Original Article

Intellectual inheritances: Cultural diagnostics and the state of poverty knowledge

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Abstract   What factors influence the scholarly field of vision, its illuminations and omissions? Reflexive interventions have typically addressed this question via analyses of knowledge producers and their institutional contexts. In contrast, this article foregrounds the inherited cultural infrastructures that enable and constrain knowledge production. I propose a 'cultural diagnostics' approach to identify and explain the persistence of what I label 'ontological myopias', a type of intellectual constriction rooted in assumptions about the content and composition of the social world. To illustrate the purchase of this analytic strategy, I examine the case of the emerging cultural sociology of poverty. Cultural diagnostics reveal that recent works have, with few exceptions, inherited an underlying presumption of earlier cultural approaches, namely that the 'poor' and their lifeworlds should constitute the principal empirical object of poverty research. This myopic focus hinders the creation of a comprehensive and relational approach to the cultural study of poverty and inequality. Ultimately, this article provides grounds to rethink the ontological foundations of contemporary poverty knowledge, and presents, more broadly, a reflexive cultural approach that can be profitably applied to other fields of scholarship.
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Introduction

> For the sociologist more than any other thinker, to leave one's thought in a state of unthought (*impensé*) is to condemn oneself to be nothing more than the *instrument* of that which one claims to think.
> – Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*

What determines – in the sense of 'setting limits, exerting pressures' (Williams, 1973, p. 4) – the scholarly field of vision, its parameters and perspicacity? What dynamics govern which features of the social world enter into focus or remain out of view? These questions have been asked many times and represent a specification of broader theoretical meditations on the origins and nature of human thought, traceable in the sociological tradition to Marx and Engels (1978) and Durkheim (1961). And yet, for numerous reasons they remain critically important to pose, not the least of which being the fact that much sociology aims to intervene, even if indirectly, in social and political life. This state of affairs heightens the need for reflexive analyses of our intellectual inheritances.

Scholarly reflexivity, in most general terms, refers to a commitment to intellectual self-interrogation rooted in a critical skepticism toward received wisdoms. In recent memory, the concept has been, at least in sociology, most strongly associated with Pierre Bourdieu. Deepening Durkheim's (1982) concern with 'prenotions', Bourdieu advocated constant vigilance against the 'collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems and (especially national) categories of scholarly judgment' (Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). In his estimation, a reflexive sociology 'continually turns back onto itself the scientific weapons it produces' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 238, emphasis in the original). For him, this meant an analysis of the social positions embodied and occupied by the scholar – as a social actor, a participant in a scholarly discipline and, most importantly, a member of the broader intellectual field (Bourdieu, 2000). Cast as an alternative to narrowly hermeneutic or textual approaches to reflexivity, Bourdieu's reflexive project sought to locate knowledge producers in social-symbolic space, so as to account for, and gain mastery over, the conceptual inheritances bestowed by social and intellectual life.[1] Accordingly, he devoted less attention to the *content* of these inheritances and their specific effects on the 'making' of social knowledge (Camic *et al*, 2011).[2]

As a subset of recent scholarship on knowledge, ideas and expertise (for example, Camic and Gross, 2001; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Benzecry and Krause, 2010; Glaeser, 2011; Morning, 2011; Eyal, 2013; Kennedy, 2015), a growing body of sociological research has begun to foreground precisely what Bourdieu's writings on reflexivity tend to background: the cultural infrastructures of knowledge (for example, Kurzman, 1994; Somers, 1996; Brekhus, 1998; Abend, 2006; Lamont, 2009; Mallard *et al*, 2009; Whooley, 2013; Abend, 2014). With

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[1] Bourdieu does not, in my reading, espouse a crude social determinist position. To the contrary, his conceptual trifecta – habitus, capital and field – attempts to integrate, with variable degrees of success, the embodied, symbolic and social dimensions of human action. For a recent elaboration of Bourdieusian reflexivity in relation to the study of race, see Emirbayer and Desmond (2012).

[2] To underscore this point, it is worthwhile to recall Bourdieu's critique of J.L. Austin's linguistic theory. Bourdieu (1991) insisted that the performative power of utterances stemmed from the socially derived authority of the speaker and not from the utterance itself. Thus, it is not the content of intellectual *doxa* that most concerns Bourdieu, but the social relations out of which it arises.

respect to knowledge production, cultural infrastructures or what Somers (1996) terms 'knowledge cultures' are the ensemble of (often) implicit epistemological and ontological understandings that, in the language of Glaeser (2011, p. 37), 'orient, direct, coordinate, explain, and legitimate or justify action' – in this case, the action of sociological investigation, theorization and analysis. Both enabling and constraining, cultural infrastructures influence 'how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways' (Hacking, 1990 cited in Somers, 1999, p. 121).

Drawing inspiration from this literature, this article focuses on what I term 'ontological myopias', a particular kind of constriction of the scholarly imagination, rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and workings of the social world. By narrowing the scope of vision, ontological myopias regulate what questions get posed and which dynamics get investigated. While these ontological inheritances impinge upon individual researchers, they are collectively generated and sustained, in part, through cultural understandings and processes.

I propose an analytic strategy that (i) identifies the existence and effects of ontological myopias and (ii) specifies cultural factors that contribute to their persistence. This analytic strategy, which I label 'cultural diagnostics', involves three operations: *cartographic, narrative* and *boundary-work*. To be sure, a broader approach would integrate an analysis of the historical formation and institutional configuration of a particular discipline or field of study. However, as reflexive scholars have devoted much more attention to these dimensions, this article emphasizes the cultural infrastructures involved in knowledge production.

As an illustrative example, I conduct cultural diagnostics on the emerging cultural sociology of poverty. This case is well-suited for several reasons. First, few topics have preoccupied generations of sociologists more than poverty, and thus it commands a degree of familiarity rare to an increasingly specialized discipline. Second, recent attempts to integrate cultural sociological tools into this field of study provide an opportunity to analyze ontologies transmitted from a broader knowledge base. Third, given that interest in cultural sociology is a relatively recent development among poverty researchers, the scholarly literature is rich with explicit statements about the history and contours of the field. Fourth, poverty scholars, including those drawing on cultural sociology are often engaged in, and seek to impact, public discourse and social policy. In light of the fact that poverty knowledge has profoundly shaped public perception about the 'poor', helped to construct 'poverty' as a particular kind of social problem, and has been wielded as a political instrument, it is critically important to investigate the oversights and limits of our scholarly knowledge.

Cultural diagnostics reveal that recent works have, on the whole, failed to explicitly call into question, and thus have inherited an underlying presumption of earlier cultural approaches, namely that the 'poor' and their lifeworlds should constitute the *principal* empirical object of poverty knowledge. Indeed, what often falls out of sight is the fact that 'the study of poverty is not the same thing as studying the poor' (O'Connor, 2002, p. 22). With several important exceptions,

this inheritance hampers the creation of a more comprehensive and relational poverty knowledge, which takes on a wider ontological vision and recognizes that 'cultural factors also affect the actions of the nonpoor, including – perhaps most important for the study of poverty – the ways in which the nonpoor respond to the problem of poverty' (Guetzkow, 2010, p. 173). Revealing the largely untapped reflexive potential of cultural sociology this article provides interested parties with a springboard from which to begin to rethink and reconstitute the foundations of contemporary poverty knowledge, particularly in the U.S. context. More broadly, the analytic strategy it proposes is not limited to this specific field of study. Rather, cultural diagnostics can be applied to investigate the intellectual commitments that anchor other areas of scholarship.

Cultural Infrastructures

Traditionally, sociologists have treated epistemology and ontology as the exclusive domain of philosophy and specifically the philosophy of science (Phillips, 1974; Somers and Gibson, 1994).[3] However, in the wake of profound epistemic ruptures and revolutions, now several decades old, the rigid division of intellectual labor between philosophy and the social sciences has become somewhat untenable. A generation of scholars – philosophers and social scientists alike – has increasingly (although not universally) come to recognize that epistemologies are embedded in social relations. It is because of this recognition that positivism – once the reigning epistemological position – took a hit from which it has not yet fully, and perhaps never will, recover. In fact, if anything unifies positivism's 'epistemological others' (Steinmetz, 2005a), it is their shared incredulity toward the possibility of *universal* and *timeless* knowledge, especially with respect to human societies. Feminist interventions, for instance, have challenged the positivist dream of a disembodied, 'value-free' knowledge, characterized by Haraway (1988, p. 581) as 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere'. Although it is debatable whether the social sciences are today haunted by positivism or post-positivism (c.f. Steinmetz, 2005b; Reed, 2010), the recognition that epistemologies and ontologies are themselves historical and sociocultural objects has enabled sociologists to investigate seemingly philosophical concerns. Indeed, as Reed and Alexander (2009, p. 30) assert, 'the insights of cultural sociology can speak to the problems of epistemology', and as elaborated below, ontology.

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[3] Prior generations of sociologists of knowledge often explicitly evaded questions of epistemology. For example, Merton (1937, p. 503) insisted that the study of knowledge, as proposed by Mannheim, 'be restricted to problems which lend themselves to tests of fact' rather than unresolvable metaphysical problems of epistemology.

In a series of essays, Somers (1995, 1996, 1999) has systematically interrogated the 'knowledge cultures' of sociological and social scientific knowledge.[4] While counting Bourdieu's reflexive sociology as an inspiration, Somers' approach departs from his explanatory focus on the habitus and field position of the researcher. Instead, she directs her analytic gaze toward the epistemic and ontological elements that structure knowledge production.

For Somers (1999, p. 135), scholarly concepts are not 'given categories with natural attributes'; rather they are 'cultural and historical objects embedded within and assigned meaning by their location in symbolic and historically constructed cultural structures'. As such, she urges recognition of the historicity and meaning-laden nature of the tools we think with. Somers (1996, p. 64) argues that knowledge cultures generate 'a capacious but delimited spectrum of conceptual possibilities'. In other words, knowledge cultures influence what is sayable, knowable and imaginable within a particular scholarly context and moment in time. Invariably, this leads, as the feminist philosopher of science Harding (2006, p. 125) has put it, to 'systematic patterns of ignorance'.

> Every knowledge system has its limits, since its priorities select which aspects of nature's order to study; which questions to ask; which metaphors, models, narratives, and other discursive resources to use; and which ways to organize the production of knowledge.
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> (Harding, 2006, p. 125)

Whooley (2013, p. 20) suggests that the production of blind spots increases as a particular 'epistemological system' achieves 'epistemic closure' and becomes capable of 'allowing for certain types of questions and answers to arise while forbidding others'.[5]

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[4] A full exposition is beyond the scope of this article but some discussion of related concepts is in order. As I understand it, the concept of knowledge cultures shares some similarities with Foucault's (1970) 'episteme', but differs with respect to scope (the latter is concerned with the underlying grid of knowledge of a particular epoch, while the former has no such ambitions). In fact, various knowledge cultures can exist within a particular episteme. Knowledge cultures are also distinct from Kuhn's (1962) 'paradigms', a concept which Somers (1999, p. 65) argues, 'is too holistic to be a useful historical tool for understanding epistemologies and social ontologies that always cut across numerous theories and methods'. Another concept of some relevance here is Lakatos' (1970) 'research program'. Somers (1996, p. 66) suggests that knowledge cultures have 'no substantive "hard core" that perdures despite peripheral challenges'. More substantially, Lakatos' concept does not seem to travel well beyond the natural sciences. In my view, the notion of knowledge cultures is perhaps closest to Reed's (2011) 'landscapes of meaning', although his concept is not limited to scholarly contexts. Unlike the other notions briefly discussed here, only Somers and Reed's respective concepts are rooted in cultural sociological thought and concerned explicitly with social scientific knowledge.

[5] In recent years, scholars have taken up the study of ignorance, or what some have termed 'agnotology' (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008). In particular, researchers have meditated on the sources, production and effects of ignorance and forms of non-knowing on intellectual practice and social experience more generally (for example, Gross, 2007; Frickel *et al*, 2010; Kempner *et al*, 2011; Heimer, 2012). Although I focus on cultural dynamics rather than institutional ones, this article resonates with work

In effect, fields of inquiry can become *myopic*, that is, they can suffer from entrenched constrictions of the scholarly imagination.[6] In the next section, I will discuss in more depth this phenomenon and its consequences on knowledge production.

Ontological Myopias

For present purposes, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of myopias: *epistemic* and *ontological*. Epistemic myopias refer to myopias regarding what can be known, and specifically, how knowledge can be justified. Feminist, post-colonial and critical race theorists have, in diverse ways, challenged the myopia of Western science and its traditionally narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate, 'scientific' knowledge (for example, Sprague, 1997; Harding, 1998; Collins, 2000). At the same time, these interventions have also challenged the ontological claims of the Western canon, insisting, for instance, that race is a constructed rather than natural phenomenon (Hesse, 2007).

Ontological myopias are outgrowths of our ontological commitments. From the vantage point of a sociologist – rather than that of a philosopher – ontology refers to 'the art of making productive assumptions about such constituents and their linkages in a particular domain of life that will prove useful in guiding our research practices' (Glaeser, 2005, p. 39f). In other words, ontologies do not concern matters of truth or veracity, which are subjects of epistemology. Instead, they pertain to belief statements about the composition of the social world.

Sociologists of knowledge have long recognized that the questions scholars pose and prioritize are closely linked to our ontologies (c.f. Mannheim, 1936, p. 89f). 'Questions at any given time reflect the explanations we are ready to give and to investigate … But they also reflect what kinds of beings and entities we think there are in the world in the first place …' (Somers, 1996, p. 71). Ontological assumptions, therefore, govern what Reed (2008) has described as the 'context of explanation', that is, the social world that scholars desire to understand. Consequently, ontological myopias refer to situations in which taken-for-granted ontological inheritances have placed restrictive parameters on a given object of study. To avoid misunderstanding, the issue here is not that individual scholars have selective attention or that subfields tend towards specialization, but rather that certain ontological commitments have become so

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on what Frickel *et al* (2010) describe as 'undone science'. I thank Steve Epstein for alerting me to this literature.

6 As a medical condition, 'myopia' is the technical term for nearsightedness (or shortsightedness), a condition that causes the impairment of long-range vision. In everyday parlance, the designation 'myopic' refers to a kind of rigid tunnel vision, associated with a lack of creativity or imagination to think 'outside the box'.

entrenched that a field of scholarship loses reflexive command over its defining questions and thematics.

By narrowing the range of permissible topics, ontological myopias impact knowledge production in numerous ways. For instance, they asymmetrically 'mark' certain aspects of social life while shielding others from sociological scrutiny (Brekhus, 1998). For Brekhus (1998), this practice tends to overstate the distinctiveness or salience of 'marked' topics. Given the traditional sociological penchant for the 'deviant' and 'marginal,' marking runs the risk – intentions aside – of confirming common sense views about marked populations and generating blind spots about the unmarked.

Moreover, ontological myopias can contribute to (and often rest upon) 'substantialism', an ontological commitment that imagines the social world as comprised of discrete and bounded entities (Emirbayer, 1997). As Desmond (2014, p. 551) notes, 'The analyst operating under the substantialist perspective artificially severs relations between people, places, organizations, or ideas to study these entities in relative isolation, thereby separating what in reality is inseparable'. This act of severing relations results in what Go (2014) has recently described as 'analytic bifurcation'. Consequently, not only do ontological myopias mark particular actors and dynamics as objects of inquiry (and therefore ignore others), they also obscure the relations through which social life and its stratifications are constituted.

In practice, our sociological ontologies and their myopias shape our research, but we are never entirely their originators. Instead, we 'inherit these ontologies and work within their – parameters – often, albeit, unconsciously' (Somers, 1996, p. 72). Given this, what are we to do? How do we render our latent ontological inheritances visible? In the next section, I propose a reflexive strategy rooted in cultural sociology.

Cultural Diagnostics

Cultural diagnostics is a technique or rather a set of tactics to investigate knowledge cultures. As elaborated here, cultural diagnostics is designed to identify the existence and effects of ontological myopias and to reveal key cultural factors that contribute to their persistence. This approach involves three operations: *cartographic, narrative* and *boundary-work*. Let me briefly describe each operation before turning to the case of the cultural sociology of poverty.

Cartographic analysis

The first operation aims to identify ontological myopias. How is this accomplished? Cultural diagnostics, as described above, focuses on the cultural infrastructures of knowledge. It does not infer omissions from the social position

of an intellectual or epistemic community. Rather, it adopts an internalist analytic that involves a cartographic mapping of the ontological universe of the specific body of work under analysis. What makes this task particularly challenging is the fact that sociological research is rarely explicit about its ontological (and epistemic) assumptions, despite the fact that much sociological theory is actually ontological, that is, theories about nature of the social world. Therefore, the researcher must construct an ontological map out of the implicit traces found within the extant literature. In its most elementary form, these traces include assumptions and claims about the relevant social dynamics and actors. What kinds of activities and practices are prioritized? What social actors are empirically foregrounded and backgrounded? What kinds of themes or topics occupy the imagination of contributing scholars?

Narrative analysis

Whereas the first operation sought to identify an intellectual myopia via an analysis of the ontological universe expressed in present research, the second operation shifts to the ways in which scholars publicly narrate the history of the field, and thus frame their intervention. How do scholars characterize the field's development? What major events – social or academic – are punctuated in these accounts? Cultural sociologists have long recognized the importance of narratives in social life (Steinmetz, 1992; Somers and Gibson, 1994; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007; Connor, 2012). Narratives are key vehicles through which meaning is produced and communicated. Through the selective emplotment or arrangement of events, actors and experiences, 'people are able to develop an understanding of the past, an expectation about the future, and a general understanding of how they should act' (Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007, p. 5). Similar to other cultural forms, narratives both enable and constrain social imagination. In his discussion of working-class identity formation, Steinmetz (1992, p. 489) notes, 'events are selected for inclusion due to their relevance to social class, or they are excluded or deemphasized because of their irrelevance to class, and events are interpreted, emplotted, and evaluated in a way that emphasizes class rather than other possible constructs'. The broader takeaway here is that narratives make certain things intelligible and other things less so. Consequently, a central task of cultural diagnostics is to analyze how narratives about the formation and development of the field influence the lifespan of inherited myopias. They can either unsettle the field and its organizing assumptions or assist in keeping particular myopias below explicit problematization.

Boundary-work analysis

Similar to the previous operation, the third operation employs a conceptual tool of contemporary cultural sociology: symbolic boundaries. As a growing body of

research has elaborated, symbolic boundaries refer to 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Gieryn (1983) illustrated that knowledge production involves considerable 'boundary-work'. However, this boundary-work is not limited, as he discussed, to the differentiation between science and non-science. Scholars distinguish themselves from their colleagues and predecessors along many axes. For instance, in the case analyzed below, leading proponents depict contemporary research as more conceptually sophisticated than past scholarship. Thus, in broader terms, the operation of boundary-making aims to answer the question: How does contemporary scholarship – in light of its dominant narrative – situate and position itself in relation to the field and in particular to its past. What symbolic boundaries are being drawn, implicitly or explicitly, in the current scholarly literature? Like narratives, this boundary-work has the potential to either further entrench or problematize ontological myopias.

In short, the three operations of cultural diagnostics offer a method of analyzing knowledge cultures and their ontological myopias. Cultural diagnostics, as a reflexive analytic strategy, can help scholars identify the production of blind spots (caused by the hyperfocus or stressing of certain features of the ontological landscape), as well as analyze cultural processes that help to keep ontological inheritances below scrutiny. By broadening the purview of reflexive sociology, cultural diagnostics also establishes grounds on which to reformulate the scholarly field of vision – a point to which I return below. However, the utility of cultural diagnostics remains a purely abstract exercise without a case of application. Therefore, the remainder of the article conducts each operation of cultural diagnostics on recent cultural sociological research on poverty.

The Cultural Sociology of Poverty

Over the past decade, a growing number of sociologists have brought cultural sociological sensibilities and concepts to bear on the study of poverty. As sociologists Small *et al* (2010, p. 8) state, 'the judicious, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded study of culture can and should be a permanent component of the poverty research agenda'. Part of an interdisciplinary cultural 'turn' in poverty scholarship, these sociologists have begun to make important contributions to major thematics in this scholarly field, including work and unemployment (Dohan, 2003; Smith, 2007; Van Hook and Bean, 2009; Young, 2010), neighborhoods and community life (Small, 2004; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008; Harding, 2010; Domínguez, 2011), parenting and family life (Waller, 2002; Lareau, 2003; Salcedo and Rasse, 2012), street violence and

gangs (Sampson and Bean, 2006; Kirk and Papachristos, 2011; Harding, 2010), intimacy and sexual relations (Harding, 2007; Fosse, 2010), homelessness and housing (Tach, 2009; Gowan, 2010), schools and educational attainment (Carter, 2005; Garot, 2010; Harding, 2011), policing and incarceration (Garland, 2006; Wacquant, 2009; Rios, 2011), as well as historically less central topics, such as politics, protest and policymaking (Auyero, 1999; Somers and Block, 2005; Steensland, 2007; Rao and Sanyal, 2010).

Within the US context, this body of scholarship grew in part out of dissatisfaction with 'structuralist' studies of poverty, which were criticized for refusing to treat '*cultural factors* as anything other than epiphenomena of structural conditions' (Small, 2002, p. 4, emphasis in original). An influential breakthrough came with the publication of Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Though widely regarded as a structuralist, Wilson came to argue in this and subsequent works for the inclusion of 'culture' into structural accounts. As narrated by Small and Newman (2001), Wilson's intervention led to a modest 'rediscovery' of culture in poverty scholarship during the 1990s.

This apparent rediscovery roughly coincided with, and eventually benefited from, the cultural and linguistic 'turn' that swept through the social sciences and humanities in the 1980s (Crane, 1994; Henry, 1995; Alexander, 2003; Friedland and Mohr, 2004). Out of this movement, cultural sociology was born. In contrast to the 'sociology of culture', which tended to concentrate on 'cultural' objects and institutions, cultural sociology has embraced a more expansive understanding: culture as the 'semiotic dimension of human social practice in general' (Sewell, 1999, p. 164). In the decades since, cultural sociologists have operationalized numerous analytic concepts including narratives (Somers and Gibson, 1994; Polletta, 2006; Connor, 2012), frames (Small, 2002; Young, 2004), symbolic boundaries (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont, 1992), codes (Alexander, 2003; Smith, 2005) and repertoires (Swidler, 1986).

With a diverse set of theories and concepts, cultural sociologists have sought opportunities to demonstrate the significance of cultural symbols, meanings and practices to social life and therefore the *indispensability* of cultural analyses. Seemingly non-cultural social phenomenon have been opened to cultural analysis, such as war (Smith, 2005), political transition (Kennedy, 2002), economics (Fourcade, 2009) and quantification (Espeland and Stevens, 2008; De Santos, 2009). The topic of poverty thus represents another site of expansion for cultural sociology. This particular expansion represents the most recent attempt to integrate 'culture' into the study of poverty. A critical examination of this emergent body of work demands, to be certain, a deeper appreciation of the scholarly 'historical arbitrary' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 116) out of which it has grown and received some of its ontological inheritances.

Over the past century, poverty research, particularly in the United States, has been profoundly shaped by the convergence of two developments. The first development is the progressively narrowing scope of poverty research, which has

come to take the 'poor' as the primary object of analysis and policy intervention. The second development is the emergence of 'culture' as a central concept for poverty scholars. Together, these two developments have made poor people – especially poor people of color – and their 'culture' the dominant, if not hegemonic, focus of poverty research.

These historical developments and convergences are put into sharp relief in historian Alice O'Connor's (2002) important work, *Poverty Knowledge*. In this work, O'Connor tracks the origins, controversies and consequences of the growing concern and obsession with the poor and their culture. Her account begins with Progressive era reformists and their attempts to 'depauperize' understandings of poverty. O'Connor notes an important movement away from these efforts to broaden poverty research in the scholarship of the founders of the Chicago School. Here, she locates the first cultural 'turn' in poverty research and the beginnings of the focus on the poor. Chicago School sociologists, such as Thomas, Park and Burgess, developed, in her estimation, an 'ecological' approach that 'focused more on issues of identity and culture than on employment and wages' (p. 26). Subsequent generations of scholars increasingly trained their vision upon members of, what Michael Harrington (1962) famously described as, the 'Other America'. It is within this growing emphasis on the poor that Lewis' (1968) 'culture of poverty' and Moynihan's (1965) 'tangle of pathology' grew and were further elaborated in the 1960s. Soon after, poverty research increasingly began to rely on quantitative methods and econometrics in policy work. Though less directly connected to policymaking, qualitative studies of the poor have helped establish many of the racialized and gendered tropes of the urban poor.

O'Connor argues that social scientists guided by a 'liberal' faith in scientific progress played into the hands of conservative think tanks and political actors, who in the 1980s further turned the poverty debate into an issue of the psychological and cultural failings of the 'underclass'. This conservative shift culminated with the dismantlement of welfare under the Clinton administration. In the course of the last century, and surely into the present one, mainstream poverty research has 'focused far more heavily on the behavior, culture, and demographic characteristics of poor people than on the characteristics of the broader social structure, political culture, and economy that foster such high rates of poverty' (O'Connor, 2000, p. 548). This claim, to be sure, does not diminish or ignore the work of some social scientists (not to mention social movements, policymakers and other political actors) to confront or resist the narrowing scope and often pathologizing thrust of poverty research. Unfortunately, these efforts have been far less successful at influencing policy or public understandings of the origins and realities of poverty. Reflecting on this history, O'Connor concludes her account with a proposal for a new poverty knowledge. In this, she does not address the cultural processes that have sustained the myopic focus on the poor. As I will discuss later, this kind of

analysis is indispensible to any attempt to reconstitute the foundations of this knowledge base.

It is within this larger historical trajectory that cultural sociology has entered into poverty scholarship. This move has revived longstanding debates about the appropriate place for 'culture' within this area of research. For some, the focus on 'meaning' distracts from ostensibly more important structural and material issues (Steinberg, 2011; Gans, 2012).[7] This stance, itself rooted in particular epistemological and ontological presumptions, fails to recognize, as Alexander (2007, p. 25) once noted, that 'the imposition of inequality, and struggles over justice, inclusion, and distribution, are culturally mediated. Both the creation and maintenance of inequality and the struggle against it are fundamentally involved in meaning-construction, for both good and for ill'. Cultural diagnostics cannot settle these debates. This is not its vocation. Rather, it provides reflexive sociology with a way to search for ontological myopias and subject them to cultural analysis.

To this end the following sections conduct each operation of cultural diagnostics. This analysis suggests that recent works have inherited ontological commitments from earlier approaches. But I want to be clear about the nature of this inheritance. The point here is not that contemporary cultural analyses represent the revivification of the 'culture of poverty,' as some have too quickly concluded. To the contrary, such an interpretation encourages us to both flatten differences between distinct generations of scholarship and to miss latent features held in common. Instead, cultural diagnostics renders a key feature more manifest: an ontological myopia that has persisted despite the transformation of the concept of 'culture.'

Operation 1: The 'Poor' and their Lifeworlds

The first operation of cultural diagnostics seeks to render explicit the implicit ontology of a given field. It addresses the existence and effects of an inherited myopia. As described above, the cartographic analysis reconstructs, via a close reading of the extant literature, the dominant features of the field's ontological

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[7] In a scathing critique, Steinberg (2011) excoriates the 'new culturalists' for posing the 'wrong questions'. Questioning the 'reductionist' emphasis on 'meaning-making', Steinberg derisively asks, 'Does it really matter how they define a "good job" when they have virtually no prospect of finding one? Does it matter how they approach procreation, how they juggle "doubt, duty, and destiny" when they are denied the jobs that are the sine qua non of parenthood?' For Steinberg, such questions ultimately obscure the historical and structural conditions that produce and reproduce poverty, particularly among urban African Americans and Latinos/as. Although Steinberg raises some issues that should be part of a robust social scientific and public debate, he fails to recognize and appreciate the advancements made by some researchers and, more importantly, the *potential* contribution of cultural sociology to the construction of a more comprehensive and relational poverty knowledge.

landscape. As such, this operation examines scholarly works with this specific objective in mind. While I will cite specific texts, I do so for illustrative or analytic reasons rather than to contest specific empirical conclusions.

For purposes of exposition, I have divided the cartographic operation into two parts. The first part is concerned with the major actors and thematics of interest for researchers. The second highlights what cultural sociological research on poverty tends to ignore or pay insufficient attention to as a result of its ontological myopia.

Actors and thematics

The first and most foundational question for a cartographic analysis is what actors predominate within the field's ontological landscape? The answer to the question, I am certain, will come as no surprise to those familiar with this scholarship – yet this is, in fact, indicative of the taken-for-granted myopia revealed by cultural diagnostics. The vast majority of the poverty knowledge produced by cultural sociologists or constructed with the assistance of cultural sociological tools is based on the analysis of the lives and lifeworlds of the 'poor'. While exceptions to this tendency exist, and to which I will return, I concentrate here on the dominant inflections in the scholarship.

Generally speaking, the study of poverty is, more accurately, the study of individuals, families or neighborhoods variously classified as 'poor', 'low income' or 'disadvantaged'. Most empirical works focus on a specific subset of disadvantaged populations: youth (for example, Harding, 2010; Berg *et al*, 2012), low-income men (for example, Young, 2004; Fosse, 2010), parents (for example, Waller, 2002), gang members (for example, Garot, 2010), homeless (for example, Gowan, 2010), community residents (for example, Small, 2004; Kirk and Papachristos, 2011; Tach, 2009), workers (for example, Lamont, 2000; Van Hook and Bean, 2009; Smith, 2010) and students (for example, Carter, 2005; Vaisey, 2010; Harding, 2011; Jack, 2014).

These accounts provide valuable insight into the ways in which low-income populations make sense and manage precarious socioeconomic conditions. Scholars have challenged the idea that inner-city neighborhoods are internally homogenous, whether culturally or economically (Pattillo, 2007; Harding, 2010). For example, in his ethnography of Boston's Puerto Rican community of Villa Victoria, Small (2004) finds that older and younger generations hold divergent views on their neighborhood, and that this affects, among other things, community activism and organization. Harding (2010) develops a concept of 'cultural heterogeneity' through a comparative study of urban Black and Latino adolescents in the same city. He argues that the problem is not that youth are 'culturally "defective"', but rather that they 'lack access to the tools and resources needed to realize them, as well as the knowledge and information to

take advantage of such tools and resources' (p. 252 – a point that echoes early challenges to the culture of poverty, for example, Liebow, 1967).

Parting with rigid structuralist accounts, these works have shed light on the diverse nature of agency among the poor. For example, in her examination of the referral practices of blue-collar service workers, Smith (2010) finds that, in contrast to Latino jobholders, who tended to view coethnics as trustworthy and hardworking, Black workers often viewed their counterparts as morally suspect and risky and as a consequence were reluctant to give references. Her analysis suggests that cultural scripts play an important role in social capital mobilization. Waller's (2010) analysis of low-income male parental practices suggests that the meanings of parenting held by low-income parents are often at odds with social policy, which often ignores the non-economic and emotional involvement of unmarried fathers. Policymakers, she concludes, should both pay closer attention to the cultural understandings of fatherhood in low-income communities and also recognize that 'many disadvantaged men are assuming important parenting responsibilities for at-risk children' (p. 119). Other works (for example, Small, 2002; Young, 2004; Tach, 2009) similarly cast doubt on ideas of social disorganization and pathology, rampant in scholarly and popular rendering of the poor and demonstrate greater attentiveness to coping strategies and cultures of resilience (for example, Lamont *et al*, 2013).

Clearly, the focus on the poor and their immediate surroundings is inseparable from the issues and themes pursued by scholars. Indeed, one of the features of ontological myopias is the elevation of particular thematics – thematics often taken for granted and treated as necessary to the field of research. Bourdieu (2004, p. 94) once described these as 'obligatory problematics'. Undoubtedly, these thematics can be quite fertile and contribute substantially to the expansion of social scientific knowledge. However, thematics can also limit our knowledge base. Thematics, like the questions researchers pose, are connected to, and are rendered thinkable by cultural infrastructures, specifically their ontological aspects. For this reason, thematics provide further insight into the ontological landscape of research communities.

To date, the cultural sociology of poverty has, on the whole, returned to many of the topics that have defined US poverty knowledge since the post-World War II period, such as sexuality, violence, unemployment, parenting and educational attainment. Therefore, the widespread sense that the poor should constitute the central object of analysis has contributed to the dominance of a relatively small set of thematics. In several cases, scholars have assumed the role of addressing the weaknesses or missteps of prior scholarship on these topics. For example, Fosse (2010, p. 125) pursues the well-worn topic of infidelity among the poor, which he notes is of 'particular concern to policymakers and researchers'. His reading of the past literature reveals a glaring gap: researchers have failed to compare how heterosexual monogamous and non-monogamous low-income men understand love and sexual relationships. To fill this lacuna,

Fosse interviews low-income African American men and finds that differences in sexual behavior are, at least in part, mediated and explained through 'cultural logics' of trust, duty and destiny. Although he questions dominant narratives about inner city Black men and their sexual practices, the analysis reinforces the idea that promiscuity and sexual behavior are relevant, or even *necessary* aspects of poverty research. In fact, even when we seek to dispel stereotypes, we can actually augment common sense assumptions that essential differences separate 'exceptional' minorities from the 'unexceptional' majority (Brekhus, 1998, p. 43).

In sum, the cartographic analysis reveals an overriding emphasis on the poor and a relatively narrow set of thematics. As I will more fully elaborate below, this focus represents a constricting myopia that profoundly shapes poverty knowledge. To be sure, the existence of this myopia does not mean that scholars should entirely cease the study of longstanding thematics or documenting the precarious realities of impoverished individuals and populations. As scholars have noted, there remains important 'debunking' work to be done (Small *et al*, 2010, p. 10). Moreover, in certain cases, such research can shed light on people and dynamics that elites and other privileged actors would rather keep hidden.[8] The broader issue then is not whether such research has a place, which it obviously does. Instead, from a reflexive position gained from cultural diagnostics, the question becomes whether the almost blinding focus on the poor and their lifeworlds provides an expansive enough ontological frame for the social scientific study of the 'production and reproduction of poverty and social inequality' (Small *et al*, 2010, p. 23)?

Myopic effects

The second half of the cartographic operation leads directly from the first. Whereas we began by charting the ontological landscape in pursuit of intellectual myopias, the subsequent movement examines its effects on knowledge production. Myopic effects are important to consider for two major reasons. First, the act of rendering a myopia visible is inseparable from the act of illuminating what it excludes. Second, the limitations imposed by the myopia represent the logical starting point for any attempt at correction – a point I will discuss below.

As noted above, the cultural sociology of poverty has primarily invested in the investigation of meaning-making among poor and low-income individuals and groups, but has remained (as of yet) far less attentive to the cultural frames,

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[8] One recent example is Decoteau's (2013) ethnography of poor Black South Africans with HIV. Her analysis exposes the harsh realities confronting a population the state has sought to systematically render invisible. Other examples could be gleaned from across the globe, and certainly from the United States.

narratives and symbolic boundaries of the 'non-poor', such as policemen, teachers or street-level bureaucrats.

In some cases, these kinds of actors appear in the research, but quickly disappear. Take for instance, as one example of many, the presence of police officers in Kirk and Papachristos's (2011) thorough analysis of neighborhood violence in Chicago. The police are described as primary sources – along with structural conditions (that is, concentrated poverty) – of 'legal cynicism', a cultural frame among low-income residents that views the police and other law enforcement agents as 'illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety' (p. 1191). Despite the role of the police in its generation, Kirk and Papachristos ultimately conclude that legal cynicism becomes an 'independent causal force' on behavior, and not just an adaptive response to structural constraints or police-resident interactions. Quickly, the impact of police behavior is bracketed, given a static background role, rather than treated as an ongoing factor, itself needing cultural analysis. Again, my objective is not to critique the specific empirical conclusions drawn, but to point out how the non-poor, in this case police, are relegated to the backdrop.

Shifting from actors that interact, often very intimately and regularly, with disadvantaged populations to those up the chain of command, so to speak, we might consider the cultural mechanisms that inform the behaviors of police chiefs, school superintendents, executive directors of local non-for-profits and hospital administrators. With little to no justification, the extant scholarly literature has generally ignored these actors and consequently their contribution to the production, reproduction and in some cases amelioration of conditions of poverty.[9] This myopic fixture on the poor might help explain, at least in part, why the extant literature has generally paid limited attention to issues of wealth, power and domination (Wacquant, 2002; Auyero, 2012). While this criticism has been previously raised, to my knowledge, scholars have not accounted for this absence in terms of knowledge cultures. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, future analysis could ask how this inherited myopia impacts the ways in which race and racism, or other 'axes of oppression' (Collins, 2000), such as gender and sexuality, are engaged in culturally informed studies of poverty. As I will discuss later on, several recent works do, in fact, direct their attention beyond this rather circumscribed field of vision, but these works are outliers in

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[9] In his recent lambasting of cultural sociology, Gans (2012) remarked, 'if cultural sociologists would take their questions about sentiments, frames and the like into the halls of power, they could find out how those agencies and the people working in them think and feel'. He goes on to suggest that cultural sociology 'could make an even more potent contribution to antipoverty research by studying the people, agencies and institutions that help to make and keep people poor' (pp. 6–7). Although this specific point (and not necessarily his broader structuralist critique) is well taken, Gans assumes the focus on culture is, by definition, allergic to the analysis of 'the halls of power'. In contrast, the analysis presented here views the lack of research beyond the poor as a consequence of an inherited myopia and not an inescapable byproduct of concerns with meaning.

relation to its overriding focus. Indeed, as Khan (2012, p. 5), notes, 'when social scientists study inequality they tend to focus on the conditions of disadvantage'. Writing against this focus, he correctly adds that 'if we want to understand the recent increases in American inequality we must know more about the wealthy, as well as the institutions that are important for their production and maintenance' (p. 5).

Beyond simply missing particular aspects of the social world, myopias have other effects on our knowledge base. As previously noted, they 'mark' particular actors, dynamics and issues as interesting and deserving attention (Brekhus, 1998). This can lead to the reproduction and reinforcement of stereotypes and stigmas. For example, Van Hook and Bean (2009, p. 424) develop a 'materialist-based' approach to cultural repertoires in attempts to 'explain the distinctively low net welfare receipt among Mexican immigrants, compared with other immigrant groups and natives'. In this essay, Mexican immigrants are treated as internally coherent and their low reliance on welfare (in comparison to other seemingly coherent groups) is attributed to a stronger 'pro-employment' orientation. Though these authors suggest that this cultural difference is not intrinsic, but rather is structural in origin, they neither specify the mechanisms through which material conditions shape cultural repertoires nor give theoretical justifications for their Mannheimesque proposition. As a result, this work seems to give scholarly confirmation to the commonsense idea that Mexican immigrants have a 'strong work ethic' in contrast to 'welfare dependent' African Americans.

In addition, myopias obscure interconnections and relations; the poor, as the primary object of inquiry, are effectively separated from their broader socio-historical and cultural context. This is not to say that scholars are unaware or unconcerned with happenings beyond sites of extreme poverty. To be sure, there is ritual mention of 'macrostructures'. For example, Small *et al* (2010, p. 23) are quick to reassure readers that 'we do not deny the importance of macrostructural conditions, such as the concentration of wealth and income, the spatial segregation across classes and racial groups, or the persistent international migration of labor and capital'. Similarly, Smith (2010, p. 48) concludes that the reluctance of Black jobholders to refer their peers 'may also be a symptom of larger forces that make finding and keeping work among the truly disadvantaged a daunting affair'. Smith, however, offers no further specification of these forces, but does list numerous individual barriers, including among others, human capital, domestic violence, familial obligations and mental health problems. In vaguely or concretely invoking 'macrostructures', scholars have ironically sacrificed the potential of cultural sociology to open up these black boxes.

However, the main point here is that myopias tend to treat the production and reproduction of poverty as a more or less bounded phenomena. As Desmond (2014, p. 567) states, 'In taking as their objects disadvantaged people and their neighborhoods, many urban ethnographers accept poverty as a given, as opposed to treating it as an active project involving people far removed from the gritty

street corner where the fieldworker has chosen to plant himself or herself. Poverty is not a thing; it is a relation'. Indeed, the poverty knowledge literature reviewed here tends to 'conceptually slice or divide relations into categorical essences that are not in fact essences' (Go, 2014, p. 125). This problem encourages researchers to ignore the interconnections between seemingly disparate social processes and dynamics.

In sum, the first operation of cultural diagnostics revealed the existence and effects of an ontological myopia, which as previously discussed has a long history in poverty knowledge (O'Connor, 2002). Next, I turn to the remaining two operations.

Operation 2: The Narrative of Abandonment

Cultural diagnostics begins but does not end with a cartographic analysis of the ontological landscape. Once an intellectual myopia and its effects are identified, additional questions emerge. What cultural factors contribute to its persistence? How do myopias continue to escape scrutiny? Without a doubt, answers to these questions cannot be entirely answered with the internalist orientation adopted here. A holistic account would have to also consider the positional dynamics of interest to Bourdieu, as well as broader organizational and institutional forces. Yet these analyses, I argue, would be incomplete without an account of the cultural infrastructures and the cultural processes through which myopias are reproduced and shielded from systematic reconstruction. The two remaining operations of cultural diagnostics shift from the ontological presuppositions to a consideration of how narratives about the field's development and the boundary-work involved in distinguishing the academic field contribute, perhaps in an unintended fashion, to the maintenance of inherited myopias. In the remainder of this section, I examine the anchoring narrative articulated by the promugators of the latest cultural 'turn' in the sociology of poverty and the poor. As I argue below, this dominant narrative construes the field's history in such a way that it renders breaking with the myopia more difficult.

With varying degrees of explicitness, recent cultural sociological research on poverty describes 'culture' as a 'long-abandoned topic' (Small *et al*, 2010, p. 6). Though testing the validity of this claim is beyond the scope and intent of this article, I should note that influential works, such as Massey and Denton's (1998) *American Apartheid*, and the 'underclass' debate in the 1980s, seem to challenge or complicate the idea that 'culture' was entirely jettisoned (see also Jung, 2009).[10] In any case, what matters here is the narrative itself and the causal explanations proponents give for the apparent 'abandonment' of culture.

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[10] For example, Massey and Denton (1998, p. 8) write, 'segregation created structural conditions for the emergence of an oppositional culture that devalues work, schooling, and marriage and that stresses attitudes and behaviors that are antithetical and often hostile to success in the larger economy'.

Leading proponents narrate that culture and cultural analysis of poverty were abandoned following the eruption of controversy that ensued after the publication of Oscar Lewis' (1968) various studies on the 'culture of poverty', and especially Patrick Moynihan's (1965) report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. In a recent reevaluation of Moynihan, Wilson (2009, p. 37) states,

> The vitriolic attacks and acrimonious debate that characterized this controversy proved to be too intimidating to scholars, particularly to liberal scholars. Indeed, in the aftermath of this controversy and in an effort to protect their work from the charge of racism, or of blaming the victim, many liberal social scientists tended to avoid describing any behavior that could be construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to people of color.

This account echos Patterson's (2006) critique of the 'deep-seated dogma' that developed in the 1960s and prohibited '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'.[11] Wilson and Patterson have argued that Moynihan (as well as Lewis) were singled out and vilified for suggesting that the poor were agents of their own impoverishment. Rao and Sanyal (2010, p. 170), for instance, remark in a footnote that Lewis was 'incorrectly demonized', and that actual culpability lies with 'later authors' who used his concept 'to generate unfortunate stereotypes that suggested that the poor had a culture that caused their poverty'. Within the narrative of abandonment, some proponents, as we see here, have crafted a more a sympathetic portrait of these controversial figures.[12]

The narrative of abandonment posits that, as a direct result of the 'rising tide of vilification' (Massey and Sampson, 2009, p. 9), the following generation of scholars refused to engage with the question of culture. Decorated with strong, descriptive language, proponents of the cultural sociology of poverty frequently narrate that culture became intellectually 'untouchable' and 'taboo' in policy research. Vaisey (2010, p. 96), for instance, asserts, 'The moral and political fear of blaming the poor and sociologists' overreaction to the limits of earlier models of culture have prevented us from asking whether the cultural models and motives that the poor internalize might have an "exogenous explanatory power" that serves to inhibit socioeconomic success'. In a thoughtful discussion of the

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[11] Massey and Sampson (2009, pp. 12–13) give an even more explicit articulation of this thesis: 'Rather than acknowledging that unwed childbearing, family disruption, delinquency, crime, and violence might be endogenous to the reproduction of poverty, liberal analysts downplayed the problems of the ghetto and attributed the growing prevalence of negative outcomes to the all-powerful and single cause of systemic racism. "Blaming the victim" was an all-too-easy put-down for an entire class of work that sought to make broader structural, cultural, and historical connections'.

[12] For a more critical reading of Lewis' and Moynihan's respective projects, see Briggs (2002).

'culture wars' in poverty scholarship, Gowan (2010, p. 22) similarly expresses, 'among left-leaning social scientists, culture had become something of a dirty word and was allowed into the picture only when treated strictly as super-structure'. As narrated by researchers, culture became, in a sense, 'forbidden knowledge' (Kempner *et al*, 2011). These assertions, to be sure, should not be necessarily interpreted as endorsements of revisionist depictions of Lewis and Moynihan. To be sure, Young (2004), Small *et al* (2010) and other scholars reiterate long-standing critiques against the culture of poverty and cognate conceptions (for example, the 'underclass'). Yet, notwithstanding the position of specific researchers on the legacy of Lewis and Moynihan, most proponents have, more or less explicitly, adopted the narrative of 'abandonment'.

The final aspect of the narrative, unsurprisingly, is the claim of return. Once dormant for decades, culture has 'inched back into debates about poverty and inequality' (Harding, 2010). Overall, this narrative seems to suggest that a major weakness of our poverty knowledge stems from the substantive abandonment of culture. As such, it envisions the recent inclusion of cultural socio-logical tools as a sign of progress, capable of improving our understanding of poverty and the lives of the poor. This, however, raises an important question. Given that most current research rejects or explicitly challenges early cultural accounts, how do proponents understand and justify this recent 'return' of culture and cultural analyses of poverty? How is the cultural sociology of poverty different, or rather, is framed as different? Turning to these questions will provide additional clues into the cultural processes through which the inherited myopia persists.

Operation 3: Antiquated Versus Sophisticated

The narrative of the abandonment and return of 'culture' in poverty research described above establishes a certain kind of continuity between past and present scholarship. Even still, sociologists, particularly those cognizant and sensitive to past controversies, are cautious not to overstate lines of continuity, a move that might result in reviving the very same critiques once directed at their intellectual predecessors. Within the extant literature, proponents simultaneously signal the triumphant return of culture and attempt to distinguish themselves from past conceptualizations of culture. In what follows, I conduct the third operation of cultural diagnostics. This operation concerns the boundary-work of the leading proponents of the cultural sociology of poverty. Interestingly, this boundary-work is most heavily directed at past cultural approaches rather than their present-day non-cultural colleagues.

The concept of 'values' offers a window into the boundaries being drawn within recent cultural accounts of poverty. Cultural sociologists of poverty

have argued that new analytic concepts are more adequate for the study of concrete empirical problems and do not mischaracterize or judge the poor. Although experiencing something of a revival via cognitive sociology (for example, Vaisey, 2009; Lizardo and Strand, 2010), current students of culture have generally shifted, following Swidler's (1986) influential intervention, away from culture as supplying *ends* toward culture as providing *means* for action. Within the literature under analysis, values are generally understood as creating obstacles to sociological understanding. As Harding (2010, p. 141) spells it out, 'under the values conception, culture is viewed as internally coherent, and cultural differences imply distinct subcultures with their own systems of values. In contrast, the cognitive view of culture allows for cultural variation'. Echoing Harding's critique of values, Kirk and Papachristos (2011, p. 1228) insist only 'a more nuanced understanding of cultural mechanisms' can explain variations in urban violence.

In contemporary cultural sociology, values have been largely replaced with a broader analytic toolkit. In a recent issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* dedicated to a reconsideration of culture and poverty, guest editors Mario Small, Michèle Lamont and Harding (2010) provide the most explicit and comprehensive case for a cultural sociology of poverty. Aware of the potential for missinterpretation and controversy, Small *et al* (2010, p. 8) distance recent research from Lewis' 'culture of poverty', affirming that 'contemporary researchers rarely claim that culture will perpetuate itself for multiple generations regardless of structural changes, and they practically never use the term "pathology"'.[13] Instead, they state that new scholars conceptualize culture distinctly, rejecting older, totalizing conceptions for ones that are 'more narrowly defined, easier to measure, and more plausibly falsifiable' (p. 8). In their view, new concepts, such as frames and cultural capital, result in 'a more exhaustive, precise, and complex grasp of the processes and mechanisms that lead to the reproduction of poverty' (p. 23). These 'narrower and distinct analytical devices' are thus framed as improvements to the conceptually vague and vacuous notion of 'culture' found in the works of the earlier generation. Along with other proponents, they maintain that specific empirical problems (for example, persistent low educational attainment) demand targeted concepts rather than overarching ones.

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[13] Although much of Lewis' thesis has been rejected, some scholars have argued that the cultural understandings of poor individuals can contribute in tandem with structural conditions, to the reproduction of poverty. For example, Wilson (2010, p. 203) asserts, 'there is little research and far less awareness of the impact of emerging cultural traits in the inner city on the social and economic outcomes of poor Blacks. Note that distinct cultural traits in the inner city have not only been shaped by race and poverty but, in turn, often shape responses to poverty, including … responses that may contribute to the perpetuation of poverty'. In addition, Smith (2010, p. 48) writes that Black 'jobholders' reluctance [to serve as referrals to other coethnics] is likely both a symptom and a contributing factor in persistent Black joblessness'.

The symbolic boundaries cast by leading scholars stresses that 'old' and 'new' approaches are not only conceptually different, but also that this difference is *significant*. Specifically, older approaches are cast as outdated and empirically suspect, while recent research is described as innovative and empirically sound.

> It is also important to ask the right questions, and some perspectives tended to 'blame the victim' because they lacked sufficient evidence or asked the wrong questions. We believe that invocations of culture would be more compelling if they were informed by the much more sophisticated culture literature that has developed over the past three decades or so.
>
> (Small *et al*, 2010, p. 13)

A more sophisticated conception and approach to 'culture' is understood and framed as the *solution* to the problems and limitations of earlier studies. Scholars can avoid pathologizing the poor by modernizing their tools and shifting from all-encompassing concepts to more nimble ones. To be sure, these scholars are well aware that the integration of culture, notwithstanding their protestations, may be interpreted as an updated version of Lewis and Moynihan. Indeed, Small *et al* (2010, p. 13) register this possibility, when noting 'some will complain that making a case for the study of culture in the context of poverty advances a conservative agenda that seeks to blame the victims for their problems'.[14]

However for cultural diagnostics, the point is not to adjudicate between whether or not 'new' works are, in fact, different from 'old' works or to speculate on whether these symbolic differentiations will successfully shield researchers from public criticism. Rather, the objective of this analytic operation is to determine the effect of this boundary-work on knowledge production, and more specifically, how it contributes to keeping the inherited myopia below collective reflection. As with the narrative analysis, the boundary-work pivots, almost entirely, on the concept of 'culture'. While the dominant narrative stresses the public reaction to cultural analysis and its subsequent scholarly disavowal and revival, boundary-work focuses on its conceptual transformation and improvement. Implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, the literature construes the problem with past approaches as largely a conceptual problem, which therefore requires conceptual solutions rather

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[14] Even though contributors went to great lengths to distinguish 'old' from 'new' approaches, it is telling that US Congressman Grijalva (2010), echoes, perhaps unknowingly, Oscar Lewis in the concluding remarks of the *Annals* edition on poverty and culture. He writes, 'By "culture of poverty", I am referring to the effect that poverty and the threat of poverty have on individuals and families – on decision making and planning for the future, on the perception and reality behind choices for important decisions that must be made today, and on opportunities and possibilities' (p. 223). This quote is an example of how the language and meaning of the 'culture of poverty' lingers on, even though many contemporary scholars have sought to distance themselves from it.

than a broader overhaul of the cultural infrastructures of poverty knowledge. Together with the narrative analyzed above, this boundary-work inadvertently obscures a deeper issue, namely the myopic concentration on the lives of the poor. In effect, it contributes to a failure to consider that earlier approaches did not simply suffer from a problematic conceptualization of culture, but from a reductively narrow field of vision.

From this angle, it is clear that while recent scholarship has broken with the totalizing concept of culture that populated prior accounts, a complete break requires more than greater conceptual specification. It requires a collective rupture with the narrow scope that has saddled poverty research over the twentieth century, especially within the United States (O'Connor, 2002). Unsurprisingly then, much of the new research has maintained the scholarly gaze on 'the poor'. With few exceptions, scholars have only rarely applied newfound tools and theories beyond inherited thematics and actors. This suggests, at the very least, that changes to our conceptualization of 'culture' have not automatically occasioned a transformation of the ontological foundations of mainstream US poverty knowledge. In fact, the historical record indicates that the increasingly constricted scope of research has been facilitated and entangled with ideas of 'culture', a concept that has – notwithstanding different formulations – participated in the rather stable narrowing of the field of inquiry.

Reconstruction: Toward a New Poverty Knowledge

The aim of the preceding analysis of cultural sociological research on poverty was primarily diagnostic rather than prescriptive. The goal was to identify a persistent ontological myopia inherited from the broader study of poverty and to examine two cultural processes – narratives and boundary-work – that contribute to its persistence. However, this analytic strategy was designed not simply to diagnose for the sake of diagnosis. Instead, it was designed with the intention of stimulating greater reflexivity about the limitations and omissions of our sociological knowledge. In other words, it seeks to create grounds on which to reconstruct knowledge cultures. With respect to the substantive case discussed herein, cultural diagnostics makes clear the need to build a 'new poverty knowledge' (O'Connor, 2002).

A key, although preliminary, step toward the creation of a new knowledge base is the expansion of the field's ontological universe. Poverty researchers, and here cultural sociologists can lead the way, must begin to aggressively 'study up' (Nader, 1972). As O'Connor (2002, p. 22) correctly suggests, this means broadening the 'analytic framework from its current narrow focus on explaining individual deprivation to a more systemic and structural focus on explaining – and addressing – inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth,

and opportunity'. In a recent essay, Allard and Small (2013, p. 8) make a similar recommendation:

> We argue that, today, understanding the conditions of these highly disadvantaged populations requires a focus not only on individuals and their neighborhoods but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the organizations that structure their lives, the systems in which those organizations are embedded, and the institutions that regulate the operation of both.

And yet, the ontological expansion proposed by these authors need not result simply in more macro-structural, network or organizational analyses inattentive to cultural dynamics. To the contrary, it also demands retraining our focus and cultural analytics upon new sites, actors and processes that contribute, directly and indirectly, to the production and reproduction of poverty. In light of recent cultural sociological examinations of the economy (for example, Fourcade, 2009; Spillman, 2012) and statecraft (for example, Carroll, 2006; Steinmetz, 2008), as well as the cultural 'turns' in network (for example, Mische, 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010) and organizational theory (for example, Johnson, 2007), there is no reason that a widened scholarly field of vision needs to forsake the study of meaning and meaning-making. In fact, several recent works make this quite clear.

Suggesting entry points for a broader and more comprehensive 'context of explanation' (Reed, 2008), some researchers have expanded the ontological lens in different ways and to different degrees. For example, Young's (2004) study of low-income African American men in Chicago's Westside is not limited to the households and neighborhoods in which these individuals reside. From a phenomenological perspective, Young also examines how experiences of work and school outside of their immediate surroundings shape their worldviews. Similarly, Rios (2011) provides a penetrating ethnography of how young Black and Latino men in Oakland negotiate and resist the emerging 'youth control complex' in the era of criminalization and mass incarceration.

Other scholars have focused on encounters between poor people and other actors. For instance, Rao and Sanyal (2010) analyze village-level public hearings in India. They find that public hearings generated new 'discursive styles' for articulating demands, expressing identities and imagining politics and government, and that these were mediated by material and symbolic inequality. This research points to opportunities to explore the intersection between poverty and civic imaginations through interactions between poor individuals, state officials and privileged citizens. Another interactional example is Auyero's (2012) recent ethnography of an Argentinean welfare office and the politics of waiting. Although he focuses on the experiences and perspectives of poor citizens, his account sheds light on some of the cultural logics and practices of state employees. Similarly, Watkins-Hayes

(2009) provides a culturally informed analysis of street-level bureaucrats charged with implementing the Clinton administration's welfare reform.

Moving beyond direct interactions, some scholars have examined the cultural repertories and frames of elites and political leaders. For example, Guetzkow (2010) investigates the frames of US policy elites and their shifting understandings of the causes of poverty and beliefs about the poor. Comparing US Congressional debates in two historical periods, the 'Great Society' era in the mid-1960s and the more recent 'neoliberal' era, he finds that distinct frames led policymakers to construct distinct policy regimes. Somers and Block (2005) delve further into the cultural infrastructures of policymaking. Examining two separate historical contexts, they offer an explanation of the causal power of the 'perversity thesis', an influential discourse claiming that social policies designed to alleviate poverty actually contributed to its perpetuation.

These works and others (for example, Lamont, 1992; Khan, 2012) demonstrate that even hegemonic myopias are not necessarily powerful enough to entirely prevent research outside of the field's 'obligatory problematics'. However, knowledge cultures tend to influence which ideas and issues get widely taken up and which remain marginal (Somers, 1996, pp. 64–65). More importantly, the expansion of the ontological horizon does not guarantee that underlying assumptions and presuppositions will be scrutinized. As such, merely adding accounts of elites or processes currently off the radar will not necessarily stimulate a reconstruction of the existing cultural infrastructure. On this point, it may be useful to revisit Stacey and Thorne's (1985) influential essay on the forestalled feminist revolution in sociology. Stacey and Thorne note that feminist scholars initially concentrated their efforts on 'filling the gaps' in the scholarship, in a sense correcting the myopic focus on men. These efforts, they add, have been 'less successful in moving to the next stage of reconstructing basic paradigms of the discipline' (p. 302). Simply including 'women' in the analysis does not address the gendered and androcentric foundations of sociological epistemologies. A feminist revolution or paradigm shift for Stacey and Thorne would require two developments. First, there would have to be a 'transition for existing conceptual frameworks' and second, 'the acceptance of those transformations by others in the field' (p. 302).

If we heed Stacey and Thorne's discussion, it is clear that a broader scholarly gaze is a necessary but insufficient condition for transforming the field's knowledge culture. It is just a starting point for the collective project of reconstruction. It is beyond the diagnostic scope of the present article to adumbrate the terms under which such a reconstruction of the cultural infrastructure can occur. Instead, the reflexive contribution of the cultural diagnostics presented here serves as an impetus for debate and discussion about the scope and nature of our poverty knowledge, and specifically, the potential of cultural sociology to contribute to a broader and relational study of poverty and inequality.

Conclusion

In recent decades, numerous arguments about discipline's 'missing revolutions' – including but not limited to feminist (Stacey and Thorne, 1985; Acker, 1992), queer (Epstein, 1994; Stein and Plummer, 1994), historical (Calhoun, 1996; Somers, 1996) and postcolonial (Bhambra, 2007; Go, 2013) – have been advanced. Indeed, the demand for sociological theory and research to breakout of outmoded and taken-for-granted assumptions is an ongoing phenomena, which in several cases has been stimulated by intellectual and political currents found in the wider society (for example, gay rights movement/queer theory/and so on). These demands, however, have often remained either within the domain of critique or meta-theoretical reflections. In both cases, little emphasis has been given to how cultural infrastructures of knowledge resist transformation or can be transformed. It is here that cultural diagnostics has a role to play.

The making of social knowledge is shaped by more than the social position occupied by scholars, complex struggles between knowledge producers and the institutional context of production. It is also shaped by cultural infrastructures, the often tacit and taken for granted but influential epistemic and ontological understandings that guide research. This article investigated 'ontological myopias', a constriction of the scholarly imagination pertaining to assumptions about the content and composition of the social world. Such myopias can effectively narrow the range of questions, issues and dynamics taken up by researchers. As exhibited here, cultural processes – specifically narratives and boundary-work – can contribute to their cloaked persistence. Yet, this effect is not universal, narratives and boundaries can also unsettle ontological myopias.

Cultural diagnostics, in short, offers resources for questioning received wisdoms and generating insights about how to reconstruct inherited cultural infrastructures. As such, cultural diagnostics is not limited to the analysis of the cultural sociology of poverty. Instead, it can be profitably applied to other arenas. In this way, cultural diagnostics contributes to reflexive sociology, a project committed to the continual analysis of our scholarly presumptions. Specifically, it shows that cultural sociology is indispensible to the reflexive project. As knowledge production is a culturally mediated process and knowledge itself is a cultural artifact, there is a wealth of reflexive potential in cultural sociological concepts and sensitivities. Cultural diagnostics, as elaborated herein, provides one route to further realize this potential.

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