). Poor people who reside in areas that support or foster strong labor force attachment are in a better position to avail themselves of employment opportunities than those with similar educational training and occupational skills living in neighborhoods that reinforce or promote weak labor force attachment.

Neighborhoods that have inadequate job information networks, few legitimate employment opportunities, and inferior schools, not only feature weak labor force attachment, they also increase the likelihood that people will turn to deviant or illegal activities for income, resulting in further deterioration of their attachment to the legitimate labor market. The problems associated with the absence of work are most severe for a jobless family in a neighborhood with low rates of employment because they are more likely to be shared and reinforced by other families in this neighborhood through the process of non-conscious or accidental cultural transmission (Wilson 1996; Hannerz 1969). A perception of a lack of self-efficacy is one of these shared problems.

In social cognitive theory, perceived self-efficacy refers to personal beliefs that one has the ability to take the necessary steps to achieve the goals required in a given situation. Such beliefs affect the level of challenge that an individual perceives he or she is able to handle, the amount of effort expended in a given endeavor, and the degree of perseverance when confronting difficulties. As Albert Bandura points out, »Inability to influence events and social conditions that significantly affect one's life can give rise to feelings of futility and despondency as well as to anxiety« (Bandura 1982: 140).

Two sources of perceived futility are identified in self-efficacy theory: people may (1) seriously doubt that they can accomplish what is expected or (2) are confident of their abilities but nonetheless do not try because they feel that their efforts will ultimately fail in an environment that is discriminatory, punitive, or unresponsive. »The type of outcomes people expect depends largely on their judgments of how well they will be able to perform in given situations« (Bandura 1982: 140).

I would hypothesize that unstable work and low income will lower a person's perceived self-efficacy. Accordingly, I would expect lower levels of perceived self-efficacy in ghetto neighborhoods than in the more advantaged neighborhoods because of higher levels of underemployment, unemployment, and labor force drop outs in ghetto areas. I would also expect the level of perceived self-efficacy to be higher among those individuals who are weakly attached to the labor force but who live in working- and middle-class areas than among their counterparts who reside in ghetto neighborhoods.

In the ghetto neighborhoods, networks of kin, friends, and associates are more likely to include a higher proportion of individuals who tend to doubt that they can actually achieve approved societal goals because of their experiences with extreme economic marginality. The self-doubts may exist for either of the two reasons stated above: these individuals may have questions concerning their own preparedness or capabilities, or they may perceive that a hostile society has imposed severe restrictions on their avenues to advancement.

The more extended the period of joblessness, the more likely these self doubts will be internalized. I think it is reasonable to assume that the longer a neighborhood is plagued with high unemployment and non labor-force participation, the stronger the association between joblessness and feelings of low self-efficacy. In such neighborhoods a jobless family is influenced by the behavior, social perceptions, beliefs, and orientations of similar families disproportionately concentrated in the neighborhood. In *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) I used the term »concentration effects« – that is, the effects of living in an overwhelmingly impoverished environment – to capture this process.

Thus, in my formulation the meaning of the concept of underclass is derived from a theoretical framework on the social transformation of the inner city, a framework that links structural, cultural, and social psychological propositions. In this theory, what distinguishes members of the underclass from those of other economically disadvantaged groups is that their neighborhood or social milieu uniquely reinforces their marginal economic position or weak attachment to the labor force.

This is not a view that is shared by other social scientists. For example, Christopher Jencks maintained that »what we now call the underclass bears a striking resemblance to what sociologists used to call the lower class (1992: 28)«. However, I

know of no previous studies that define »lower class« in terms of the dual problems of weak attachment to the labor force or marginal economic position, and social isolation in neighborhood of highly concentrated poverty. The standard designation »lower class« does not capture this important distinction.

What the terms »lower class« and »underclass« have in common is that they connote economic marginality. Where they differ is that unlike the term »underclass,« as theoretically defined in this paper, the term »lower class« does not signify the added dimension of neighborhood or social milieu. In America the problems this definition of the underclass connotes – economic marginality and neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty – are more likely to be present in the inner-city ghettos.

In this connection, Jencks (1992) argues that because my definition of the underclass emphasizes location, it refers mainly to a nonwhite population. However, the concept as used in my theoretical framework can be applied not only to different racial and ethnic groups, but also to different societies. In the United States the concept will more often apply to people of color because whites seldom live in ghetto or extreme poverty areas – that is, neighborhoods with poverty rates of at least 40 percent.⁵ For example, the proportion of the poor who reside in ghetto neighborhoods in metropolitan areas varies noticeably by race. Of the eight million ghetto poor in 1990, 4.2 million were African American, two million were Latino and roughly 1.8 million were white (Jargowsky 1997).⁶

Thus to speak of the underclass in the United States is to refer primarily to blacks and Latinos.⁷ However, there is nothing in my conceptual definition of the underclass that would restrict its application to people of color. In other societies the combination of weak labor force attachment and social isolation may exist in certain inner-city neighborhoods even though the levels of concentrated poverty do not match those inherent in American ghettos. For example, there is evidence that the long term jobless in the Holland inner cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam – particularly the immigrants with weak labor-force attachment from Surinam and Indonesia – have experienced sharply decreasing contact with conventional groups and institutions in Dutch society despite levels of ethnic and class segregation far

⁵ See footnote 2.

⁶ Of the large cities in the U.S., Boston is unique in that it includes a significant number of whites who live in high poverty census tracts. Thus the use of the term »white underclass« would be more applicable to Boston than to other metropolises in this country.

⁷ Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut (2001) use the term »underclass« to refer to those second generation Latino immigrants who have experienced the downward assimilation path, including residence in barrios, not the more stable and socially organized immigrant enclaves, and whose experiences are similar to those African Americans who reside in ghettos. See Portes and Rumbaut (2001).

below those of large inner cities in the United States. In response to this development, several Dutch social scientists have discussed the formation of an underclass in the Netherlands in precisely the theoretical terms outlined in my book, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Schuyt 1990; Kloosterman 1990; Engbersen 1990; Engbersen/Schuyt/Timmer 1990).

We need a concept that allows us to describe and highlight the important theoretical linkage between a disadvantaged group's position in the labor market and its social environment. I have shown how the term »underclass« can serve this purpose. Social scientists may choose another concept to capture this relationship. I now use the term »ghetto poor« to designate the dual problem of weak-labor force attachment and a social milieu featuring concentrated poverty and social isolation. My concern is that a theoretically derived concept of underclass will be overcrowded in the long run by nonsystematic, arbitrary and atheoretical usages that often end up as ideological slogans or code words, particularly in journalistic descriptions of patterns of behavior in the inner city (cf Hamill 1988; Magnet 1987).

However, regardless of the concept used to describe the theoretical linkage between a disadvantaged group's position in the labor market and its social environment, many may question the strength of this relationship given the recent criticisms of the research on neighborhood effects for not adequately considering the unmeasured differences between inner-city ghetto families and families that live reside in non-ghetto communities (Tienda 1991). In other words, it is argued that the effects that we attribute to neighborhoods may be due in large measure to the characteristics of families who end up living in neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty – families with the weakest job-related skills, with the least awareness of and concern for the effects of the local environment on their children's social development, and with the most personal problems (Jargowsky 1997).

Indeed, some scholars have maintained that neighborhood effects disappear when researchers use appropriate statistical techniques to account for »self selection bias« (Plotnick/Hoffman 1993; Evans/Oates/Schwab 1992). I think that such conclusions are often reached because of the crude measures that are used to capture neighborhood effects. Allow me to elaborate. The research that we conducted in Chicago in the late 1980s revealed that the residents in Chicago's ghetto neighborhoods share a feeling that they have little informal social control over their children. A primary reason is a weak institutional resource base that fails to provide a foundation for social organization in their neighborhoods (Wilson 1996).

It is easier for parents to control the behavior of the children when their neighborhood features a strong institutional resource base. That is, when community institutions such as churches, schools, political organizations, businesses, and civic clubs are stable, and their links are strong or secure. The higher the density and stability of community organizations, the less deviant activities such as crime, the

formation of gangs, drug trafficking, and prostitution can take root in the neighborhood.

A weak institutional resource base is what distinguishes inner-city ghetto neighborhoods from stable working-class and middle-class areas. Parents in ghetto neighborhoods experience much greater difficulty in trying to control the behavior of their adolescents and prevent them from getting involved in activities detrimental to pro-social development, activities that may affect their chances for future success in the labor market. Because our rudimentary measures of neighborhood effects are unable to capture the dynamic impact of differences in the institutional resource base on families and individuals, we are more likely to overemphasize the importance of self-selection bias.

Moreover, our rudimentary measures of neighborhood effects are also unlikely to capture indirect forces that operate to disadvantage individuals and families residing in highly concentrated poverty areas. I am referring to both indirect structural and cultural factors (Smelser/Wilson/Mitchell 2001). These causal mechanisms are »indirect« because they are mediated by the position of the group in the system of social stratification (i.e., the position the group occupies in terms of power, prestige, influence, and privilege). Take for example, the impact of national economic change on low-skilled African-American workers.

In recent years, the growth and spread of new technologies and the growing internationalization of economic activity have changed the demand for different type of workers (Katz 1996; Schwartzman 1997). While these trends tend to benefit highly educated or highly skilled workers, they have created situations where lower skilled workers face the growing threat of job displacement and eroding wages. The decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor has had a greater impact on poor black communities because the percentage of low-skilled workers is still disproportionately large. Low-skilled workers in all racial and ethnic groups are likely to be adversely affected by the changes in the relative demand for labor, but the severest dislocations will be felt in the inner-city ghettos. Social isolation in these areas, for example the lack of access to the informal jobs network, exacerbates the problems that low-income workers in all neighborhoods experience from shifts in the demand for labor.

Also, social isolation in ghetto neighborhoods creates mechanisms that affect race-neutral processes that ultimately influence group outcomes. Consider the problem of the flow of information to poor inner-city ghetto neighborhoods. In order to make wise decisions, people have to have good information. However the more socially isolated or segregated the community, the less likely the residents will have ready access to reliable information concerning the labor market, schools, apprenticeship programs, financial markers, and so on.

Our rudimentary measures of neighborhood effects do not capture these indirect structural factors. They also fail to capture indirect cultural factors. Following Ulf Hannerz (1969), I define »culture« as the sharing of modes of behavior and outlook within a community. The study of culture not only involves an analysis of how it is transmitted from generation to generation, but the way in which it is sustained through social interaction in the community.

When individuals act according to their culture, they are following their inclinations as they have been developed by learning or influence from other members of their community (Hannerz 1969). Skills, styles, and habits are often shaped by the frequency in which they are present in the community (Swidler 1986). Accordingly, the point I want to emphasize – which should be kept in mind when considering my theoretically derived definition of the underclass – is that the environment embodies both structural and cultural constraints and opportunities. In order to fully appreciate and explain the divergent social outcomes of human groups, we must take into account their exposure to different cultural influences.

Patterns of behavior in the inner city often represent particular cultural adaptations to the systematic blockage of opportunities in the environment of the inner city and the society as a whole. These adaptations are reflected in habits, skills, styles, and attitudes that are shaped over time. The exposure to different cultural influences in the environment has to be taken into account if one is to really appreciate and explain the divergent social outcomes of human groups. To state the issues more formally, culture provides the tools and creates constraints in patterns of social interaction, including the social interaction that leads to different racial outcomes. Accordingly, culture is closely intertwined with social relations in the sense that its effects on stratified racial outcomes are filtered through social relational processes and are therefore indirect (Tilly 1998).

Imposed or voluntary restrictions on the actions of members of the community increase differences in behavior and outlook and may limit opportunities for economic and social advancement. This creates situations in which social factors, such as a group's economic position in society, interact over time with cultural factors in the formation of observable group traits and characteristics. As noted above, these group traits and characteristics often shape the attributes of individual members of the community – such as their motivations, attitudes, and skills – which in turn affect their social outcomes, including their social mobility.

Among the effects of living in segregated neighborhoods is repeated exposure to cultural traits – styles of behavior, particular skills, habits, orientations and world views – that emanate from or are the products of racial exclusion, traits that may impede successful maneuvering in the larger society. For example, our research in Chicago revealed that many parents in the inner-city ghetto neighborhoods warned their children to avoid eye to eye contact with strangers and to develop a tough

demeanor when encountering people on the streets. While such behaviors are helpful for survival in the ghetto, they hinder successful interaction in mainstream society (Wilson 1996).

When I speak of the impact of the environment I am not making an either/or distinction between culture and social structure, rather I am highlighting the interaction between these two variables. In the final analysis, the exposure to different cultural influences in the environment has to be taken into account if one is to really appreciate and explain the divergent social outcomes of human groups.

Conclusion

One of the general hypotheses from my theory of the social transformation of the inner city is that a social environment featuring concentrated poverty and social isolation reinforces weak attachment to the labor market (Wilson 1987). A number of the specific hypotheses that embody the notion of concentration effects – the effects of living in highly concentrated poverty areas – specify the mechanisms that create the connection between the social environment and labor-force attachment. For example, one of these hypotheses states that individuals living in high poverty areas are much less likely to be tied into the informal job information network system than those living in marginal or low poverty areas.

The dual problem facing many individuals of weak labor-force attachment and residing in a social environment that further weakens that attachment is conveyed by the concept »underclass«. Accordingly, this concept derives its meaning from the theory of the social transformation of the inner city and helps to highlight the importance of the social environment for so many truly disadvantaged individuals.

However, as I have tried to indicate, because our empirical measures of the impact of the environment are rudimentary, as is so clearly revealed in the research on neighborhood effects, we have yet to demonstrate the complex ways that the environment or neighborhood milieu directly and indirectly affects the social outcomes of individuals and families, including the cumulative effects of living in an environment that is overwhelmingly impoverished. But as we work to improve our measures of the social environment's impact on poverty populations, a concept that forces us to keep in focus the role of the environment in weakening attachment to the labor is indispensable, regardless of whether that concept is the »underclass« or some equivalent designation.

References

- Aponte, Robert. (1990), »Definitions of the Underclass: A Critical Analysis,« in: Gans, Herbert J. (ed.), *Sociology in America*, Newbury Park.
- Auletta, Ken (1982), *The Underclass*, New York.
- Bandura, Albert (1982), »Self-Efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency«, *American Psychologist*, vol. 37 (February), pp. 122–147.
- Clark, Kenneth B. (1965), *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*, New York.
- Darendorf, Ralf (1985), *Law and Order*, Boulder, Colorado.
- Engbersen, Godfried (1990), »Modern Poverty in the Netherlands«, paper presented at the *Workshop on Social Policy and the Underclass*, University of Amsterdam (August).
- Engbersen, Godfried/Schuyt, Kees/Timmer, Jaap (1990), »Cultures of Unemployment: Long-Term Unemployment in Dutch Inner Cities«, *working paper 4*, Vakgroep Sociologie Rijksuniversiteit, Leiden.
- Evans, William N./Oates, Wallace E./Schwab, Robert M. (1992), »Measuring Peer Group Effects: A Study of Teenage Behavior«, *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 100, pp. 966–991.
- Fiskin, James S. (1983), *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family*, New Haven.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1995), *The War Against the Poor. The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy*, New York.
- Gilder, George (1981), *Wealth and Poverty*, New York.
- Hamill, Pete (1988), »Breaking the Silence«, *Esquire*, March, pp. 91–102.
- Hannerz, Ulf (1969), *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*, New York.
- Hughes, Mark A. (1989), »Concentrated Deviance and the ›Underclass‹ Hypothesis«, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 274–282.
- Jargowsky, Paul (1997), *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*, New York.
- Jargowsky, Paul/Bane, Mary Jo (1991), »Ghetto Poverty in the United States, 1970–1980. In The Urban Underclass«, in: Jencks, Christopher/Peterson, Paul E. (eds.), *Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution*, pp. 235–273.
- Jencks, Christopher (1992), *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass*, New York.
- Katz, Michael B. (1993), »Reframing the ›Underclass Debate«, in: Katz, Michael B. (ed.), *The ›Underclass‹ Debate: Views from History*, Princeton, pp. 440–478.
- Katz, Michael B. (1989), *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the World on Welfare*, New York.
- Kloosterman, Robert C. (1990), »The Making of the Dutch Underclass? A Labour Market View«, paper presented at the *Workshop on Social Policy and the Underclass*, University of Amsterdam (August).
- Lemann, Nicholas (1986), »The Origins of the Underclass«, *Atlantic*, June, pp. 31–61.
- Liebow, Elliot (1967), *Tally's Corner: A Study of Streetcorner Men*, Boston.
- Magnet, Myron (1987), »America's Underclass: What to Do?«, *Fortune*, vol. 115, no. 10, pp. 130–150.
- Massey, Douglas S./Denton, Nancy A. (1993), *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Cambridge.
- Mead, Lawrence (1986), *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, New York.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick (1965), *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Washington D.C.
- Murray, Charles (1990), *The Emerging British Underclass*, London.
- Murray, Charles (1984), *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*, New York.

- Myrdal, Gunnar (1962), *Challenge to Affluence*, New York.
- Nathan, Richard (1996), »The Underclass – Will It Always Be with Us?«, paper presented at the New School for Social Research, New York.
- O'Connor, Alice (2001), *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*, Princeton.
- Plotnick, Robert/Hoffman, Saul (1993), »Using Sister Pairs to Estimate How Neighborhoods Affect Young Adult Outcomes«, *Working Papers in Public Policy Analysis and Management*, no. 93–98, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington.
- Portes, Alejandro/Rumbaut, Ruben G. (2001), *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Berkeley.
- Rainwater, Lee (1966), »Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family«, *Daedalus* 95, (Winter), pp. 176–216.
- Ricketts, Earl R./Sawhill, Isabell (1988), »Defining and Measuring the Underclass«, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, vol. 7, pp. 316–325.
- Schuyt, Kees (1990), »The New Emerging Underclass in Europe: The Experience of Long-Term Unemployment in Dutch Inner Cities«, paper presented at the *Workshop on Social Policy and the Underclass*, University of Amsterdam (August).
- Schwartzman, David (1997), *Black Unemployment: Part of Unskilled Unemployment*, Westport, Conn.
- Smelser, Neil J./Wilson, William Julius/Mitchell, Faith (2001), »Introduction«, in: Smelser, Neil J./Wilson, William Julius/Mitchell, Faith (eds.), *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, vol. 1, Washington D.C.
- Swidler, Ann (1986), »Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies«, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 51 (January).
- Testa, Mark/Krogh, Marilyn (1995), »Male Joblessness, Nonmarital Parenthood and Marriage«, paper presented at the Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Conference, October 10–12, Chicago.
- Tienda, Marta (1991), »Poor People and Poor Places: Deciphering Neighborhood Effects on Poverty Outcomes.« in: Huber, Joan (ed.), *Macro-Micro Linkages in Sociology*, Newberry.
- Tilly, Charles S. (1998), *Durable Inequality*, Berkeley.
- Time (1977), »The American Underclass.«, August 29, pp. 14–27.
- Van Haitsma, Martha (1989), »A Contextual Definition of the Underclass«, *Focus (Newsletter of the Institute for Research on Poverty)*, vol. 12 (Spring-Summer), pp. 27–31.
- Wacquant, Loic/Wilson, William Julius (1990), »The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City«, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 501 (January), pp. 8–25.
- Wilson, William Julius (1987), *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy*, Chicago.
- Wilson, William Julius (1996), *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, New York.
- Zelditch, Morris Jr. (1989), »Levels in the Logic of Macro-Historical Explanation«, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.