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Op-Ed Contributor

A Poverty of the Mind

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SEVERAL recent studies have garnered wide attention for reconfirming the tragic disconnection of millions of black youths from the American mainstream. But they also highlighted another crisis: the failure of social scientists to adequately explain the problem, and their inability to come up with any effective strategy to deal with it.

The main cause for this shortcoming is a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960's: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group's cultural attributes — its distinctive attitudes, values and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members — and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing.

Harry Holzer, an economist at Georgetown University and a co-author of one of the recent studies, typifies this attitude. Joblessness, he feels, is due to largely weak schooling, a lack of reading and math skills at a time when such skills are increasingly required even for blue-collar jobs, and the poverty of black neighborhoods. Unable to find jobs, he claims, black males turn to illegal activities, especially the drug trade and chronic drug use, and often end up in prison. He also criticizes the practice of withholding child-support payments from the wages of absentee fathers who do find jobs, telling *The Times* that to these men, such levies "amount to a tax on earnings."

His conclusions are shared by scholars like Ronald B. Mincy of Columbia, the author of a study called "Black Males Left Behind," and Gary Orfield of Harvard, who asserts that America is "pumping out boys with no honest alternative."

This is all standard explanatory fare. And, as usual, it fails to answer the important questions. Why are young black men doing so poorly in school that they lack basic literacy and math skills? These scholars must know that countless studies by educational experts, going all the way back to the landmark report by James Coleman of Johns Hopkins University in 1966, have found that poor schools, per se, do not explain why after 10 years of education a young man remains illiterate.

Nor have studies explained why, if someone cannot get a job, he turns to crime and drug abuse. One does not imply the other. Joblessness is rampant in Latin America and India, but the mass of the populations does not turn to crime.

And why do so many young unemployed black men have children — several of them — which they have no resources or intention to support? And why, finally, do they murder each other at nine times the rate of white youths?

What's most interesting about the recent spate of studies is that analysts seem at last to be recognizing what has long been obvious to anyone who takes culture seriously: socioeconomic factors are of limited explanatory power. Thus it's doubly depressing that the conclusions they draw and the prescriptions they recommend remain mired in traditional socioeconomic thinking.

What has happened, I think, is that the economic boom years of the 90's and one of the most successful policy initiatives in memory — welfare reform — have made it impossible to ignore the effects of culture. The Clinton administration achieved exactly what policy analysts had long said would pull black men out of their torpor: the economy grew at a rapid pace, providing millions of new jobs at all levels. Yet the jobless black youths simply did not turn up to take them. Instead, the opportunity was seized in large part by immigrants — including many blacks — mainly from Latin America and the Caribbean.

One oft-repeated excuse for the failure of black Americans to take these jobs — that they did not offer a living wage — turned out to be irrelevant. The sociologist Roger Waldinger of the University of California at Los Angeles, for example, has shown that in New York such jobs offered an opportunity to the chronically unemployed to join the market and to acquire basic work skills that they later transferred to better jobs, but that the takers were predominantly immigrants.

Why have academics been so allergic to cultural explanations? Until the recent rise of behavioral economics, most economists have simply not taken non-market forces seriously. But what about the sociologists and other social scientists who ought to have known better? Three gross misconceptions about culture explain the neglect.

First is the pervasive idea that cultural explanations inherently blame the victim; that they focus on internal behavioral factors and, as such, hold people responsible for their poverty, rather than putting the onus on their deprived environment. (It hasn't helped that many conservatives do actually put forth this view.)

But this argument is utterly bogus. To hold someone responsible for his behavior is not to exclude any recognition of the environmental factors that may have induced the problematic behavior in the first place. Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways; to point out the link between their behavior and the destructive acts is in no way to deny the causal role of their earlier victimization and the need to address it.

Likewise, a cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness addresses not simply the immediate connection between their attitudes and behavior and the undesired outcomes, but explores the origins and changing nature of these attitudes, perhaps over generations, in their brutalized past. It is impossible to understand the predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering behavior of young black men without going back deep into their collective past.

Second, it is often assumed that cultural explanations are wholly deterministic, leaving no room for human agency. This, too, is nonsense. Modern students of culture have long shown that while it partly determines behavior, it also enables people to change behavior. People use their culture as a frame for understanding their world, and as a resource to do much of what they want. The same cultural patterns can frame different kinds of behavior, and by failing to explore culture at any depth, analysts miss a great opportunity to re-frame attitudes in a way that encourages desirable behavior and outcomes.

Third, it is often assumed that cultural patterns cannot change — the old "cake of custom" saw. This too is nonsense. Indeed, cultural patterns are often easier to change than the economic factors favored by policy analysts, and American history offers numerous examples.

My favorite is Jim Crow, that deeply entrenched set of cultural and institutional practices built up over four centuries of racist domination and exclusion of blacks by whites in the South. Nothing could have been more cultural than that. And yet America was able to dismantle the entire system within a single generation, so much so that today blacks are now making a historic migratory shift back to the South, which they find more congenial than the North. (At the same time, economic inequality, which the policy analysts love to discuss, has hardened in the South, like the rest of America.)

So what are some of the cultural factors that explain the sorry state of young black men? They aren't always obvious. Sociological investigation has found, in fact, that one popular explanation — that black children who do well are derided by fellow blacks for "acting white" — turns out to be largely false, except for those attending a minority of mixed-race schools.

An anecdote helps explain why: Several years ago, one of my students went back to her high school to find out why it was that almost all the black girls graduated and went to college whereas nearly all the black boys either failed to graduate or did not go on to college. Distressingly, she found that all the black boys knew the consequences of not graduating and going on to college ("We're not stupid!" they told her indignantly).

SO why were they flunking out? Their candid answer was that what sociologists call the "cool-pose culture" of young black men was simply too gratifying to give up. For these young men, it was almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture, the fact that almost all the superstar athletes and a great many of the nation's best entertainers were black.

Not only was living this subculture immensely fulfilling, the boys said, it also brought them a great deal of respect from white youths. This also explains the otherwise puzzling finding by social psychologists that young black men and women tend to have the highest levels of self-esteem of all ethnic groups, and that their self-image is independent of how badly they were doing in school.

I call this the Dionysian trap for young black men. The important thing to note about the subculture that ensnares them is that it is not disconnected from the mainstream culture. To the contrary, it has powerful support from some of America's largest corporations. Hip-hop, professional basketball and homeboy fashions are as American as cherry pie. Young white Americans are very much into these things, but selectively; they know when it is time to turn off Fifty Cent and get out the SAT prep book.

For young black men, however, that culture is all there is — or so they think. Sadly, their complete engagement in this part of the American cultural mainstream, which they created and which feeds their pride and self-respect, is a major factor in their disconnection from the socioeconomic mainstream.

Of course, such attitudes explain only a part of the problem. In academia, we need a new, multidisciplinary approach toward understanding what makes young black men behave so self-destructively. Collecting transcripts of their views and rationalizations is a useful first step, but won't help nearly as much as the recent rash of scholars with tape-recorders seem to think. Getting the facts straight is important, but for decades we have been overwhelmed with statistics on black youths, and running more statistical regressions is beginning to approach the point of diminishing returns to knowledge.

The tragedy unfolding in our inner cities is a time-slice of a deep historical process that runs far back through the cataracts and deluge of our racist past. Most black Americans have by now, miraculously, escaped its consequences. The disconnected fifth languishing in the ghettos is the remains. Too much is at stake for us to fail to understand the plight of these young men. For them, and for the rest of us.

Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard, is the author of "Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries."