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The Culture of Race, Class, and Poverty: The Emergence of a Cultural Discourse in Early Cold War Social Work (1946–1963)

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Through a primary source historical analysis, this article discusses the emergence of a cultural discourse in the early cold war (1946–1963) social work literature. It traces the evolution of social work's cultural narrative in relation to social scientific perspectives, changing race relations, and increasing welfare caseloads. Social work scholars originally employed their cultural discourse to account for racial and ethnic difference and eventually came to examine class and poverty from this viewpoint as well. This cultural framework wrestled with internal contradictions. It simultaneously celebrated and problematized cultural difference and foreshadowed both latter twentieth century multiculturalism as well as neo-conservative thought.

In the introduction to their 1958 edited volume, *Social Perspectives on Behavior,* Herman Stein and Richard Cloward suggested, "If we are to develop, now and in the future, our characteristic method in psychosocial study, diagnosis, and treatment, knowledge of group and cultural patterns must match our not inconsiderable knowledge of personality organization" (Stein & Cloward, 1958, p. xiiii). The writers, two faculty members at the New York School of Social Work, largely echoed the sentiment of their peers. Increasingly, early cold war (1946–1963) social work scholars argued that an understanding of culture was integral to the study of psycho-social phenomena and the amelioration of social problems.

Although elements of a cultural perspective were present in earlier social work thought, cultural narratives gained new

ground in the early cold war years or the period spanning from the close of World War II in 1946 until the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. This development mimicked larger trends in the social sciences. In response to Nazi racism and a mounting civil rights movement, mainstream social scientists rejected biologically-based explanations of racial and ethnic difference and instead turned to the prospect of an environmentally produced "culture" to account for racial, ethnic, and—eventually—class characteristics. Postwar social workers largely followed suit. Like social scientists, social workers initially applied this cultural lens to questions of race and ethnicity, but soon came to examine class, poverty, and welfare use from this vantage point as well.

Historians generally maintain that psychological perspectives dominated early cold war social work thought (Curran, 2002; Herman, 1995; Leiby, 1978; Patterson, 1986; Trattner, 1994). These authors are correct in their claims, yet their psychiatric focus obscures postwar social work's simultaneous concern with cultural issues. Existing scholarship examines the origins of cultural narratives in the social science literature and its impact on policy making (Bell, 1982; Katz, 1986, 1989; O'Connor, 2001; Rainwater, 1970; Rainwater & Yancey, 1967), while a fewer number of authors investigate postwar social work's adoption of a cultural discourse in its discussion of the African-American family (Solinger, 1992; Kunzel, 1993). Nevertheless, historians have generally not explored the rise of a cultural discourse in the early cold war professional social work literature. To address this research gap, this paper asks: How did the postwar professional social work community respond to the growth of a social scientific cultural framework and how did it integrate this intellectual stance into its professional vocabulary?

Through a primary source analysis of social work texts, journal articles, and technical reports, this article traces the origin and emergence of a cultural discourse—meaning scholarly, expert narratives on culture—in the social work literature. It situates and tracks the evolution of social work's cultural discourse in relation to developments in the social sciences, changing race relations, an increase in the welfare caseload, and the political milieu of early cold war America. As this analysis finds, social work's cultural discourse grappled with its own internal contradictions and

ultimately produced a mixed legacy. In its celebration of cultural difference, it adopted a culturally relativist stance and foreshadowed the political and intellectual multicultural movement of the latter twentieth century. Yet it simultaneously problematized and pathologized cultural difference, with some social work authors suggesting that cultural difference could account for poverty and related social ills. Through its in-depth investigation of a critical era in social work history, this research ultimately reveals the contested nature of a cultural discourse—one that continues to figure prominently within the vernacular of contemporary social science and social work.

The "Cultural" Context: Social Science, Race Liberalism, and Social Work

Postwar social work's attraction to cultural perspectives reflected developments in the social sciences. The World War II and early postwar eras witnessed an intellectual fusion between psychological, sociological, and anthropological viewpoints, as researchers collectively sought to explain the horrors of Nazism. With these cross-disciplinary strivings, academics and even average Americans became familiar with the anthropological concept of culture. The work of iconic anthropologist Margaret Mead (1935, 1949) preached a cultural relativism that exalted the status of seemingly "primitive" cultures. Relatedly, the writings of Danish emigré analyst Erik Erickson (1950) and famed Frankfurt School theorist Theodore Adorno (1950) portrayed culture as integral to personality development. In sum, the "culture and personality" school dominated mid-century social science (Bell, 1982; Herman, 1995).

Postwar social work scholars were not immune to this interdisciplinary fervor. Social work had enjoyed a long-standing relationship with the social sciences. Prior to the 1920s, the profession was more closely allied with sociology than with either psychiatry or psychology, but this shifted as social work found more common ground with the mental health disciplines (Leighninger, 1987; Stein, 1955). Yet the WW II and postwar period again opened up collaborative opportunities for social workers. The 1948 appointment of a sociologist as head of the Russell

Sage Foundation, the leading funding body for social work research, furthered an alliance between social work and the social sciences. The culture and personality model also attracted social workers who had historically vacillated between individual and environmental frames. Moreover, as the postwar social sciences gained federal support and public influence, social work embraced a social scientific knowledge base in an attempt to enhance professional prestige. The early cold war social work literature reflected this move towards interdisciplinary collaboration. In 1950, social work educator Henry Maas' article, "Collaboration between Social Work and the Social Sciences," won the *Social Work Journal* award for the best paper addressing "The Contribution of the Human Sciences to Social Work Practice." The period saw the establishment of a cross-disciplinary faculty seminar at the University of Michigan that eventually spurred the interdisciplinary doctoral program in social work and social science. Social scientists were increasingly placed on social work faculty and as consultants in social work agencies (Leighninger, 1987). The appeal of social scientific thought set the stage for the introduction of cultural narratives into the social work knowledge base.

The relatively liberal racial politics of the World War II and postwar period also furthered social scientific and social work attraction to cultural perspectives. The nation's entrance into WWII forced Americans to confront racism at home as they fought racism abroad. In these years, Roosevelt outlawed discrimination in defense industries, Truman established the first presidential committee on civil rights and desegregated the military, and African-American activism flourished. The 1950s continued to see major strides towards racial justice with the growth of the civil rights movement in the South and the 1954 desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Ed.* The beginnings of the cold war also drove racial progress, as the Soviet Union played on the hypocrisy of American racism in its appeal to European and developing nations. Postwar race liberalism and the civil rights movement enhanced the appeal of cultural perspectives on race. This new framework defined differential racial and ethnic characteristics as matters of learned cultural norms and thus provided an alternative to earlier, explicitly racist biologically-based theories of racial difference (Jackson, 1990; Kirby, 1980; Sitkoff, 1978).

Professional social workers pronounced a rhetorical commitment to the basic goals of the postwar civil rights movement, including desegregation, equal opportunity, and anti-lynching legislation (AASW, 1952; "The American Lynching Record," 1950; Hosch, 1948; Klineberg, 1957; "Race and Housing," 1959). Civil rights appeared on the policy platform of the major social work organization, the American Association of Social Workers (AASW) and later the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), from the late 1940s into the early 1960s (Anderson, 1948; "NASW Position on Civil Rights," 1963; "The 1950 Delegate Conference," 1950). Early cold war social workers also looked to their own backyards and encouraged agencies and schools to desegregate caseloads, cease discriminatory practices in hiring and service provision, and integrate agency boards (Berry, 1963; Granger, 1948; Hosch, 1948; Lindeman, 1948; Olds, 1961; Simons, 1956; Solinger, 1992). However, social work's commitment to racial equality was limited. Early cold war social work writings provided little coverage of the grassroots civil rights movement and the profession's rhetorical commitment to racial equality was often not matched in practice. Many agencies carried on racist and segregationist practices throughout the postwar years, and African-Americans remained marginalized and underrepresented within the profession (Solinger, 1992). Nevertheless, social work embraced a moderate civil rights agenda and a cultural framework became the preferred means by which professionals discussed and explored issues of race and ethnicity.

Social Work's Cultural Narrative: Ethnicity and Race

By mid-century, a cultural discourse on ethnicity and race emerged among social work leaders and scholars. This new outlook captured the imagination of social work educators. The Russell Sage Foundation and the Committee on Social Work Education (CSWE) sponsored the New York Cultural Project, a collaborative group of social workers and social scientists that explored socio-cultural issues in social work education. In its 1955 monograph, *A Casebook of Seven Ethnic Case Studies*, the project argued, "The same piece of behavior may be viewed from a psychological frame of reference and from a socio-cultural frame of

reference and both approaches must be integrated in any attempt to understand or explain it" (p. 4). In the early fifties, the American Association of the Schools of Social Work (AASSW) established a sub-committee concerning cultural issues in social work education and courses on culture, although still marginal, increasingly appeared in social work schools (Coyle, 1952; Kluckhohn, 1951).

Writings on culture surfaced in the social work literature and addressed a relatively representative range of American cultural groups, including white ethnics, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Japanese-Americans. Social work authors argued that cultural knowledge was essential to good casework practice. For example, in her 1956 text, *Cultural Values of American Ethnic Groups*, Sister Frances Jerome Woods, a social work educator, opined, "A theoretical framework within which to view cultural values and an ability to recognize and appreciate the significance of the cultural elements in specific case situations is believed to be helpful and, at times, essential to effective practice" (p. 4). Other authors suggested that a lack of cultural knowledge undermined the efficacy of social work interventions. A 1959 article appearing in the practitioner-oriented journal *Social Casework* described a botched casework attempt in a Native American community and attributed a misdiagnosis to cultural ignorance. According to the writer, the ignorant workers mistook a matriarchal family pattern, which "traced kinship descent and all major social responsibilities through, and to, the senior members of the female line" for " 'a father that doesn't care' " (Williams, 1959, p. 79).

The cultural relativism apparent in postwar anthropological research also made its way into social work discourse. The social work literature revealed an expanding professional tolerance for cultural difference. Historians have described social work's historical imposition of dominant Anglo-American norms upon immigrant and other minority groups, particularly during the Progressive Era (Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1986; Mink, 1995; Platt, 1969). However, postwar social workers, at least on paper, questioned an assimilative ideal. For instance, in his 1951 article entitled, "The Relationship of Culture to the Principles of Casework," social worker William Gioseffi (1951) asserted, "It is not the function of casework to 'acculturate' the client to what we may conceive of as American mores" (p. 195). Others similarly asked: "Are American

cultural values, simply because they are American, always to be preferred to the values of the client?" (Woods, 1956, p. 357). These comments signified a "proto-multiculturalism," or an intellectual and ideological posture that challenged the melting pot ideal and its eradication of cultural diversity.

Again anticipating late twentieth century multiculturalism, some postwar authors advocated a self-reflexive stance and directed social workers to examine how their own cultural position and values affected their work. According to social work educator Grace Coyle (1952), "As we achieve self-awareness of our own cultural conditioning, we are better able to use this understanding in our relations with others which may come from other cultural groups" (p. 293). The lack of such insight, others argued, left social workers at risk of inadvertently imposing their cultural norms upon clients (Barabee, 1954; Brown, 1950; Ginsburg, 1951; Houwink, 1946). In her 1947 article, "Race as a Factor in the Caseworker's Role," the Director of the Howard University School of Social Work, Inabel Burns Lindsay, described how the unconscious racial bias of a young white worker led her to address her African-American clients by their first names while referring to her white clients as "mister" or "miss." Given the potential for unconscious racial biases to corrupt the casework process, some authors, and African-American writers in particular, debated the merits of racial matching between clients and caseworkers (Brown, 1950; Houwink, 1946; Lindsay, 1947; Taylor, 1955).

Importantly, social workers were quite careful to ensure that a cultural analysis did not obscure a psychological one. Although psychiatric perspectives largely dominated the profession's intellectual discourse in the early cold war years, professionals did not seek to replace psychological narratives with cultural ones, but instead sought the integration of the two. For instance, in his article entitled, "The Psychocultural Approach in Social Casework," Peter Sandi (1947) defined the "combining the psychiatric understanding of individuals and groups with cultural understanding" as "a further advancement of great importance . . . in the social work field" (p. 378). Others maintained that culture shaped and infused personality (New York Project, 1955). The fusion of these two narratives also mirrored the profession's developing

psychosocial framework (Coyle, 1956; Hamilton, 1951; Perlman, 1957) that theorized the interdependency of psychological and social phenomenon.

"A 'Colored' Attitude": Social Work on the African-American Community

As a cultural framework infiltrated social work thought, one of the areas most strongly affected was the profession's discourse on the African-American community. Wartime and postwar migration brought African-Americans to urban centers and contributed to an expanding African-American client base in social agencies (Trolander, 1987). Moreover, African-Americans came to account for a growing proportion of the postwar welfare caseload and by 1957 42% of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) recipients were African-American (Bureau of Public Assistance, 1960). In serving an expanding population of African-American clientele, many postwar social workers turned to their cultural knowledge base and, more specifically, to the work of E. Franklin Frazier for guidance.

Famed African-American sociologist and social worker E. Franklin Frazier was one of the first thinkers to advance an environmentally-based analysis of African-American experience, which included a discussion of African-American culture. In his celebrated 1939 text *The Negro Family in the United States* Frazier examined the social problems associated with African-American migration from the rural south to urban centers, including the overrepresentation of female-headed households among low-income African-Americans. Relating this phenomenon back to slavery, he referred to the "matriarchal" family as a "cultural artifact" of the pre-emancipation era. Although Frazier (1939) understood illegitimacy as a "simple peasant folkway" that benignly endured among African-Americans in the rural south, he maintained that illegitimacy and female-headed homes contributed to grave problems and to the "general disorganization of family life" as African-Americans headed to industrializing cities (p. 100). Some critics contend that Frazier attributed poverty primarily to cultural norms (O'Connor, 2001), but a strong economic and structural analysis also underscored his account. He partially attributed the overrepresentation of female-headed

homes and urban social disorganization in the African-American community to racial discrimination and high rates of unemployment among African-American men (Jackson, 1990; Schiele, 1999; Seemes, 2001; Southern, 1987).

In interpreting Frazier's logic, however, many postwar social workers emphasized his cultural analysis rather than his sociostructural one. Most typically, social work writers suggested that higher rates of illegitimacy in the African-American community were primarily attributable to cultural conditions. In their frequently cited 1947 study, "The Attitudes of Negro Mothers Towards Illegitimacy," social workers Patricia Knapp and Sophie Cambria found that cultural factors were the best predictors of illegitimacy among lower-class African-Americans. This idea circulated widely. In an 1950 article entitled, "Illegitimacy and Aid to Dependent Children," the author argued, "Cultural attitudes are partially responsible for a higher illegitimacy rate among Negroes . . . .There is mentioned a 'colored' attitude toward pregnancy, by which is meant the notion that illegitimate pregnancy is no particular disgrace" (Brenner, 1950, p. 176). Of course, not every social worker agreed with this position. Many drew on psychological accounts or combined psychiatric perspectives with cultural ones to explain African-American illegitimacy (Curran, 2002; Orchard, 1960; Tuttle, 1962). Moreover, social workers were not completely blind to the socioeconomic forces affecting the African-American community, and some connected employment discrimination to the overrepresentation of female-headed homes (Bureau of Public Assistance, 1960; Greenleigh Associates, 1960; Woods, 1956). Yet a cultural narrative was clearly present. Historian Ricki Solinger (1992) contends that a cultural determinism replaced an earlier biological determinism in a strain of postwar social work discourse on unwed motherhood in the African-American community.

Postwar social work writing on African-American culture and family life—particularly in the low-income community—often diverged from the celebration of diversity and cultural relativism that characterized the general social work literature. Here, social workers problematized perceived cultural differences. For instance, Woods (1956) used the pejorative term "unstable" to describe the African-American family (p. 183). In an article for *Social*

Work, Seaton Manning (1960), the Executive Director of the Bay Area Urban League, concluded that among low-income African-Americans, "Personal and family disorganization is common" (Manning, 1960, p. 5). Social work's position largely mirrored that of the larger social scientific community, which although acknowledging the socio-structural inequalities, depicted low-income African-American culture as disorganized and pathological (Drake & Cayton, 1945; Myrdal, 1944; O'Connor, 2001).

The Culture of Class

Social science and class

A cultural discourse was not reserved for racial and ethnic issues and many social workers simultaneously applied their cultural lens to questions of class as well. Like its perspective on race, social work's adoption of a cultural perspective on class followed developments in the social sciences. Scholarly attention to class dates back to the late 1920s when social scientists, and particularly those in the nascent discipline of sociology, began investigating class dynamics in American society (O'Connor, 2001). Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 classic, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*, and W. Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt's 1941 study, *The Social Life of a Modern Community*, pronounced class as a central organizing principle of American society. These prolific writers argued that class was not simply a matter of one's socioeconomic status, but rather behavior, mores, attitudes, and values were central signifiers and determinants of class position: "When we examined the behavior of a person who was said by some to be 'the wealthiest man in town,' to find out why he did not have a higher position, we were told that he and his family do not act right" (Warner & Lunt, 1941, p. 82). Researchers involved in the "class vs. caste" debates explored the intersections of class and race, and some argued that socioeconomic status was a more powerful determinant of cultural norms than racial status (Johnson, 1934; Davis & Havighurst, 1958; Dollard, 1937; Drake & Clayton, 1946; Powdermaker, 1939). Academic attention was also not limited to the lower class. In the 1950s, influential works like David Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*, William Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man*, and C. Wright Mills' (1956) *White*

Collar scrutinized the suburban world of the white, middle class. In short, investigations into the culture of class became a hallmark of the postwar social scientific literature.

This academic love affair between "class" and "culture" culminated in anthropologist Oscar Lewis' (1959, 1961) now infamous "culture of poverty" thesis. Expanding on earlier sociological theorizing, Lewis attributed poverty to economic disruptions accompanying industrialization, yet maintained that the stabilization of these larger forces did not necessarily resolve the poverty problem. Rather, poverty often became a permanent feature of industrialized economies as it was continually reproduced by a "culture of poverty." In a series of works spanning the 1950s and 1960s, Lewis (1961) laid out his thesis: "The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members. It is a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and becomes a subculture of its own" (p. xxiv). Lewis identified a constellation of behavioral and psychological traits characterizing those living in the culture of poverty, including "a high incidence of alcoholism," "use of physical violence in the training of children," "early initiation into sex," "a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children," "a strong present time orientation," and intergeneration transmission (Lewis, 1961, p. xxvii). Lewis' work was hailed by liberal intellectuals, including Michael Harrington whose *The Other America* discussed the cultural components of poverty. As students of Lewis' work suggest, Lewis sought both cultural and socio-structural solutions to poverty, yet interpretations of Lewis' work led many academics and policy makers to primarily focus on the cultural attributes of the poor (Katz, 1989; O'Connor, 2001; Trattner, 1994).

Social work and "social class as a way of life"

Social workers were avid consumers of this new research and, even before Lewis cemented his ideas, a cultural perspective on class edged its way into the social work literature. Social scientists who promoted this viewpoint, such as Lloyd Warner, Oscar Lewis, and August Hollingshead, spoke at social work conferences and contributed to postwar social work journals. In a 1961 article entitled "Social Class and the American Social System,"

social work educator Martin Loeb (1961) asserted, "in each social class there is a sort of subculture-a way of life-in which there is a shared morality and a shared view of the macrocosm and the microcosm" (p. 13). One of the most significant papers for social work was anthropologist's Walter Miller's 1959 publication in *Social Service Review*, "Implications of Urban Lower-Class Culture for Social Work." There, Miller (1959) argued, "The various social-class groupings in our country represent distinctive cultural traditions whose influence on behavior is as compelling as that of ethnic cultures or, in some respects, more so" (p. 220). In another influential 1963 *Social Service Review* article, prominent social welfare researcher Elizabeth Herzog (1963) concluded, "the culture-of-poverty concept is so helpful that some of its sharpest critics would not block its acceptance even if they could" (p. 394).

While these authors did not blame the poor for their poverty, many social workers followed social scientists and were most interested in the cultural norms of low-income groups. Authors argued that women-headed households and paternal absence were defining features of lower-class life[1] and insisted that lower-class culture and its accompanying social pathologies were transmitted inter-generationally (Boulding, 1961; Fantl, 1958). Some suggested that low-income families exhibited a greater tolerance for violence and aggression. In her article on juvenile delinquents from lower-class backgrounds, social worker Ruth Brenner (1957) maintained, "in his community, assaultive behavior is acceptable, and quite within the norm, while it is just the opposite in middle-class society where it is severely condemned" (p. 28). Others believed that the lower class evidenced higher levels of hostility and suspicion towards authority figures and peers. Citing a popular 1958 study by sociologist August Hollingshead and psychiatrist Fredrick Redlich's 1958 entitled, *Social Class and Mental Illness*, Loeb (1961) declared: "Intimacy is rare [among lower-class individuals], and there is a considerable degree of distrust and suspicion" (p. 16).

Social workers also portrayed the lower class as "present oriented;" that is, poor individuals lived for the moment, with little ability to defer gratification. Brenner (1957) noted, "few of these [low-income] families follow anything like a schedule in their daily living, that meals at a set hour at which the family members

gather is the exception; rather one eats when one is hungry" (p. 27). Quite significantly for caseworkers whose livelihoods were often dependent upon the verbal expression of emotion, the poor had difficulty conveying their feelings verbally: "The lower-class person has difficulty in specifying and describing his emotional reactions to stress situations" (Meier, 1959, p. 17). Some maintained that these class-related traits were inevitable, and perhaps adaptive, responses to class-based deprivation. But in their portrayal of low-income individuals aggressive, sexually promiscuous, and inarticulate, social workers problematized class-based cultural difference and painted a pejorative portrait of lower-class experience.

Following this logic, authors often promoted indoctrination into dominant values and adopted a paternalist stance in work with low-income individuals. Well known social worker and federal researcher Alvin Schoor (1962) maintained, "Clients at some of our programs . . . are 'present-oriented'; we should help them to be 'future oriented.' That, is they should learn over time-possibly over generations, for it is uncertain what time span a fundamental change in values requires" (p. 74). At the 1961 National Conference on Social Welfare, Thomas Gladwin, an anthropologist employed by the National Institute of Mental Health, similarly proposed intervention into supposed cultural traits: "any plan for remedy must be concerned with culture change, with an alteration in the over-all way of life" (p. 75).

Class relativism

Although social work's new discourse on class often cast low-income individuals and communities as problematic, the profession's cultural perspective contained contradictory impulses and reflected a cultural relativism alongside a cultural paternalism. As with their cultural rhetoric on race and ethnicity, social workers used their cultural discourse on class to challenge class biases. In part, social workers employed their commitment to self-reflection to expose and attack potential class prejudice. Walter Miller (1959) argued that a lack of knowledge about lower-class culture, along with unexplored middle-class prejudices, could result in inappropriate diagnoses and treatment: "it is vital to distinguish between what are really problems in the lower-class community and what

appear to be problems because of an implicit comparison with features of middle-class culture" (p. 233). Adopting a culturally relativist framework, some went so far as to question the ability of middle-class workers to help low-income groups (Martin, 1957). But others insisted that with a carefully developed capacity for self-reflection social workers could reach across the class divide: "It is quite feasible for a so-called middle-class worker to form meaningful relationships with clients from other strata providing he is able to examine his personal limitations with an open mind" (Weinberger, 1959, p. 128). Here social workers problematized their own beliefs and attributes, rather than those of their clients.

In keeping with this cultural relativism, social workers recommended that caseworkers shape their interventions to meet the particular class-based needs of their clients. For example, in their discussion of juvenile delinquency, social work educators Stein and Cloward (1958) argued that treatment techniques "suitable for the middle-class child may be relatively ineffective for the lower-class child" (p. xviii-xix). At their most extreme, some social workers asserted that the goal of casework was not necessarily the inculcation of middle-class norms. In his commentary in *Social Work,* Walter Taylor (1962) discussed the "superiority of some of the values that persist in lower-class families" (p.110). Here, Taylor acknowledged the assets of lower-class experience and anticipated social work's contemporary "strengths perspective" (Cowger, 1994; Saleebey, 1992). Importantly, these findings concerning social work's class-based cultural relativism diverge from recent scholarship on mainstream social scientific thought. Postwar social scientists often depicted the behaviors of low-income individuals—even those understood as somewhat adaptive—as pathological and problematic in nature (O'Connor, 2001). In contrast, like its perspective on race and ethnicity, social work's cultural discourse on class ran a continuum from celebrating diversity to problematizing it.

The Culture of Welfare

Not surprisingly, social work's cultural discourse eventually infiltrated the profession's perspective on welfare use. The now familiar legislative and popular attacks on ADC first surfaced in

the years following World War II, as caseloads grew and the program increasingly served African-Americans and never-married mothers. The ADC rolls more than tripled in size from 1940 to 1960 and by 1961 never married families accounted for 21% of all ADC cases (Abramovitz, 1988; Bureau of Family Services, 1963; Bureau of Public Assistance, 1960; Hoey, 1939). Critics accused the program of producing a variety of social ills including the erosion of the work ethic, immorality, and illegitimacy (Curran, 2001). In response to these changes, legislators and states enacted multiple restrictive measures, such as suitable home policies, work requirements, and substitute parent statutes to quell program growth and cost. Faced with this backlash, some social workers attributed growing welfare receipt to socio-structural factors, such as unemployment, low wages, and racial discrimination (Curran, 2001; Leighninger, 1999a, 1999b). Many also employed popular psychological narratives to account for financial need (Curran, 2002). And still others looked to their cultural knowledge base to explain welfare use.

To a notable extent, professionals applied their understanding of lower-class culture to the question of ADC receipt and especially to the issue of the "multiproblem" family or long-term ADC recipients. According to this strain of social work thought, multiproblem ADC recipients shared the subcultural characteristics of the lower class that contributed to the perpetuation of poverty. For instance, professionals argued that the multiproblem family resembled other lower-class families in their aggression and hostility (St. Paul's Family Centered Project, 1957). Moreover, like the individuals in the larger lower-class culture, the multiproblem ADC family demonstrated an inability to abide by the strictures of time. In her 1962 article for the journal *Child Welfare*, social worker Evalyn Strickler (1962) quoted one welfare recipient as telling her caseworker: "I never get any place on time; I don't even own a clock" (p. 28). According to some social workers, long-term welfare recipients suffered from a dearth of verbal skills and did "not communicate through speech" (Salmon, 1962, p. 104). Thus, like social class in general, postwar social workers began to understand welfare receipt as not simply an economic phenomenon, but a cultural one as well. At the 1961 National Conference on Social Welfare, one speaker argued, "The hard core

[long-term welfare recipients] must be looked upon as people who share a dysfunctional subculture" (Gladwin, 1961, p. 79). In other words, economic need alone could not account for welfare receipt.

Some suggested that this culture of welfare was not simply related to issues of class-based characteristics, but also to issues of ethnicity and race. These writers maintained that different ethnic and racial groups exhibited differing values and attitudes towards public assistance use. Social worker Elizabeth Meier (1959) argued that while most Americans experienced relief receipt as demoralizing "it is equally necessary to recognize that there are differing class values and that some ethnic groups may have other ideas about receiving help from a common fund" (p. 16). In his 1956 study, researcher Ivor Svarc (1956) similarly proposed that "self-support and dependency may have different cultural meanings" among different racial and ethnic groups (p. 146). While social workers' commentary on differing racial and ethnic stances toward state assistance did not overtly equate welfare use with a cultural pathology, it created a link between welfare use and ethnicity and race and especially to African-American culture. A few took this cultural reasoning even further and began to suggest that welfare recipients lived within their own distinct subculture. In their article, "The Legitimacy Status of Children Receiving AFDC," social workers Jane Kronick, Delores Norton, and Elizabeth Sabesta (1963) suggested that ADC recipients, "have developed a separate subculture of their own around their position as aid recipients" (p. 340). The authors' belief in a distinct subculture produced by aid receipt both paralleled and foreshadowed burgeoning criticisms of the program, which claimed that welfare created a culture of dependency.

While social workers supported expanded welfare state provisions (Curran, 2001; Leighninger, 1999a, 1999b), social work's cultural narrative—in both its relativist and paternalistic guises—led many scholars to focus on the attributes of the poor rather than the attributes of the socioeconomic system. Clearly, social work's cultural discourse reflected the political climate of the early cold war, which prohibited analyses of socioeconomic stratification. In an era of fervent anti-communism and McCarthyism, it is not surprising that a class and race-based discourse would minimize

socioeconomic inequality and highlight cultural dynamics. Some early cold war social workers were victims of red-baiting (Reisch & Andrews, 2001) and a cultural viewpoint provided professionals with a means to discuss poverty and public aid without alienating mainstream Americans or exposing the profession to further episodes of red-baiting. The close of the 1950s saw the demise of anti-communism's most violent aspects, but by this time the cultural viewpoint had laid deep roots in social work's intellectual life.

Conclusion

The cultural discourse that emerged in postwar America set the tone for the academic and policy debates on race, poverty, and ADC use for years to come. The framework met its first serious challenge with the public response to then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. Citing the work of Frazier and other prominent postwar social scientists, Moynihan attributed increasing rates of ADC use among African-Americans to the breakdown of black family life and a dysfunctional culture. According to Moynihan, low-income African-Americans were caught in a "tangle of pathology" characterized by delinquency, crime, and female-headed households. The report embodied many of postwar social work's fundamental assumptions about class and race, and cemented the association between the culture of poverty, welfare use, and the African-American community, which had always simmered below the surface in the postwar social work and social scientific discourse. Although a socioeconomic analysis accompanied his conclusions, Moynihan's pathologizing of black family life and culture invoked the wrath of a civil rights movement increasingly dedicated to black pride and power (O'Connor, 2001; Rainwater & Yancey, 1967). Amid the controversy surrounding the report and accusations of its racism, many social workers came to renounce and denounce pivotal aspects of their cultural thesis. Yet the debacle of the Moynihan report did not lay the culture of poverty thesis to rest. Instead, conservatives and other welfare opponents latched onto the theory, divorced it even more fully from a socio-structural analysis, and argued that

welfare created a culture of dependency (Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984). Ironically, a cultural narrative that initially emerged from an effort to combat racism became, in modified form, a staple of the neo-conservative movements of the latter twentieth century.

The postwar cultural discourse paradoxically anticipated another political and academic movement: multiculturalism. In contrast to the problematizing strain of social work's cultural discourse, the cultural relativism apparent in postwar social work thought—with its acceptance of cultural difference and reflection on cultural biases—deeply resembles contemporary multicultural perspectives in social work (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Ewalt, 1999; Lum, 1999). While contemporary commentators on multiculturalism often attribute its intellectual roots to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ewalt, 1999; Kivisto & Rundblad, 2000), this work shows that the early cold war period actually provided some of the groundwork for these developments.

Although social work's cultural relativism addressed diversity and at times even challenged racism and class prejudice on an individual level, it did not directly or consistently link its discussion of cultural bias to larger questions of socioeconomic power differentials, such as class stratification or institutionalized racism. In their positive attention to culture postwar social workers, however unknowingly, preached a cultural relativism relatively devoid of a larger socioeconomic analysis. Echoing these historical findings, present-day commentators describe how a multicultural discourse that primarily celebrates ethnic and racial diversity can inadvertently block questions of socioeconomic inequality and class-based stratification (Fraser, 1995). According to sociologist Michel Wieviorka (1998), certain categories of multiculturalism risk producing "a policy which is unsuited to the specifically economic and social difficulties of the groups for whom cultural recognition is not necessarily a priority, or in any event, the only priority " (p. 904–905). While by no means discrediting multiculturalism, these historical findings similarly expose possible constraints in its narrative.

Most significantly, by demonstrating that the early cold war social work literature on culture contributed to such politically divergent legacies, this study reveals how profoundly contested this discourse actually was. This history ultimately tells us that

there is nothing inherently progressive or conservative about the notion of culture. Cultural narratives can be used to advance multiple and contradictory political claims.

Note

1. An examination of the deeply gendered implications of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper. For a feminist response to the culture of poverty thesis see Ladner (1971) and Stack (1974).

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