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Poverty: The Problem of the Overview

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Abstract

Research on poverty is highly fragmented and technical, the work mostly of specialists who analyze data using statistical methods. However, policymakers and researchers also need to understand poverty in a broader, more integrated way. How does one construct such an overview? No definite methodology can be suggested, because the literature is not all commensurable or quantified, and even statistical research involves judgments. Interpreters, like policy analysts, should appeal to multiple and reliable sources, prefer impartial research, cite the full range of findings, consider program experience as well as academic studies, and take a position on the psychology of poverty.

Poverty: The Problem of the Overview

INTRODUCTION

Research on poverty is done by experts who generate findings, as in other academic specialties. But poverty is also a critical public issue about which people demand answers broader than research results. Those pressures are felt by researchers themselves, as well as by politicians and the public. So specialists are driven to reason more widely about the problems of poverty than can strictly be supported by a research methodology. They have to construct some overview that fits together what is known about the problem. How to do that well is a neglected problem in the field. In my judgment, poverty experts do not do enough such reasoning, and what they do often occurs unconsciously, without the sense of proper procedure that guides primary research.

Below, I describe the overview problem and how solutions to it might be approached. Research on poverty has become specialized and technical, a trend that makes drawing general conclusions about the subject difficult, yet the need for such reasoning is clear. The interpretative process cannot be as structured as primary research. The guidelines I suggest, instead, are much like those that guide policy analysis.

TECHNICAL RESEARCH

When poverty first became a national issue in the 1960s, forming views about it may have been easier than was true later, because the literature was small and largely nontechnical.[1] Early poverty authors such as Michael Harrington (1962), Edward Banfield (1970), or Piven and Cloward (1971) were as much writers as social scientists. Their treatments of poverty, though imprecise by later standards, described and explained the problem as a whole, and they were accessible to a broad

audience. Those virtues are still often found in accounts of the poverty problem by journalists (e.g., Auletta, 1982; Dash, 1989; Kotlowitz, 1991).

Since the 1960s, however, research on poverty has become highly specialized. Few experts today aspire to understand the problem as a whole. The inquiry has broken up into a number of subfields, each focused on a particular aspect of poverty or antipoverty policy. A far-from-complete list would include the demographics of the poverty or welfare population, the dynamics of the poverty or welfare population, the poor family and its problems, the employment problems of poor adults, inequality in the wage or income distributions, the role of race in poverty, employment policy, welfare policy, education policy, and so on. Researchers now specialize in each of these areas, and it is uncommon for any one person to be expert in more than one or two of them.

A second change is that research has become more technical. Expert writing about poverty is no longer discursive. Primary research on the subject today largely consists of statistical analyses of data bases, particularly the Current Population Survey (CPS), the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Researchers reason by building causal models out of the variables available in these data bases, then estimating and testing them using regression, logit, or some other multivariate procedure. Evaluations use various designs to separate the effect of a program on its clients from other influences.

Academic incentives strongly support these trends. Those who study poverty aspire to careers in the university or leading think tanks, and this drives them away from integrative approaches to their subject. It is only by specializing in a subfield and training in quantitative methods that one can usually get through graduate school, get appointed to a research position, and generate the publications needed to achieve tenure or make a name for oneself. In the academic world, the priority is to use procedures that can be described, justified, and replicated exactly, limiting the role of the researcher's judgments.

This precision is what specialized and statistical research permits. The role of judgment is not absent, as I note below, but its role is much more limited and defined than in qualitative writing about poverty.

Due to technical research, we understand the demographics and correlates of poverty much better today than was true thirty years ago. Certain major analytical problems have been solved, such as the separation of the short-term from the long-term poor or welfare dependent (Bane and Ellwood, 1983, 1986) and the description of the demographic flows that lie behind the growth of heavily poor areas (Jargowsky and Bane, 1990). It is clear that most sustained poverty is due in the first instance to nonemployment and marital breakup among the parents of poor families. It is less clear what background forces produce nonwork and breakup (Sawhill, 1988, pp. 1086–1088, 1112–1113; Mead, 1994).

INTERPRETATION

To draw conclusions about poverty, however, one must also interpret or integrate the literature. By "interpret" I mean to reason about the problem and its solution in ways that go beyond the findings of conventional methodology. To interpret is to make statements about the subject that are not the outcome of an identifiable research procedure. That means especially:

1. To assess the importance of a particular finding alongside that of other studies in the same subfield.
2. To construct an overall understanding of the causes of poverty, drawing on findings across several subfields.
3. To appraise the significance of findings in political or policy terms, that is, as a basis for overcoming poverty.

The second interpretative task is probably the most crucial, as policy recommendations usually rest on some overall view of the poverty problem.

For example, suppose a study finds that single mothers who go on welfare as teenagers or as high school dropouts are more likely to stay there long-term than those who go on when older or as high school graduates. The research design identifies these factors as statistically significant causes of long-term welfare participation. The interpretative questions are: How do the findings compare to those of earlier research on the demographics of welfare? How do they affect our overall understanding of dependency? That is, how do these determinants compare in importance to others often blamed for welfare, such as disincentives against work and marriage generated by welfare or the limited employment prospects available to welfare mothers? What, in light of these findings, should social policy do to minimize dependency? Is there a case for new initiatives to forestall early pregnancy and improve high school graduation rates?

Interpretation is secondary to basic research but important for elucidating its full meaning. Research procedures tell us only what is factually the case. An overview places results in context. It shifts to a more judgmental idea of reality. In interpretation, there is no definite truth or falsehood, only readings of evidence that are more or less reasonable. To construct an overview is to enter into a dialogue with other interpreters. From that discussion will flow, perhaps not agreement, but a wisdom about what the "facts" imply. It is this dimension of inquiry that today's researchers often ignore or perform unconsciously, at least in print. Interpretation occurs with very little of the sense of method that guides primary investigations.

At present, the first interpretative task is the only one performed often or deliberately. Reports of new findings often include reviews of the literature in the same specialty. Overviews in the other two senses are remarkably uncommon. Most books about poverty by experts are edited volumes in which several researchers discuss different facets of poverty or antipoverty policy (Cottingham and Ellwood, 1989; Lynn and McGeary, 1990; Jencks and Peterson, 1991). Probably the most widely cited collections have contained papers written for conferences staged by the Institute for Research on

Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, a longtime center of antipoverty research (Haveman, 1977; Danziger and Weinberg, 1986; Danziger, Sandefur, and Weinberg, 1994). The individual chapters in such works may sum up the research in particular subfields, but they usually do not speak to the research as a whole, assess the relative importance of causes, or argue from an overview toward conclusions for politics or policy. At best, the editors of the volumes may do these things partially in their introductory chapters.

To interpret the literature in the above sense is not the same thing as to make use of it. Some experts write broad treatments of poverty, in the course of which they cite widely from research, but their purpose is to support a line of argument derived chiefly from their own inquiries. Examples can be found among scholars who say that poverty is due mainly to low wages (Ellwood, 1988), economic restructuring (Wilson, 1987), welfare disincentives (Murray, 1984), or a lack of work requirements in programs (Mead, 1986). One could call these authors protagonists in the poverty debate. Interpreters, on the other hand, are those who try to say what the literature as a whole, or a major part of it, suggests about poverty, awarding no specialty priority to their own work. Remarkably few experts interest themselves in writing work of this kind (e.g., Sawhill, 1988; Jencks, 1992, 1994; Mead, 1992 [chaps. 3–7], 1994).

One reason interpretation is neglected is that few specialists have the proclivity for it. Typically, experts are better at generating a new finding about poverty than at saying what it means. Increased training in technical research methods has come at some cost to the skills needed to set results in context and make policy arguments—writing ability, background in social and political theory, and broad knowledge of social policy, politics, and government. The earlier, more literary poverty writers were stronger in these dimensions than today's technicians. It is uncommon today for experts to rely heavily on both qualitative and quantitative arguments, and those that do often have unusual backgrounds.[2] It is these scholars who tend to take on interpretative tasks.

Some experts are unworried about this state of affairs. They say that it is impossible, even dangerous, to give a meaning to the poverty problem as a whole. The poor are various, as are the things that may be said about them. The causes of poverty will appear very different if we refer to the poor of Harlem, rural Mississippi, or Appalachia. There is little point in an interpretive discourse about poverty if we do not agree on the problem. The realization that we have not one poverty problem but many is one of the contributions of the new, more technical style of research. To impose a single interpretation on the problem, in this view, would be to roll back the clock.[3]

THE NEED FOR INTERPRETATION

Nevertheless, more interpretation is needed. For one thing, it would improve the academic product. Interpretative debate is a useful way to communicate the most important findings from each subfield to others. Experts in one area can get ideas from other specialties that they can use to improve their models. Labor economists, for example, can use constructs from social psychology to strengthen models that explain why black youth work less consistently than whites.[4]

The process also chastens the misconceptions that experts in one area have about others. The effect of social research is generally to break down certainties. As a problem becomes better understood, simple or ultimate causes usually prove elusive (Aaron, 1978). Specialists in any one subfield, however, may believe there are certainties elsewhere. They will sometimes repeat the conventional wisdom about these areas without realizing that findings and experience have undercut certainties there as well. One often reads, for example, that many poor single mothers do not leave welfare for employment because they fear to lose Medicaid coverage, have preschool children, or live in the inner city where jobs are less available than in the suburbs. In fact, the role of all these factors appears to be minor or unclear (Blank, 1989; Bane and Ellwood, 1983, pp. 34, 44–45, 65; O'Neill et al., 1984, pp. 11–12, 33–35, 51; Jencks and Mayer, 1990).[5]

Interpretation is even more necessary for policy purposes. The poverty problem is so important that it demands answers, and even specialists feel driven to provide them. At conferences, experts talk more interpretatively than they usually write. Roundtables are held on poverty or welfare reform where the discourse ranges more widely than it usually does in published research. In government, policymakers seek guidance from experts about how to reform welfare or other social programs. Federal policymaking is strongly influenced by expert understandings, and nowhere is that more true than in antipoverty policy (Heclo, 1978; Moynihan, 1965). Congressional hearings on poverty can be almost as academic as the panels held at conferences (see, e.g., U.S. Congress, 1991). A major reason the Family Support Act of 1988, the most recent welfare reform legislation, is devoted chiefly to strengthening child support and employment programs in welfare is that experts testified that these were the best ways to reduce dependency (Baum, 1991; Haskins, 1991).

Interpretation is also more possible than purists suggest. While the poor are indeed various, the major dispute is about the long-term poor and dependent of the inner city, especially the working-aged and their children. These may be only a minority of all poor as the government defines them, but they are the needy that most concern the public. Accordingly, they get the lion's share of attention in Washington and state capitals and, partly as a result, the greatest attention from researchers. The long-term, working-aged, urban poor are a group that is defined enough so that one can have a dialogue about them focused on causes rather than on the nature of the problem.

And while the questions one might ask about poverty are also various, the majority of research attention has been focused on whether "barriers" of several kinds explain long-term poverty. Since most poverty among the working-aged arises in the first instance from nonemployment or family breakup, the chief question has been whether these patterns derive from a lack of opportunity in the society or from welfare itself. Do poor adults often fail to work or marry because of low wages, a lack

of jobs, racial bias, the disincentives generated by welfare, and other factors? These questions, too, are focused enough to permit a meaningful dialogue.

To join such debates, as either interpreters or protagonists, experts must step beyond the technical discourse in which they are usually immersed. They must be willing and able to draw conclusions from their own and other research that are meaningful to the political process. Who does this best affects the balance of opinion about policy. In the 1980s, the trend in social policy was to cut welfare benefits and toughen work requirements. That was due to the Reagan administration but also to the fact that several conservative analysts made compelling arguments for these policies (Gilder, 1981; Murray, 1984; Mead, 1986). In the 1990s, government has also moved to improve skills and wages for the low-skilled, due to the Clinton administration but also because of liberal arguments about a need to improve education and "make work pay" (Ellwood, 1988; Reich, 1991). Both positions have drawn criticism from other experts,[6] yet have still shaped the larger policymaking debate.

NO RIGOROUS SOLUTION

If interpretation is needed, however, there is no rigorous approach for carrying it out. "Rigorous" here means that a procedure limits and defines the role of personal judgment in the same way that statistical procedures do in primary research. The first interpretative task—literature review in a subfield—is the only one where methods have developed that build and test models in a statistical manner. "Meta-analysis" permits aggregating technical studies of the same causal relationship so as to permit an overall judgment of its importance. The merger increases the number of observations for statistical tests, sometimes allowing a variable to reach significance in the meta-analysis that failed to do so in the individual trials. However, meta-analysis requires that dependent and independent terms be defined in closely similar ways in all the studies (Cooper, 1989, chap. 5). The method has been used

mostly in educational research, for example the evaluation of compensatory education programs such as Head Start (e.g., McKey et al., 1985).

Generally, the poverty literature is too diverse to be aggregated in this way even within a subfield, let alone across several. The canons of methodology say remarkably little about how to integrate research in a more judgmental way. We have a better idea about how to appraise the quality of individual studies than how to summarize what they say. The methodology for literature review, to the extent one exists, is mostly about how to define and collect research in a subfield, not how to state its content (Cooper, 1989, chaps. 1–4). One might think, if one reasoned by analogy to primary research, that interpretation was a form of multivariate analysis writ large. The ideal would be to embody every hypothesis about poverty in an explanatory variable. Most working-aged poverty is due in the first instance to lack of earnings. The latter, in turn, is modelled as due to some combination of welfare disincentives, lack of jobs, low wages, racial bias, and so on. Measure each determinant and then test which are really significant.

Unfortunately, despite its often-rarified nature, the literature on poverty is far from permitting such a test. One reason is that even primary research involves more judgment than researchers sometimes admit. While the results of statistical studies look formidably precise, they are entirely dependent on the decisions made about which variables to include in a model, and in what causal order. These judgments rest on theoretical views, which may differ, about the structure of forces behind poverty. For example, race is a robust explainer of many social problems. Blacks are more likely than whites to be poor, dependent on welfare, involved in crime, and so on, even in models that include many other terms. Some would say that the race effect is real, others that it is due to other social forces, sometimes reaching to the distant past, such as the less advantaged education and family background of blacks compared to whites.

There is doubt not only about what causes poverty but, in many instances, even about the direction of causal influence, what statisticians call an identification problem. For example, people go on welfare because they lack income, but dependency in turn can be viewed as a cause of poverty. Some experts blame urban poverty on a loss of jobs from the inner city, particularly in manufacturing, but perhaps worsening urban social problems have driven employers away rather than the other way around.[7] The fact that blacks living in the suburbs earn more than those living in the inner city may suggest that blacks could find work more easily if the ghettos were dispersed. But perhaps the suburban blacks found jobs outside the cities and then moved there rather than the other way around (Jencks and Mayer, 1990, pp. 202–216). These problems can be intractable in cross-sectional analyses. In theory, longitudinal data bases such as PSID should resolve them by making clear which variable came before the other in time. But such data bases provide few contextual variables (see below), and none extends long enough in time to resolve the issues.

Quantified research also generates less certainty about the relative importance of explainers than many people suppose. The assumption of multivariate models of poverty or dependency is that such determinants as age, race, gender, education, etc., can be separately estimated. In fact, the terms may be highly intercorrelated. That is, they may vary together to such an extent that to test their importance separately may not be meaningful. For example, prolonged dependency tends to involve welfare mothers who are simultaneously unmarried, black, high school dropouts, and residents of the inner city, and who were teenagers when they first went on welfare. The variables are really different labels for the urban complex. We will undervalue the ability of any one of them to predict long-term welfare if we try to estimate them separately (Ellwood, 1986b, chap. 4).

Even in the case where explainers are more independent, the coefficients produced by a multivariate estimation do not actually tell us which explainer is the "most" important. This is true even of regression estimates, in which the coefficients appear to permit a comparison. Each tells how

many units change in the dependent term will result from a one-unit change in the independent term. The trouble is that the units used to express the independent terms are usually different. To say that one term is "more" important than another is, strictly speaking, to compare apples and oranges. Nor is the problem solved by standardizing the coefficients, because standardization uses a unit (the standard deviation of the explainer) that also differs across terms (King, 1986, pp. 669–674). Only if the variable of interest is the only one to reach significance, or if its coefficient is very much larger than the others, is it reasonable to say that it "dominates" a model.

Constructing an overview of poverty also involves judgments going beyond those normally involved in quantitative research. One task is to integrate findings where the units of analysis differ, so that results are not strictly comparable. The orthodoxy is that to apply findings based on aggregates to the explanation of outcomes at the individual level commits the ecological fallacy, but data limitations sometimes force poverty researchers to do this. For example, the population of older cities is becoming more nonwhite and less educated while the people employed in these cities show rising levels of education (Kasarda, 1986). Do these trends mean that inner-city adults have become less employable than formerly, and does this explain in turn the welfarism and other problems of the inner city? Those who see a "mismatch" between jobless poor and opportunity in the cities have to make these inferences (Wilson, 1987), while opponents doubt them (Harrison, 1974, pp. 42–51; Mead, 1992, pp. 100–101).[8] Neither side can strictly prove its case.

Further, an interpreter must compare determinants of poverty that are quantified with those that are not. The data bases that researchers most often analyze contain information on the respondents such as personal demographics, family structure, sources of income, employment history, government benefits received, and in some cases measures of attitudes and mental functioning. But many environmental forces that act on individuals or families are omitted. The CPS asks individuals who are not working to give reasons, but it provides little basis for the researcher to assess how difficult it was

for people to work. The NLSY and PSID say little about economic conditions other than the unemployment rate in the areas where respondents live.[9]

Some scholars believe that an adverse economic and social environment in the inner city adds pressures toward dysfunction beyond those stemming from the personal features or background of individuals (Wilson, 1987, pp. 46–62; Anderson, 1990). The lack of contextual information in surveys makes it difficult to test these theories. Some research on the underclass has used Census data to approximate neighborhood conditions such as the incidence of school dropouts or welfare dependency (Jargowsky and Bane, 1990; Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988). But this approach permits analysis only in terms of aggregates; contextual markers are not yet included in individual-level data bases.[10] Even if they were, socioeconomic indicators would not capture important intangibles such as the ethos of an ethnic group or area (once called the "culture of poverty") and the stringency of public authority in enforcing values such as the work ethic or law-abidingness. How to integrate these forces with the measurable determinants is a crucial task of interpretation.

Another dilemma is what might be called the additivity problem. One purpose of interpretation is to assess how fully we understand poverty. Individually, no one impediment, such as welfare disincentives, low wages, racial bias, or the availability of jobs, has shown much tie to whether people are poor or dependent. But an overall judgment depends critically on how distinct one believes the various barriers are. Some would say that the forces add up to produce prohibitive disadvantages for the poor of the inner city (Wilson, 1987). The other view is that female-headedness, employment problems, race, crime, and so on are really different facets of the same inner-city milieu. If so, then the barriers are more competitive than complementary. To add them up, even judgmentally, is to exaggerate how much we know; and poverty remains substantially a mystery (Mead, 1994).[11]

Trends in methodology have made it no easier to answer these questions. Although explainers cannot strictly be compared, statistical models probably give the broadest sense of the forces that

produce a social problem such as poverty or dependency. But such models are in disrepute because of selection problems. Just because hard-and-fast barriers cannot account for long-term poverty well, it is reasonable to think that much of the cause must lie in the psychology of the seriously poor. But this is a "soft" dimension that is notoriously hard to quantify. This makes it doubtful that statistical models can ever explain poverty or assess programs accurately. Program evaluations are supposed to compare outcomes for clients who receive a new treatment to those for comparable people outside the program. If a program appears, say, to improve the earnings or employment of its clients relative to the comparison group, that may really be due to other differences between the two groups. In theory, control variables could capture these effects, but not if the differences are in intangibles such as motivation.

The only way to eliminate doubt is through an experimental evaluation design where subjects are randomly assigned to the program and to a control group. Only then do unmeasured differences between the two groups become implausible, so that differences in outcome may safely be attributed to the program alone (Burtless and Orr, 1986). It is now official federal policy to fund only evaluations of this type, and an experimental design is used exclusively in the evaluations of welfare employment programs done since the 1980s by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), probably the most influential recent evaluations in the antipoverty field.

The effect, however, is to concentrate attention on the program effect. The debate about the causes of poverty is centered mostly on background economic and social conditions, yet they are controlled out of the picture by the experimental design. In practice, MDRC measures impacts using multiple regression models that use demographic explainers as well as whether a client was in the experimental group to predict individuals' employment or other outcomes. One statistical rationale is to adjust the estimate of the program effect for any small differences between the experimental and

control groups, another to reduce the standard error of the estimated program effect, thus increasing the chance that it will be significant.[12] But little is said about these multivariate results in the write-ups.

Evaluations, like much other poverty research, typically do not assess the contextual variables that probably influence who remains poor or dependent long-term. The effect of economic conditions is typically ignored, on the argument that programs are local and the labor market is the same for both experimental and control subjects. Yet much of the debate about the causes of poverty revolves precisely around whether jobs exist at sufficient wages to allow the poor to escape poverty. The influence of practices within the program is also usually ignored, for to assess the effect of the specific assignments given to individual clients would require having separate experimental groups for each subgroup, which is impracticably complex.[13] The difficulty of studying administration in rigorously quantitative ways is one reason why program evaluations usually give too little attention to implementation (Nathan, 1988). For these reasons, experimental evaluations will probably continue to contribute little to overviews of poverty, even as they help develop better antipoverty programs.[14]

RULES FOR INTERPRETATION

The convention is that the academic world is interested in theory, the policy world in practice. Academics want accurate estimates of the causes of poverty, while policy analysts seek to minimize uncertainty about the effects of policy (Coleman, 1972; Moore, 1983). The interpretation of poverty is a hybrid task with both academic and policy aspects, but performing it requires approaches akin to policy analysis. We cannot construct a master model of poverty, but we can assemble information from many sources to circumscribe what we do not know. In that spirit, I suggest the following guidelines to guide the interpretive process. Their tendency is to favor cautious and multivariate interpretations of the poverty problem.

Get the Facts Right

When experts reason about poverty outside their specialties, it is easy to misstate elemental realities. One sometimes reads, for example, that welfare mothers cannot go to work because they have large families, or that if they work it will be at the minimum wage. These statements are simply false. Most welfare families have only one or two children, and when welfare mothers go to work their median wage is around a dollar above the minimum (U.S. Congress, 1993, p. 696; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1987, p. 104).

Christopher Jencks's initial interest in studying poverty and inequality was in "getting the facts more or less right," and this has been one of his main contributions to the poverty debate. Largely, what Jencks does is read other people's interpretations of poverty and match them against the hard evidence, most of it simple survey data. His conclusions tend to discomfit both right and left. The data on black earnings and employment, for example, suggest to him that government equal opportunity policies have been vital to black advancement, but also that disadvantaged blacks show deficiencies in work discipline that cannot be blamed on racial bias (Jencks, 1992, pp. 6–7, 24–69). An accurate reading of the raw data is where any overview of poverty must begin.

Use Impartial Research

An overview must make heavy use of surveys and also secondary research, which uses primary data to infer the causes of social problems. There is no lack of such material. The poverty field is awash in "studies" of every imaginable provenance. Groups with an agenda often sponsor their own research to support their views of antipoverty policy. A responsible interpreter must judge which research one can trust to give a fair view of the causes of poverty. When assessing material outside one's own subfield, one must take cues in part from who did a study and who published it. My rule is to prefer surveys and studies done by the government or by impartial organizations and published in refereed outlets.

Surveys that ask poor people to explain their situation can make social barriers look large or small depending on how questions are worded. For example, does a lack of reliable and affordable child care explain why few poor mothers work regularly? A survey by the Census makes child care look surprisingly available and affordable, while another survey partly funded by an advocacy group raises more doubts. In the Census findings, only 4 percent of working mothers lost time from work in a given month due to the breakdown of child care arrangements. Only 38 percent of working mothers made monetary payments for their child care, and those that did paid an average of only $53 a week; the equivalent figures specifically for poor mothers were 30 percent and $42 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992, pp. 14, 29). The other survey found that 15 percent of mothers lost time, mainly because it defined time lost more expansively. Its cost findings, while not inconsistent with the Census survey, were presented so as to highlight the expenses of mothers, such as those with preschool children, who pay the most for care (Hofferth et al., 1991, pp. 119–200, 346–348).[15] In judging the role of child care in poverty, I would find the Census study more impartial.

Secondary research appearing in refereed journals or from independent think tanks is likely to present a more balanced view of the difficulties facing poor people than studies with a more political background. For example, the idea that rising inequality is destroying opportunity for ordinary people in America was given currency in 1987 by a study done by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison for the Joint Economic Committee. It found that a majority of the new jobs created in the economy during 1979–1984 were "low-wage" (Bluestone and Harrison, 1987). The calculation depended on assumptions about the definition of "low-wage," the time interval, the adjustment for inflation, and other technical details that favored liberal conclusions. With more conservative assumptions, it is unclear whether inequality is rising much at all (Kosters and Ross, 1988). A Brookings volume on the question took a middle position: wage inequality is rising, but mainly for men, and for unclear reasons

(Burtless, 1990). I would favor this final view because it is the most moderate, and also because the inquiry behind it seems the most disinterested.

Cite a Range of Research

Honest overviews should give a representative picture of the research underlying generalizations, including studies that do and do not support one's interpretation. For example, does lack of access to jobs in the suburbs explain why many adults in the inner cities do not work regularly, as asserted by the mismatch theory? Some publications find that whether disadvantaged people work is related to their proximity to jobs (e.g., Ihlanfeldt and Sjoquist, 1990), others that it is not (e.g., Ellwood, 1986a). A fair overview of the mismatch debate must wrestle with both findings. Thorough literature reviews tend to conclude that employment may be related to job proximity, but the effect is not strong, and which way the causation runs is unclear (Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Holzer, 1991). Interpreters who lack the time to penetrate a literature thoroughly should rely on such reviews.

The same holds for program evaluations. People who favor a particular policy toward poverty are tempted to cite only studies that support their position. They may feel that the successful programs show the potential of the approach in question and are thus more significant than the less successful. Policymakers, however, must judge programs on the basis of what they typically achieve. Some demonstrations that show encouraging results enjoy better organization or more expert or motivated staff than the program would if it were generalized to the nation. For example, the Perry Preschool project in Ypsilanti, Michigan, has demonstrated favorable effects on several aspects of youth development, even years after clients left the program. Many advance those findings as evidence that Head Start should be expanded. They should discuss as well other demonstrations and Head Start evaluations that show weaker results (Haskins, 1989). Equally, those who think enforcing employment is a good approach to welfare reform must discuss not only the most successful welfare-work initiatives

(Hamilton and Friedlander, 1989; Friedlander et al., 1993) but the weaker results shown by the bulk of programs (Gueron and Pauly, 1991).

Discuss Substantive as Well as Statistical Significance

If a variable in a study shows any effect on poverty or dependency that is in the expected direction and too large to be due to chance, the tendency is to call it important. But it is less reasonable today than it once was to use statistical significance to indicate significance in other senses. Contemporary samples are often large enough that, with sensitive analytic methods, a great many influences on a social outcome will be discernible. Yet not all of the effects are large enough to matter, either to an understanding of the poverty problem or to policy. Interpreters, therefore, need to discuss the size as well as the significance of coefficients. To do this they require some sense independent of statistics of what constitutes a "large" effect (Cooper, 1989, pp. 99–100). As the third interpretive task mentioned above suggests, that criterion might well be policy relevance: a finding is significant if it suggests some way government could get leverage over the poverty problem.

Cite Policy Experience as Well as Academic Research

Much of the debate about poverty is about whether various social barriers to opportunity can explain the problem. But in seeking evidence about barriers, experts tend to look mostly to multivariate academic studies. They tend to ignore the record of social programs aimed at eliminating the barriers. That experience offers a practical test of how important the impediments are. Evaluations of programs may not themselves offer much of an overview of the forces surrounding the poor, but they do suggest whether lack of the benefit provided by the program is important. Overviews should assess program experience alongside more academic findings.

For example, do many people stay on welfare long-term because of welfare's disincentives to employment? The federal government's experiments in income maintenance, run between 1968 and

1982, found these effects to be weaker than anticipated; especially, work levels among recipients did not vary much with variations in the rate at which benefits were reduced in case of earnings (Burtless, n.d.). But equally persuasive is the fact that the work incentives tried out in AFDC between 1967 and 1981 had almost no effect on work levels among welfare recipients (Moffitt, 1986). That record was the main reason the incentives were largely eliminated in 1981.

Much debate about poverty centers on whether poor adults are jobless due to lack of available jobs or, in the case of single mothers, the child care necessary to take jobs. Some experts believe that work levels could not rise among the poor unless government-provided child care were vastly expanded. Job or child care availability is difficult to study in statistical ways because these are among the contextual variables usually not included in quantified data sets. Welfare employment programs, however, offer a practical test of how constraining the labor and child care markets are. MDRC's evaluations suggest that lack of jobs has constrained programs in rural states, but not in the urban areas where the bulk of the welfare caseload lives. Lack of child care was seldom a serious problem, at least for the programs of the 1980s, which served mainly women with school-aged children (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1987, pp. 86–87; Gueron and Pauly, 1991, pp. 232–233).

Address the Qualitative Variables

The tendency in overviews of poverty is to concentrate on the results of quantitative research. This is understandable, as these findings are the most definite and the most separable from the researchers' judgments. But interpreters who do only this will be guilty of what Laurence Tribe calls "dwarfing the soft variables" (Tribe, 1972, p. 97). They should also weigh the influence of forces that are tougher to quantify, such as economic conditions, the neighborhood environment, ethnic differences, and the strength of public authority, including the implementation of programs.

Especially, interpreters should take positions on the psychology of poverty. Since structural determinants are usually insufficient to explain sustained poverty, much of the cause must lie in the

beliefs or attitudes of the poor. Thus, some position on the "culture" or mentality of the poor must be combined with the influence of social or economic variables to produce a comprehensive account of poverty. Even assessments of the structural factors hinge on assumptions about who the poor are as people. Scholars who impute to them a more threatened, vulnerable personality are more likely to blame poverty on external barriers than those who take them to be more masterful. Those who doubt that poor adults could cope with life on their own are the readiest to recommend new benefits for them, while those who attribute more competence are willing to be tougher, either cutting back support or conditioning it on employment (Mead, 1992).

The question of psychology is so crucial for how one interprets poverty that several experts have recently written overviews on this point. These statements review the literature bearing on the attitudes of the poor in order to argue for a particular reading of poverty psychology. One viewpoint is that welfare mothers optimize within constraints much as the nonpoor would do; they want to do work but usually do not because employment pays them little relative to what they can get on welfare (Ellwood, 1989). Another position is that poor adults want to work but often do not even when working would be in their interest, because of discouragement stemming from impoverished surroundings (Wilson, 1988). Still another is that the poor are impaired in their attachment to conventional values as well as their ability to attain them, due chiefly to flawed upbringings in weak families (Hopkins et al., 1987).

There is value simply in making these presumptions clear. Many researchers hold the view that the poor are optimizers, but they do so unconsciously. They take this position because they are economists, or because it is natural to assume that the poor share the same getting-ahead mentality as the better-off. But the view that the poor economize should be argued, not assumed. To take a position on psychology is also crucial for policy. Often, recommendations will hinge as much or more on the assumptions made about mentality as on views of the practical constraints facing the poor. Of the three

positions above, the first looks toward measures to "make work pay" so that it will be in the interests of more poor adults to work, the second toward restoring opportunity in the cities in ways radical enough to restore hope to the defeated, the third toward custodial policies that manage the seriously poor without much hope of changing them.

Engage Opponents

Interpreters of poverty should mention and debate contrary readings of the literature. It can be awkward for making one's case to admit that opposing positions exist. But failure to do this weakens the communication of results and viewpoints within the antipoverty community.

William Julius Wilson has developed several important approaches to explaining poverty, but he has made an equal contribution by his willingness to engage his critics. Rather than just make his own argument that a lack of jobs explains inner-city joblessness, he openly debates conservatives who say jobs are available (e.g., Mead and Wilson, 1987). Rather than ignore the uneasiness among liberals about talk of an "underclass," Wilson discusses the subject sensitively, admitting that a "social milieu" alien to regular employment is one cause of poverty (Wilson, 1991).

A weakness in the literature about welfare employment has traditionally been that the studies were disaggregated. Each evaluation was discrete, the write-ups seldom canvassing other research in the subfield. One of the explanations is that program evaluations tend to be produced by think tanks that are primarily concerned to communicate their results to their clients, not to carry on an academic debate. MDRC's reports and overview publications typically discuss only the organization's own research.[16]

Admit Ignorance

If an overview is at all comprehensive, it will emphasize how little we actually understand about poverty. We are better at describing the poor and the immediate correlates of poverty than at

explaining why a portion of the poor stays needy for years, even in an affluent society. While an overview summarizes what is known, it should also describe the mysteries. Most of the interpreters mentioned above suggest that the frontier in poverty studies lies in specifying the contextual forces—job availability, public authority, culture—that generally escape the reach of today's quantified research. The challenge is to bring assessments of these forces, which we now discuss judgmentally, within the reach of the technical methods used in the rest of the literature. We can characterize the poor, but we have still to understand the life of poverty as it is lived, often by people very different from ourselves.

Notes

[1]An interesting question is whether the advance of knowledge about a subject makes forming an overview more or less difficult. On the one hand, research drives out speculation with hard evidence about causes. On the other hand, it usually makes the causes of a problem seem more complex, so that judgments about their relative importance become more difficult.

[2]Christopher Jencks was a journalist and social activist before he went into sociology. Lawrence Mead studied comparative politics and political theory in graduate school before going into public policy research. The same was true of Charles Murray, although he is more a protagonist than an interpreter in my terms.

[3]Christopher Jencks takes this view about the underclass (1989) and the homeless (1994) even though, in these works and in Rethinking Social Policy, he is also a highly effective interpreter of poverty.

[4]I am indebted for this example to Ronald Ferguson, whose work lies in this area.

[5]As the cited references explain, the doubt about preschool children springs from a conflict among data bases. PSID suggests that preschool children do not deter a mother working off of welfare, while NLSY suggests they do.

[6]See the rebuttals to Murray by Ellwood and Summers (1986) and Jencks (1992, chap. 2), to Ellwood and Reich by Mead (1992, chap. 4), Heckman (1994), and Schiller (1994).

[7]A neglected question in "mismatch" research is why the employers moved. Was it due to impersonal economic changes that made location outside of cities more profitable, or was it because crime or a less reliable labor force made location inside of cities untenable?

[8]One purpose of William J. Wilson's massive Urban Poverty and Family Structure Project in Chicago was precisely to obtain individual-level data on the employment problems of the inner-city poor.

[9]NLSY's environmental variables are limited in most years to gross features of a respondent's residence (region, urban/rural, SMSA) and the unemployment rate in the locality. In PSID, only the local unemployment rate was provided in all years of the survey, 1968–1989. PSID once included several other measures of the labor market for the low-skilled, but most of these variables were dropped by the late 1980s. According to documentation for 1989, all of the contextual terms, including unemployment, were to be dropped in 1990 (Survey Research Center, 1992, p. 80).

[10]The Committee on the Underclass of the Social Science Research Council recently commissioned five data sets that will attach location codes to individual cases so that contextual or neighborhood effects on poverty can be more precisely estimated.

[11]This problem is analogous to the problem of estimating closely related explainers mentioned above.

[12]The experimental design does not mean that outcomes for an individual are uninfluenced by the controls, only that estimates of these effects, like the program effect, are unbiased by determinants that remain unmeasured, such as the motivation of the clients.

[13]However, the MDRC studies of welfare employment programs in San Diego and Chicago did evaluate two separate treatments.

[14]It is possible to imagine a "Cadillac" evaluation design that would combine experimental assessment of local sites with an estimation of forces varying across sites, such as economic conditions and implementation strategies (Greenberg et al., 1993). But the number of sites needed to discriminate all the variables would be large, and the management problems would probably be insurmountable.

[15]This study was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and also by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, an organization of "early childhood professionals" whose goals are "to improve professional practice in early childhood care and education and to build public understanding and support for high quality early childhood programs" (Hofferth et al., 1991, p. vii).

[16]A recent MDRC overview volume (Gueron and Pauly, 1991), however, is more comprehensive.

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