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Web Roundup: Who or what is to blame for poverty?

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The heated public debate about poverty, inequality, and discrimination that filled the news and social networks after the protests in Baltimore paints a full picture of just how many possible explanations we have for these problems, yet how little we know about how to change them. This month's Web Roundup provides a very brief look at the discourses and narratives of poverty and upward mobility in America.

In a much contested column, D. Brooks claimed that it is the values and social interactions -of the poor- that explain why they are poor by arguing that "the actual barriers to upward mobility are the quality of relationships at a home and a neighborhood that either encourage or discourage responsibility, future-oriented thinking and practical ambition". The responses were not long in coming, you can find a few examples here and here. These claim that arguments such as the one put forward by Brooks not only moralize the discussion by using values as the core explanation for the lack of upward mobility, but focus on blaming the victims and blatantly omit the structural factors at play in keeping people in poverty.

In the meantime, another column stated that the discussion on whether material conditions can explain values or if it is the other way around only demonstrates disengagement and laziness in thinking through the problem. The article makes an argument for the importance of taking the specific context and history into account. Baltimore is not Ferguson, or any other place for that matter. Yet, thinkers on both sides of the old discussion on poverty – those arguing for the role of values and agency and those focusing on structure- seem to forget these particularities. Readers are left with no tools to grasp them.

This month also brought about several interesting studies focusing on poverty and upward mobility in other parts of the world. One study demonstrated that the neighborhood where you grow up really does matter for income mobility. You can even see a map of the best and worst places to grow up in America, if you haven't seen it already. NPR covered a study published by Science, carried out in several low and middle income countries to see if aid can help people create sustainable

self-employment activities. It turns out that giving families the right kind of aid can create a [persistent impact](#) on income earning and stable improvements on wellbeing. This made me think of a TED Talk from a few years ago by [E. Duflo](#) where she does a good job reminding viewers that people who are poor are just like non-poor people in almost every way, they are no less rational. Yet, they struggle with things that most people take for granted, like access to bank accounts or running water. She makes a case for the need for rigorous approaches to answer small -yet far reaching- questions to improve the lives of people living below the poverty line.

Interestingly, what seemed missing from the debate was a discussion of the prevailing notions of poverty. We know that the stories we tell about poverty and the categories we draw matter. The public discourses on poverty and upward mobility -and the policies resulting from such discourses- are themselves cultural products, as argued by Small and colleagues in this [paper](#). In many ways, the discourses on poverty reflect the beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, and orientations in the society, and shape how we relate to "the other", in this case, the poor. Further, a close look at the assumptions about responsibility, agency, and deservingness provides a powerful opportunity to advance our understanding of the problem. Maybe asking about the entanglements between meaning making and poverty can result in something other than a "culture of poverty" thesis. Whether, when, and how cultural aspects matter to think through poverty and upward mobility is indeed an empirical question; one in great need of research.

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