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Rewriting Race, Class, and the “culture of poverty”: Ethnographic Work by Eleanor Leacock, 1959–1980

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ABSTRACT

Eleanor Leacock (1922–1987) was a cultural anthropologist and prominent critic of the “culture of poverty” framework. This paper analyzes Leacock’s writings on the culture of poverty with the following questions in mind: How did Leacock’s critique of the culture of poverty framework evolve over time? What was her dissatisfaction with the available conceptual vocabulary and how was she struggling to grow beyond it? We illustrate the shift in Leacock’s critique of culture of poverty discourses by juxtaposing key writings from 1960 and 1980. We then offer an interpretation of the shift by discussing four central themes across her work: the we–they dichotomy, definitions of culture, a critique of research methods, and the real-world effects of the culture-of-poverty thesis. We conclude by drawing insights from the evolution of Leacock’s thinking to advance a critique of contemporary culture of poverty discourses, and to help develop an alternative conceptual vocabulary.

Eleanor Leacock (1922–1987) was a cultural anthropologist and prominent critic of the “culture of poverty” framework, particularly as it was applied in education and anthropology. She was the daughter of literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke and a student of anthropologists William Duncan Strong and Gene Weltfish at Columbia University. Her research focused on housing, mental health, gender, race, class, and education, and she approached anthropology’s mission as “understanding and remediying social problems” (Hochwald, 2006). Leacock worked in indigenous communities in Northern Canada (1954) and urban communities in the United States (1969); later in her life, she conducted fieldwork in Zambia, and she passed away while doing her last fieldwork in Samoa (Gacs, Khan, McIntyre, & Weinberg, 1989). She maintained a fundamental concern with recognizing the historical roots of social problems such as poverty and educational inequity, and a commitment to developing more complex conceptual, methodological, and political tools.

While Leacock’s critical approach to social analysis is essential to the history of ethnographic research on schools, she is rarely cited or assigned in university courses on race, culture, ethnography, and education. We hope to counter this trend by analyzing Leacock’s writings on the culture of poverty with the following questions in mind:

(1) How did Leacock’s critique of the culture of poverty framework evolve over time?
(2) What was her dissatisfaction with the available conceptual vocabulary and how was she struggling to grow beyond it?

We use the word struggle to imply both the difficulty of Leacock’s conceptual objective and her relationship to struggles for social and political change. We are most interested in the process...
through which Leacock developed her critique of culture-of-poverty discourses, including her concern with the real-world implications of how academics describe and treat low-income and racialized communities.

We first illustrate the shift in Leacock’s critique of culture-of-poverty discourses by juxtaposing key writings from 1960 and 1980. We then offer an interpretation of the shift by looking at four central themes across her work: the we–they dichotomy, definitions of culture, a critique of research methods and positionality, and the real-world effects of the culture-of-poverty thesis. We conclude by drawing insights from the evolution of Leacock’s thinking to advance a critique of contemporary culture-of-poverty discourses, and to help develop an alternative conceptual vocabulary.

A key shift: 1960–1980

Comparing Leacock’s writings from 1960 and 1980 illuminates a key tension many educational researchers committed to equity must confront: How to engage in sociocultural critique with terms that may delimit the potentials of communities in need? In Leacock’s comment on Martin Deutsch’s 1960 monograph on ties between poverty and delayed cognitive development, we find central concerns that persisted throughout her writings, namely: the schools’ role in perpetuating racial and class inequality, the uncritical acceptance of middle-class values as the desired norm, and the researcher’s positionality and bias. The language Leacock used to analyze these problems in 1960 included terms she later critiqued. For example, in problematizing Deutsch’s focus on “cultural deprivation” as a cause of educational inequity, Leacock argued instead for addressing “educational deprivation,” or the unequal distribution of resources across schools. At the same time, she used the language of “deprivation” and “deprived children” throughout her 1960 piece:

As a corollary to the adverse effects of cultural deprivation and discrepancy, lower-class and Negro children also suffer from what can be called, “educational deprivation.” . . . There is often little attempt to prepare deprived children for more than commercial high schools. (1960, p. 31)

Leacock’s concern in 1960 was not Deutsch’s use of “cultural deprivation,” but that he did not fully attend to educational inequality.

By 1980, Leacock had developed a vocabulary for directly confronting the culture-of-poverty thesis, and the very notion of cultural deprivation:

In culture of poverty terms, . . . the close fit between “good” schools and white middle-income student bodies, and “bad” schools with low-income and nonwhite student bodies needs no further explanation than that the latter follow from the children’s “cultural deprivation” (pg. 157). . . . The ideology embodied in the culture of poverty . . . would have us believe that schooling practices and occupational structures are not the problem, but that the children themselves are to blame. (1980, p. 174)

Eventually, Leacock argued that the culture-of-poverty thesis was more effective in displaying the norms and values of the culture it came from, than in adequately describing those it sought to analyze. Between 1960 and 1980 she shifted to a more direct political critique that included an analysis of the researcher, not just the researched. To understand these developments, we examine the evolution of key themes that comprise Leacock’s critique.

The we–they dichotomy

From the outset, Leacock was concerned about how “we” (researchers, members of dominant groups, categories to which she belonged) are constructed over and against “they” (the researched, members of social groups treated as subordinate).

All too often the concept [of cultural deprivation] carries with it the uncomfortable implication that middle class norms are ipso facto desirable, that “lower class culture” is merely a subtraction from middle class culture and has no positive attributes of its own on which to build learning, and that our goal should be to have all children reject any deviations from middle class standards. (1960, p. 31)
For the next two decades, Leacock consistently expanded her critique to include new formulations of the we–they binary (middle-class vs. lower-class culture, abstract vs. concrete language, achievement vs. underachievement, civilized vs. primitive). Eventually, she argued that the “habit” of overusing dichotomies was itself central to culture-of-poverty theorizing.

In 1967, Leacock analyzed the we–they dichotomy in relation to the homogeneity of school curriculum, a theme she continuously returned to:

What needs closer description and more attention is the way the blond middle class “we” versus all “others” theme ties in with school definitions of patriotism and a teacher’s goal for the children. . . . [A]ll people are measured in terms of this single continuum which at the successful end has become identified with the notion of “values”; it is not a matter of having middle class occupation and status, hence the appropriate ideology, but of having the “values,” hence the success. The phrase commonly slipping into Brotherhood Month activities, “they are just as good as we are,” means they can be as good if they learn to be clean, quiet, etc. It is these “values” that the teacher feels duty bound to inculcate into the children, and one can only wonder how any self-respecting child can help but rebel! (p. 17–18)

Leacock considered how the we–they dichotomy supports the idea that inequality results from a lack of middle-class cultural values. She also linked this blame-the-victim ideology with liberal statements like “they are just as good as we are”—a sentiment that leaves middle-class norms unquestioned. The we–they dichotomy mediates and constrains relationships between teachers and students, researcher and researched, such that the “they” is always a lesser version of the “we.” By 1971, she directly named the abuse:

[T]he projection of a middle-class orientation to life in general was not the major problem for poor and black children. It was rather that a middle class attitude towards them and their inferior status as poor and black was being foisted upon them. (p. 29)

Leacock also contested the tendency to exaggerate class differences in behavior by stating them in terms of polar opposites:

Middle class people plan; the poor do not. Middle class people defer gratifications, the poor do not. Middle class child-rearing modes are democratic; those of the poor are authoritarian. . . . Middle class people think abstractly; the poor think concretely; And so on and on. (p. 25)

By 1977, Leacock explicitly defined we–they dichotomizing as “the habit of relating to people in terms of strongly evaluative unidimensional polarities according to which individuals are in essence viewed in terms of higher or lower on a single scale” (1977, p. 162). She traced this habit to its Western epistemological roots and the overt Americanization of immigrants, and highlighted its direct effect on classroom learning. “The interest and excitement that could accompany learning about differences is submerged by the concern with relative merit. Differences loom as problems. They are sensed as threats, for people cannot just be different—someone has to be ‘right’ and someone ‘wrong’” (p. 154).

For Leacock in 1977, and for us today, it is the habit of dichotomizing (and the relative judgments embedded in the dichotomies) that must be challenged and reconfigured. The dichotomies distort more than they illuminate, keeping us caught in a framework where “differences loom as problems.”

Definitions of culture over time

A second theme in Leacock’s critique of the culture-of-poverty thesis was her analysis of “culture” itself. In the early 1960s, Leacock did not directly critique how culture of poverty theorists used the concept of culture. She described relationships across “sub-cultures,” whose differences exist because of “ethnic, class, regional, and rural-urban variations” (p. 31). Starting in 1967, she began to criticize how theorists such as Lewis (1961, 1966) and Moynihan (1965) used “culture” for two central reasons: their overemphasis on the role of psychological and personality factors in the maintenance
of poverty, and their failure to address how structural and material constraints influenced observed behaviors.

Leacock took strong exception to the psychological and deterministic character of culture-of-poverty theories. Shifting the language from “lower class” or “poor” people to “workers,” she castigated culture-of-poverty theorists for perpetuating a “psychological attack on the American worker” (p. 4). She also sought to make explicit the social, economic, and political forces that influenced working-class individuals and families. In 1968, she criticized the focus on “group personality” vis-à-vis the family “as a major mechanism (to some the major mechanism) in the perpetuation of existing economic and social conditions” (Rainwater & Leacock, 1968, p. 83). For culture-of-poverty theorists, the family itself perpetuated poverty through its cultural values and norms. For Leacock (1968, 1969, 1971), these theorists treated cultural processes as “closed-circle” (1969) transmissions occurring only in the home, unrelated to the social and economic changes communities faced.

By 1971, Leacock provided her own definition of “culture”:

the totality of a group’s learned norms for behavior and the manifestations of this behavior. This includes the technological and economic mechanism through which a group adapts to its environment, its related social and political institutions, and the values, goals, definitions, prescriptions, and assumptions which define and rationalize individual motivation and participation. (p. 35)

Leacock continued to describe subcultural variations among U.S. ethnic groups, but insisted that they emerged in response to specific historical, regional, and economic realities (p. 26). What remains unclear in Leacock’s writings is the extent to which “culture” is defined by nation-state borders and whether there exists such as thing as “American Culture.”

For Leacock, the culture-of-poverty framework was a peculiarity of U.S. middle-class values. It was an “American culture myth” that “inborn psycho-biological characteristics determine social patterns of behavior” (1977, p. 156). By 1980, she also drew a clear connection between culture-of-poverty theorizing in the United States and the discursive treatment of so-called developing nations.

**Critiques of the researcher over time: Methods and positionality**

If the culture of poverty itself was a mythical manifestation of U.S. middle-class values, it was also a key source of the biases of American researchers and their methods. For Leacock, methods were political: Research participants could either be treated as subjects of a presumably objective study, or as political actors, a stance that requires researchers to reflect on her own subjectivity and positionality. As early as 1967, she advocated for “radical scholar[ship]” and alliance with the “working class” (p. 67). Like many of the social scientists influenced by the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty, Leacock wanted her research to do public good, but she soon began to critique liberal researchers who constructed research participants as ultimately responsible for their own poverty.

Initially, Leacock (1960) used the term “citizen scientists” to describe scholars who were being called to study schools and identify methods for helping “deprived children” (p. 31), and she saw the hypocrisy of trying to fix children without fixing basic educational inequalities as a result of what researchers were being asked to do. By 1967, Leacock aimed her critique directly at researchers themselves, and their sources of funding, which emphasized individual deficiencies without attending to unequal educational, political, and economic conditions. She explained that “the psychological attack on American workers is tied in with the proliferation of vast research and action-linked projects designed to look good and go nowhere” (p. 4–5).

Leacock claimed that researchers’ judgments of their participants were tied to substantive methodological limitations. Culture-of-poverty researchers uncritically applied interpretations based on their own subjective middle-class, college-educated, white, and male frames. Leacock saw carelessness in how sociologists and educational researchers deployed sample groups to generalize characteristics of whole ethnic and racial communities. She scrutinized controlled research
environments that “conform[ed] to the professional world of the social scientist” (1967, p. 19) and forced research participants outside of their communities to be interviewed, recorded, and observed, thereby creating an unequal relationship between “expert” researcher and “nonexpert” research subject, a dynamic that likely influences the responses given by research participants.

Leacock advocated for qualitative and ethnographic research with a deliberate orientation toward systematically learning from research subjects. From this place of deep respect, researchers’ analyses could engender more complex, nuanced portraits of the communities and individuals studied. Leacock called for researchers to take a more ethical and political stance, understanding the ways funding structures and institutional pressures may affect their intentions and work, and always aiming to learn from and stand in solidarity with their research participants.

**Real-world implications of culture-of-poverty theorizing**

Leacock’s critique of culture-of-poverty theorizing emerged from her concerns with its real-world impact: a distortion of the historical and structural roots of poverty and racism, and a tendency to blame educational inequities on the poor themselves. For Leacock, this framework exacerbates the problem by (a) legitimizing and rationalizing inequality, (b) influencing teachers’ perceptions and pedagogical relationships, and (c) hindering revolutionary demands in favor of liberal, reformist political agendas. Leacock’s analyses of these real-world implications hold direct relevance to the current resurgence of culture-of-poverty theorizing.

Early on, Leacock emphasized the contradictory role schools play: while meritocratic ideas are consistently espoused, schools themselves are organized as a “double-track” system. Through unequal resources and opportunities, students are socialized for different socioeconomic roles. In 1969, Leacock recounted the shift in her thinking that resulted from her study of classrooms in four urban neighborhoods in the 1950s:

> Initially I assumed a so-called “value clash” would be significant and that the “middle class” character of the schools would find a ready response from middle class children, but would create difficulties for poor white and Negro children who hold “lower class values.” As the research progressed, however, it became apparent that this was an oversimplification of the case to the point of distortion. Instead, as the socializing institution second only to the family in our society, the school differentiates in its treatment of the children according to the position of their parents in the social status system. This differentiation is such that the school takes an active part in defining for poor children a role as outsiders and failures. Teachers are not as sensitive to low status children as individuals, do not respect them, and are not as prepared to listen to them as they are to middle class children; and not so much because these children have “lower class values” as because they are lower class. For the phrase “middle class values” to have any significance, it must include as primary the evaluation of people according to income and the assumed inferiority of anyone who is poor and is not white. (p. 356)

This shift in thinking illustrates Leacock’s growing attention to the unequal distribution of resources across schools, and to the functions of teachers’ assumptions about students. Her research led her to reject the argument that differential achievement resulted from a “clash” of values, a stance that failed to examine and problematize the teacher’s pejorative attitudes toward poor students. If the “culture of poverty” blamed the student, Leacock moved on to blaming the teachers. In the next few years, she would leave both positions behind by examining the position of students, teachers, and researchers within a larger system. By 1971, Leacock described teachers as both “victims and villains” (p. 28), and began developing her earlier call for helping teachers to resist received categories and exploring opportunities to talk with students, parents, and teachers in ways that suspend these frames:

> The literature on differential schooling by class and race, the opportunity to watch the progress of organized attempts to improve schooling, the possibility of meeting some parents in various organizational situations, and of observing some children in freedom schools makes me ask: How can a social scientist be content with the formulation, “since the children do not grow up in a stable life, they are not able to accomplish in school”? (1968, p. 88)
Contemporary struggles

Our goal in this paper has been to excavate Leacock’s processual and evolutionary interrogation of the conceptual vocabulary undergirding the culture-of-poverty framework. We see a strong resonance between social science writing about poor people in the 1960s and current emphases within educational discourse on character, grit, perseverance, accountability, and individual responsibility. Once again, the contemporary legacies of culture-of-poverty theorizing legitimize inequality, influence teachers’ perceptions and pedagogical relationships, and constrain revolutionary demands in favor of reformist political agendas. Once again well-intentioned reformers equipped with a language of pity and a call for equity are using public money to implement test-based reforms that rely on and perpetuate deficit views of the poor (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). These reforms aim to change the children and not the system. Like Leacock, we are dissatisfied with both the conceptual vocabulary used to describe families and children living in poverty and the attendant ways they are treated in U.S. schools (Rodela, 2014). Although concrete resource inequities have become more visible, proposed solutions continue to rely on individualized frames that position familial and cultural backgrounds as causes for student failure, and define success as achievement despite the odds rather than a reimagining and reorganization of the system to serve all children (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). The current language of reform occludes poverty itself as a social problem, opting instead for a pejorative focus on teachers and families.

Leacock’s goal was not simply to reform the system, but to bring about social and political transformation. Leacock pushed for researchers to consider how scholarship shapes the ways “experts” treat and study working-class families and children. She yearned for scholars and activists to learn from and move in solidarity with working-class communities. As a self-named “radical scholar,” she sought to change talk about the poor and to incite a shift toward seeing students, parents, and educators as legitimate political actors. This conceptual and political shift requires a critical evaluation of our own vocabulary and a commitment to wrestling with its assumptions. How can we use teaching and research to critique and disrupt a socioeconomic system that privileges our role as “experts” over the voices and movements of working-class families and communities? Confronting the assumptions within our language and conceptual frameworks can generate interpretations and understandings that lead to distinct ways of remedying social problems. Words that mask the material conditions of poverty and that sort and limit people should be confronted. Even words we love—words like learning (McDermott, 2015)—must be treated as suspect. Drawing from Leacock, we seek to work with research participants and together grow historicized frameworks grounded in justice-oriented solutions for social and educational problems.

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