



Culture and poverty from a lifeworld stance: rehabilitating a controversial conceptual pair

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Abstract

This paper picks up Oscar Lewis’s controversial culture of poverty theorem and shows that it has analytical potential, if applied with a rigorous, dispassionate and actor-bound concept of “culture”. Based on Alfred Schutz’s socio-phenomenological model of the lifeworld, “culture” is understood as the interpretive und pragmatic ways in which actors approach the world. Staying true to this framework, I argue that people in scarce living conditions are deprived of institutionalized possibilities to live out their intentionality. This demoralizes and disorients them, which results in the loss of inner drive and pessimistic attitudes. Fatalism and passiveness infiltrate their action planning. Phenomenology helps to systematize these results into spatial, temporal and social aspects: people in poverty lose opportunities for the appropriation of space, their biographies appear to stagnate and they are preoccupied with securing their social reputation. My results therefore show that poverty should not be understood as a self-isolated subculture. Instead, people in poverty are heavily oriented towards the dominant middleclass and its life models. The interview data that provided these insights were collected in North England and South Wales, in the facilities of subsidiary and counseling bodies, between 2016 and 2019. They were analyzed using methods of hermeneutic text interpretation.

Keywords Culture of poverty · Oscar Lewis · Phenomenology · Lifeworld · Alfred Schutz

Introduction

In social sciences, poverty has often been understood as a lack of financial means, or symbolic exclusion from the dominant sphere of gainful work (Byrne 1999; Dermott and Main 2018; Paugam 1998; Shildrick 2018b; Townsend 1979). Poverty is

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characterized in this way as something that is brought to the individual from the outside by impersonal economic, political or structural forces. With reference to Alexander (2007; 2001), one can say that these perspectives obstruct the view on how people in poverty actually experience their life–circumstances, that is, what poverty looks like from the inside. Poverty is lived by concrete actors who deal with it, shape it and, in the course of this, develop their own approaches to the world. These approaches develop their own dynamics, which also play an important role in explaining poverty. One of the first authors to include this perspective into research was Oscar Lewis. His influential works on the “culture of poverty” (Lewis 1959, 1961, 1966b, 1966a, 1968) manifested an important turn towards the lived reality of poverty. It established the conviction in social sciences that poverty populations in modern welfare states form an everyday world in its own right. At the same time, Lewis’s theorem marked the beginning of a very intense debate that lasted for decades – and is still viewed very controversially.

According to Goetze (1992), especially in the USA, the “culture of poverty” approach provoked different sociopolitical exhortations and confessions. Scholars argued whether Lewis’s diagnosis devalued the poor, mostly black, population of the urban slums (Harvey and Reed, 1996). Authors like Valentine (1968) or Leacock (1971) pointed to the (potential) pejorative implications of Lewis’s theorem that seemed to other “the poor” as culturally inferior and overall “blame the victim”. More conservative authors (Murray 1984) used it to delegitimize social welfare measures which supposedly supported unproductive and deviant lifestyles, thereby leading to a persistency of the “underclass”. To sum up, one can say that, in these discussions, Lewis’s ideas were “used as a weapon rather than as a tool” (Rodman 1977, p. 874).

In other parts of the world, the controversy was less political. In particular, but not only, the German debate addressed Lewis’s (and also his critics’) theoretical and systematic shortcomings (Goetze 1992). It was pointed out that Lewis mainly described a “subculture” that differed from the rest of society, especially the middle-class, but did not formulate a coherent *theory* of the “culture of poverty”. He unsystematically named social conditions that helped a “culture of poverty” to grow¹ and stressed that, once established, it develops an own dynamic and persistency. The latter being due to “values and goals of the larger society” that the poverty population cannot live up to, “feelings of hopelessness and despair” (Lewis 1966b, p. xlv) that result from failing them, an own way–of–life, consisting of coping strategies and institutions, and “a strong present–time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification, to plan for the future, [and] a sense of resignation and fatalism” (Lewis 1966b, pp. xlv–xlviii). Thus, he followed, even if the conditions change, the subcultural imprint prevents new opportunities from being seized, which is why

¹ These conditions are: “(1) a cash economy, wage labor and production for profit; (2) a persistently high rate of unemployment and underemployment for unskilled labor; (3) low wages; (4) the failure to provide social, political and economic organization, [...]; (5) the existence of a bilateral kinship system, rather than a unilateral one; and finally, (6) the existence of a set of values in the dominant class which stresses the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility and thrift, and explains low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority” (Lewis 1966b, pp. xliii–xlv).



poverty populations would stick to their lifestyle. Against these dichotomizing, holistic and deterministic ideas of a “subculture” of poverty, an approach was called for that focused on actors and their ways of adopting and making sense of their life situations (Goetze 1992, p. 94).

This demand was renewed years later in the US–context by Lamont, Small and colleagues (Lamont and Small 2008; Small et al 2010). They called for “going beyond the ‘culture of poverty debate’” by turning towards “the role of meaning making in basic social processes” (Bell et al. 2016, p. 1) and using established sociological concepts when linking poverty with “culture”. In doing so, they (critically) picked up a *post-Lewis* research strand that has been developing since the late 1990s, when authors started including experiences, interpretations and coping strategies of poverty populations into research again. To name just a few of these works: Sharon Hays (2003), explicitly referring to Lewis, argued that single mothers with a (very) low income, due to their unique challenges and circumstances, develop their own values, beliefs and practices which differ from those of the middleclass. Thus, besides seeing their family through, they are confronted with a struggle for social recognition. Kathryn Edin’s and her colleague’s work on the very poor (Edin 1993; Edin and Lein 1997; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Halpern-Meehin et al 2015) showed that “the absence of cash permeated every aspect of their lives. It seemed as though not only cash was missing, but hope as well” (Edin and Shaefer 2015, p. XV). With this, they aimed for bringing attention to the defects of the welfare system of the USA and the severe personal consequences that arise as a result. Young (2004) and Lamont et al (2013) pointed to forms of agency and resilience capabilities of vulnerable, impoverished (black) groups: they do not simply endure their difficult living situation and their social stigma, but find ways to act on them and demand respect (see for similar arguments Lister, 2004). Unfortunately, these forms of subjective agency can also have undesirable consequences, as is shown by Matthew Clair (2020). He argued that poor defendants in court are less cooperative and establish more complicated relationships with their attorneys than more well off defendants. This assertive behavior is grounded in a deep skepticism towards the legal system, due to former negative experiences with the police and being trailed (see also Goffman 2015).

In sum, these works provide impressively thick descriptions of the lived reality of poverty, due to the fact that they were “the product of qualitative feet on the ground examining the daily lives of the urban poor in the workplace or the street” (Newman and Massengill 2006, p. 423). They also demonstrate how poverty populations establish ways of sensemaking and engage in unique practices – some of which, while being understandable within the realm of their lived experiences, hinder upward social mobility. However, as intriguing these works are, a meta-learning from them is that “poverty researchers should be more explicit about the conceptual tools they mobilize to describe how culture contributes to the production and reproduction of poverty” (Bell et al 2016, p. 13). Are we speaking of normative aspects like “values” and “beliefs”, when talking about “culture”, or are we focusing on the individual and its “frames” and “repertoires” (Bell et al 2016 p. 13)? For a cultural sociological approach to this topic not to be “elusive” but distinguishable (Alexander and Smith 2001, p. 144) it is important to be clear about such theoretical



decisions. Depending on them, the picture we draw of culture and how it is linked to a life in poverty differs.

In my article, analyzing qualitative interviews from a research project on people in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, who were dependent on financial and social support, I want to contribute to this theoretical discussion. I propose that the “culture of poverty” concept has potential as an analytical tool, if it is based on a dispassionate, “judicious, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded” (Small et al 2010, p. 8) notion of culture. For this purpose, I draw on the socio–phenomenological theory of the lifeworld (Schutz 1945; Schutz and Luckmann 1973). It provides concepts which help to focus on the meaning people give their surroundings and their own actions in everyday life. The *culture* of poverty is thus understood as the ways in which poverty populations pragmatically approach and “frame” (Small et al 2010, pp. 14–15) the lifeworld. Additionally, these interpretive processes are systematized into three dimensions – time, space and the social – which Schutz differentiated as the fundamental strata of human experience (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). This enables me to pin down the key challenges to the world access of people in poverty. Instead of an autonomous, vigorous lifestyle, as is taken for granted by large parts of society, people in poverty experience heteronomy and an inability to live out their intentions. Phenomenologically speaking, their “horizons of possibilities” (Small et al 2010, p. 15) shrink down in regard to space, time, and sociality. That is, people in poverty lose opportunities for the appropriation of space, their biographies appear to be at a standstill and they are occupied with securing their social reputation.

Lewis’s theorem is thus updated theoretically in two ways. Firstly, it becomes apparent that people in deprivation share major patterns of orientation with the rest of society. Instead of insinuating a (deviant and self-excluding) subculture with unique and coherent values and norms, as Lewis did – and others still do in an idealizing manner (McGarvey 2018; McKenzie 2015) – it is more accurate that people in deprivation still make sense of their situation in reference to dominant social institutionalizations and life goals. Actually, comparing themselves to the standards of the “labor society” (Arendt 1958) and its dominant middleclass is where most of the resignation comes from. Contrary to romanticized views, my respondents’ wish is to get a proper job, fitting in and living a modest life. Hence, people in deprivation do share a unique experiential realm, which is based on processes that will be elaborated below. However, this does not mean that they close themselves off from society.

Secondly, the thesis of a cultural persistency of poverty is explained anew. Instead of assuming a subcultural imprint, I show how my respondents are often caught up in a dialectic of losing touch with the world of gainful work and consumerism on the one side, and a defensive way of approaching the lifeworld on the other. For some, this results in a total and overwhelming pessimistic impression of the world and their chances in it. In a very general manner, they become passive and lose their “sense of agency” (Chase and Walker 2013, p. 748). Others are more resilient and find ways of motivating themselves. However, even in these cases, it becomes clear how difficult it is to identify with the image of an “agent self” (Silva and Corse 2018) in a world of experience that demoralizes the experience bearers. This insight



must not be confused with psychologizing the reasons for poverty, or “blaming” the poor. Poverty is not due to a weakness of character, to be sure. However, one can show that specific everyday surroundings and social arrangements shape the agency of individuals and thus their ways of approaching the life–world pragmatically.

To sum up, the lifeworld approach contributes to concretizing culture as a “strong” explanatory factor for poverty (Alexander 2007; Alexander and Smith 2001). It theoretically deepens the insight that a life in socio–economically scarce conditions involves actors which establish typical modes of experience for themselves that go hand–in–hand with typical modes of world interpretation and action planning. Moreover, the approach allows the systematization of this culture of poverty into different horizons (space, time, the social) and thus the extension of the results of studies that relate to time perspectives only (Güell and Yopo Díaz 2021).

Not least, my approach contributes to the long-lasting discussion about the reproduction of (lower) class positions through culture (Bourdieu 1990; Lamont 2000; Lareau 2003; Skeggs 1997; Willis 1981) in a unique way. In addition to the idea of cultural transmissions from one generation to the next through processes of socialization, or class-specific narratives that hinder upward mobility (Silva and Corse 2018), poverty is recognized as a state–of–living that is experienced in a concrete “here” and “now” and which involves a very basic struggle for personal realization and social recognition. It is this struggle which consumes most of the energy of my respondents and that makes their living situation so hard to escape.

In order to elaborate on this argument, I have structured my paper into the following. Firstly, I give an introduction into the lifeworld theory and how I utilized it as tool for finding out more about the lifeworld interpretations of people in deprived circumstances. This is followed by information about the empirical approach and the qualitative methodology upon which my findings are based. In the next three sections, I give insights into the experiential landscape of poverty. Differentiated into the spatiality, the temporality, and the sociality of poverty, it turns out that experiencing deprivation and unemployment not only goes hand–in–hand with the management of shortages and exclusion. The actors’ general way of approaching the world and their role in it changes from active and optimistic, to passive and defensive. Eventually, in the light of these results, I discuss the theoretical contributions of my research, as well as some of its limitations.

Analyzing poverty from a lifeworld point of view

The concept of the lifeworld was introduced by Edmund Husserl into philosophical discourse as “what we know best, what is always taken for granted in all human life, always familiar to us in its typology through experience” (Husserl 1970, p. 123). This includes the immediate living environment of an individual, with its typical errands, encounters and experiences that are not questioned in everyday life. Alfred Schutz utilized this approach for sociological thought. He concentrated on the everyday world as the “paramount reality” (Schutz 1945, p. 549). By this, he meant the consciously dominant world of the “pragmatic motive” in which social actors operate “naturally” and which they modify by their actions (Schutz and Luckmann



1973, p. 6). It is pivotal that the lifeworld is not just a cognitive image, but is always pragmatically appropriated: “We have an eminently practical interest in it, caused by the necessity of complying with the basic requirements of our life” (Schutz 1945, p. 549). Hence, the lifeworld does not exist independently of an actor’s intentionality, but is formed in the first place by his plans of action, relevancies and interpretations (Schutz 1945, p. 549).

Researching the “culture of poverty” from a Schutzonian perspective thus means to understand it “within the scheme of human motives, human means and ends, human planning—in short—within the categories of human action” (Schutz 1943, p. 146). In other words, it is necessary to foreground how people in socioeconomic scarce living conditions meaningfully approach and appropriate their lifeworld. The “horizons of significance” (Frechette et al 2020, p. 4) that are revealed therein constitute the *Eigensinn* of poverty: specific world interpretations, attitudes and convictions that differ from those formed in other (material) contexts of experience, and which tend to bring about experiences that support these worldviews. This leads to my main theoretical argument: I portray poverty as a state-of-living in which the actor’s horizons of action shrink down, thus invoking a very basic struggle for self-realization and social recognition. As I will make clear, people in deprived circumstances find it hard to attribute themselves potential for action or envision achievable goals for themselves.

At first glance, this mode of experience may appear due to material restrictions and structural forces only. One could say that an activist approach towards the lifeworld results from an outgoing experience structure and is based on a materiality and the social constellations that secure it. Where both are missing, pessimism and fatalism become more probable. However, on closer inspection from a cultural sociologist perspective, this explanation falls short. It misses out on the fact that the social world is put together by actors who follow intentions and who are guided by generalized forms of life practice that are taken for granted in everyday life. Those who cannot meet these inter-subjectively-shared resources of basal sensemaking, for whatever reason, are confronted with the fact that the unquestioned normality and social belonging that is decisive for other members of society is suspended. For them, the ways in which actors typically makes sense of their life can no longer be taken for granted. I propose that poverty is a state-of-living where exactly this happens. For my respondents, it is a common, subjectively severe problem that they cannot comply with the institutionalized, dominant models of action. This severely disorients them: that is, only few manage to redirect the own potentials and find ‘alternative’ or highly individualized ways to give meaning to their situation. Most have the perception, however, that they cannot bring to life that with which they identify, or what is expected of them. The result is that they become demoralized and lose agility.

Referring to Alexander and Smith (2001), these typical perceptions and convictions make up the “internal environment” (Alexander and Smith 2001, p. 136) of my respondents. They constitute the “cultural structure” of poverty in that they lay open that poverty, in part, is characterized by specific processes of sensemaking and ways of relating to the world. That is, besides outer circumstances like the liberal welfare state, one finds that actor-bound interpretations of the world and the own



position in it as well as the actions that follow from it also play a role in explaining the production and reproduction of poverty. Phenomenology now provides conceptual keys that reveal how these cultural structures are linked to poverty circumstances. As I will show, one finds a dialectic of an inability to achieve generalized social goals and practices, whereby the intentionality of my respondents in daily life remains undirected, and a restricted focus on local and short term goals, which hinders them to “escape” their poverty situation. In addition, phenomenology helps to further concretize and differentiate this argument. As Schutz pointed out, there are three stratifications of experience in which the intentionality of the individual manifests itself. These are a) the spatial arrangement of the lifeworld, starting from the individual’s “zone of operation”; b) the temporal structure of the lifeworld, based on the individual’s “internal duration” and external time courses; and c) the social arrangement of the lifeworld, i.e. different “fellow–men” to whom the individual maintains various types of relationships (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, pp. 36–98). I will use these phenomenological dimensions for giving accounts of the *spatiality of poverty*, the *temporality of poverty*, and the *sociality of poverty*. It becomes visible that generalized practices of the appropriation of space, such as going on vacation trips and independent housing, and of time, such as the biographical formation throughout the employment career, are hardly achievable for people in poverty. In addition, basic assumptions about one’s own social worth are contested: the affected find themselves in a struggle for social recognition. Overall, this shows that if one cannot comply with the different institutionalized models of the general organization of life that are essential for subjective sensemaking, one’s general way of approaching the world changes from active to passive.

Data, methods and ethics

My study relies on face-to-face interview data that were gathered between 2016 and 2019 in North England and South Wales by a research team as part of a larger project². The respondents ranged from young people who consume drugs on a daily basis and were convicted for different crimes, to people who once lived a middle-class life and now struggle to find a way out of unemployment; from single mothers who mainly perform care work for their children, to older single men who suffer from their alcohol addiction and depression; from people who left school early, to people who graduated from university. Hence, the sample is contrastive in the sense that it covers different biographical and class backgrounds. All the respondents represent a type of poverty that was not chosen. Self-imposed, escapist, ‘alternative’ or

² The project was dedicated to “Worldviews of Unemployed People” in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. It was based at the University of Leipzig, Germany, from 2016 to 2019 and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Principal Researcher was Kornelia Sammet. Student assistants were Johanna Häring, Charlotte Nate, Alexander Mennicke and Almuth Richter. They all contributed to the data collection and the analyses in various constellations.



in other ways aestheticized models of living in economically scarce conditions were not part of my study. All names are pseudonyms.

My respondents experienced the wider societal conditions of the UK which complemented their living situation. The UK paradigmatically stands for a long lasting liberal welfare tradition (Esping-Andersen 1993) and, starting in the 1980s, underwent a transformation from a welfare to a “workfare” state (Deeming 2015), which resulted in a strong personalization, moralization and stigmatization of deprivation and unemployment. Additional austerity measures, such as the Welfare Reform Act in 2012 (Dwyer and Wright, 2014), manifested this character. Thus, people in poverty can barely count on political help or public empathy. In North England and South Wales, one can observe these effects particularly well. The regions were strongly affected by the industrial structural change, the ‘neoliberal’ reforms and the financial crisis of 2008. Unemployment and deprivation are therefore widespread phenomena (Noble et al 2019; StatsWales 2019). Accompanied by a simultaneous lack of job perspectives, one finds particularly harsh living conditions there.

To recruit participants, we researched subsidiary and counseling bodies, such as food banks, community centers, job clubs or private employment agencies in these regions and emailed or called them. We explained our research idea and attached short information sheets to display in their facility, or to be passed on directly to potential respondents. Most service providers invited us so as to get to know us better. Few canceled directly to protect their clients. If we were invited, the further recruitment was moderated by intermediaries, mostly professional social workers. They knew their individual clients, helped to explain the scope of the research to them and oversaw the completion of the consent forms. In addition, they helped to set up an initial group discussion within their facilities that served as both an opportunity to introduce ourselves to the respondents, and as a data piece for later analysis. Subsequently, the staff also helped to set up the individual interviews with people who stood out as theoretically interesting cases in the group settings. However, in order not to let the obvious power relation between social workers and the interviewees influence the interview, the research team made sure that the social workers were not included in the interview setting. Since they were mostly aware of this issue themselves, this did not create a problem for further co-operation. In fact, the social workers even helped with another ethical issue that needed monitoring: there was a good chance to be perceived as part of the middleclass and, moreover, as representatives of an institution with judgmental authority (university). This posed the danger of triggering “feelings of inferiority, rejection, shame, guilt, and defensiveness” (Mao and Feldman 2019, p. 129) through our appearance. The fact that the interviewees often suffered psychological problems, or experienced severe life crises, exacerbated the problem. In this difficult situation, the social workers helped to build trust and to address concerns of the potential interviewees. In addition, they gave information about delicate topics and experiences of the participants. It was thus possible to guarantee sensitive interview behavior. Finally, in some cases, the social workers helped with language difficulties, since the research team consisted, to a large part, of German first language speakers with different degrees of experience in English, and only one British-Canadian English native speaker. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the intermediaries were never included in the interview



settings, as interpreters, for example. In general, we relied on the guiding principles of qualitative research (openness, reflexivity and pragmatism) to manage language barriers (see Erhard et al 2021).

The semi-structured interviews followed a biographicalnarrative approach (Elliott, 2005) and lasted between 20 and 90 minutes. In line with the phenomenological research interest, the respondents were asked to speak freely about their life-story and current life situation and encouraged to talk about what is important and meaningful *to them* in their everyday life. To stimulate fluent narrations and elaborations, they were asked only a few “open-ended questions” (Charmaz 2006, p. 30), in order to try to tap into the “assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (Charmaz 2006, p. 32) that guided the respondent’s actions.³ For the UK, this resulted in a sample of 36 single interviews and four group discussions which were included in my study. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using methods of hermeneutic text interpretation (Frechette et al 2020; Maiwald 2005; Reichertz 2004). That is, the interview transcripts were interpreted to identify repetitive, typical experience structures and, coherent with the theoretical framework, implicit beliefs about the actors’ acting potentials. This revealed how experiences of the respondents translated into attitudes. To systematize and condense the emerging patterns, the phenomenological stratification model allowed the informing of these interpretations metatheoretically. It showed that the relevant experiences and the change in the ways people in poverty approach the lifeworld affect all strata of human experience – not only one.

The spatiality of poverty

So far, cultural sociology has mainly dealt with the stigmatizing images that specific poverty spaces, especially in urban areas, have for the public and the “site effects” these images have on the inhabitants (Bourdieu 1999). These effects include “hustling” as a specific, semi legal economic survival strategy (Wacquant 2007), for example, but also own codes of conduct and constant stress and fear, due to unique everyday challenges, like being steadily surveilled, policed and supervised (Goffman 2009, 2015). Thus, mainly the spatial segregation of poverty populations, and its reproductive effects on class (and racial) inequalities, have been researched. Although this is an important perspective, I want to introduce a different approach to the relationship between poverty and space. Staying true to the phenomenological framework, I show that the spatial horizons of my respondents tend to narrow down to a very restricted “here”. This is due to a dialectic of attitudes and perceptions

³ The stimulus for each single interview was as follows: “At the beginning of the interview, I am interested in your personal life-story, what you have experienced. Maybe you can just tell me what your life has been like, or what has happened in your life. You can start wherever you want – perhaps with telling me how you grew up and how your life went on. Maybe you can start with your childhood.” Situationally, this stimulus was adapted so as not to disrupt the previously natural character of the conversation. In the further course, questions were asked concerning biographical breaks and crises, as well as the perception of the current life situation.



concerning spatial acting potentials, and the actual spatial mobility of the individual. Institutionalized practices of space appropriation, like furnishing the own home or going on vacation trips, represent the reference parameter for this. Just like certain biographical patterns, these practices direct the otherwise undirected spatial intentionality of an actor. If one cannot live up to these orientation patterns, it changes the perception of the lifeworld. One becomes inwardly detached from one's immediate surroundings and loses the inner drive to act space related.

Dave: social decline and spatial constriction

A first example for this is Dave. He was 56 years old when he was interviewed. During the talk, he painted a picture of himself as a former self-made entrepreneur who had built his private fortune through his own efforts and skills. Right out of school, he worked in a poultry factory, earning enough money to support himself. This was followed by various jobs until he finally bought his own fish shop and started his own business. At the same time, he married and started a family, with which he associated a high degree of subjective happiness in his memory. The first excerpt deals with the biographical situation of establishing himself in a middleclass position:

Dave: [...] but this eh this job changed my life, did that. Absolutely. In between we'd had two big fires.⁴

I: The fish shop?

Dave: Yeah. Em, one, one were on me twenty-first.

I: Oh, okay?

Dave: Twelve o'clock dinner time, so it would be, nobody had wanted to go out. The flames were hitting the ceiling and I was thinking, Woah. And then another one where we were just going home and I heard this big roar. It were one of the extractors what had caught fire, but I didn't get home till four the next morning 'cos we, we couldn't lose any trade. But em, yeah, I could do anything. I could set my mind to absolutely everything. I rewired me own house, put me own kitchen in. An- We were happy for a long while. We went on holiday twice-a-year, (.) joined a holiday club. (ll. 242-60)

Dave tells a story of an especially space related expansion and virility. He owned a house and a business, both of which kept him well occupied and therefore stimulated his agility. In addition, he went on vacations regularly which represents a popular space-consuming practice of the middleclass. This extensive phase in which Dave was very motivated and could live out his intentions ("I could set up my mind to absolutely everything"), however, only represented a biographical plateau which is indicated by the evaluative wording "we were happy for a long while." The rapid decline that followed this plateau is sketched in a subsequent interview passage,

⁴ The interview excerpts are smoothed slightly. Only pauses in speech and unclear or incomprehensible parts are marked.



where Dave reported the separation from his wife and the bankruptcy of his fish shop. He even became homeless for two weeks and lived in a tent in a park. What is relevant at this point for the argument of this section is that Dave had experienced forms of an independent and autonomous appropriation of space. However, these living conditions were disrupted by a significant cutback of his spatial possibilities. What exactly this change meant for him was expressed when he came to speak about the demoralizing time when he finally had to leave behind his previous standard of living (ll. 57–58):

Dave: When I first lived, moved on me own, I cried for days. Never lived on me own before.

And later in the interview, when speaking about his current living situation in sheltered accommodation, he paints this picture even further (ll. 301–309):

Dave: The first time I lived on my own, oh, it were terrible. It were tiny, it were only about the size of this room I'd say.

I: Oh, really?

Dave: With the kitchen in it and bed in it. It were horrible. (sniffs) It weren't my scene at all and it were a bit run down. Em. And then we went into a, then I went into a, yeah, then I went into another bedsit. It were a private landlord and that were even worse than that.

It is recognizable here that Dave above all remembered a regression in the living conditions (“it were tiny”, “it weren't my scene at all and it were a bit run down”), from which he suffered greatly (“I cried for days”). By referring to the small size of the room he had to live in, which was roughly the same size as the room in which the interview took place, he makes it clear that he experienced the change as a step backwards and, referring to a “private landlord”, a curtailment of autonomy. This experience, of course, can only be understood against the backdrop of his previous living situation. Compared to his former experiences, the situation described in the interview must have appeared almost like a confinement.

Alex: spatial alienation

But how does this shrinking of spatial potentials and the change from an autonomous to a heteronomous space practice effect the inner orientation of an actor? Alex is a good example to answer this question. At the time of the interview, he was 51 years old. Like others in my sample, his perception of the lifeworld was clouded and fatalistic. The main reason for this was that he had long since ceased to be part of the sphere of gainful work, which was still a crucial reference point for him. However, his demotivation also became clear in relation to another point. Speaking about his current housing situation, he expressed what Wacquant called “spatial alienation” (Wacquant, 2007, p. 69). He was inwardly distanced from the place in which



he had lived. For him, it missed identification potential and could not serve as his own home, which demotivated him (ll. 87–102):

Alex: [...] I got married in nineteen eighty-five, um, I'd been with her since, since I left school really. Erm, got divorced in two-thousand, so that didn't help. Then I got married again. I'm still married now, but don't live with her. Basically, that's why I had to register as homeless. But I'm not homeless, I'm in er, I'm in like supported accommodation. Keeps me off the streets you know.

I: Yeah. It's better.

Alex: But it's not ideal, I do, I need me own place really to give me a purpose. It would give me a motivation to stop drinking in general really. Cause I have to – (when) we have got I'll have to like buy furniture and stuff (sniffs), to feel it's me own. Just give you a purpose dunnit, if you've got your own place, incentive. (sniffs)

Here Alex briefly reported the history of his marriages, linking the (informal) dissolution of the second one to the loss of his house. This connection is difficult to reconstruct, but has to do with the fact that his wife left him and abruptly moved out one day – as Alex mentions later in the interview. As a result, he lost his house and had to register as homeless, which continued until the time of the interview. At the same time, he did not consider himself homeless, which he elaborates by saying that he now lives in “supported accommodation”, the functionality of which fulfilled the purpose of keeping him off the streets. At the same time, however, this could not be compared to an apartment of his own: this specific idea of a personal housing space implies that he could have designed and furnished it (“buy furniture and stuff”) and thus would have gained the impression that it is indeed his “own”. Phenomenologically speaking, it thus becomes apparent that living in, and designing, one's own home fulfills “meaning” beyond mere accommodation. It gives one's intentionality a spatial anchor point. The extent to which this is true can be seen in the fact that Alex associated a “purpose” and an “incentive” with the personal appropriation of a dwelling. This addresses an inner drive in everyday life that is nourished in settings of autonomy and obstructed in settings of heteronomy.

Hence, what we see here is that the lived experience of poverty coexists with a change of how the lifeworld is pictured and appropriated. Instead of a positive identification with one's own spaces in everyday life and an active outlook on the use of space, my respondents experienced that their spatial horizons of action are more limited than before. On the one hand, this is, of course, due to material restrictions that limit the actors “zone of operation” (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 41). On the other hand, however, one can observe effects of demotivation and demoralization that relate to experiences of the limitations of formerly taken-for-granted spatial action potentials. These effects deprive actors of their motivation to physically move or extend their zones of operation. The spatiality of poverty, as represented in my data, is thus also due to individual perceptions of one's spatial possibilities and attractions in the lifeworld.



The temporality of poverty

Even though the trope of a dominant present time orientation and the loss of future outlooks among poverty populations has been pivotal to cultural analyses of poverty (Banfield 1970; Fieulaine and Apostolidis 2015; Güell and Yopo Díaz 2021; Lewis 1966b; Moynihan 1965; Zimbardo and Boyd 1999), so far only little is known about “the concrete events and experiences that shape pessimistic or optimistic perceptions of life–course and social mobility” (Güell and Yopo Díaz 2021, p. 13). Of course, Silva and Corse (2018), for example, showed that members of the working class perceive their future outlooks and upward mobility chances pessimistically because of specific narratives they grow up with. However, the phenomenological framework presented here helps to clarify how such imprints shape one’s perception of the world and eventually one’s actions. My results are based on insights into so called “biographical trajectories” (Riemann and Schutze 1991) that enable modern individuals to make sense of the passing of time. In fact, the ability to place themselves within institutionalized life *story* patterns constitutes (parts of) their identities and guides their actions in the first place (Somers 1994). I argue, that for my respondents, this model of a “fixed succession” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, p. 52) of the life course appeared to be stuck, which also affected their daily experience of time. Phenomenologically speaking, the temporal horizons of actions narrowed down to immediate, short term perspectives characterized by little variety. In the interviews, one can therefore observe both perceptions of a biographical standstill or dead end and of a stretched present. My respondents found it hard to present a life story of themselves. As the following examples demonstrate, the typical experiences and events that led to these perceptions were insecure surroundings of socialization, as well as personal biographical crises.

Dylan: socialization and biographical standstill

The incapacity to place oneself in a biographical trajectory, as well as the pessimistic–passive attitude which characterize a biographical standstill, became particularly clear in the case of Dylan. At the time of the interview, Dylan was 19 years old. He had been arrested several times, consumed hard drugs and was father of a daughter whom he was not allowed to see. He was interviewed in a counseling agency for teenagers and young adults, who were (potentially) homeless or had other housing needs. During the interview, he found it hard to concentrate and was overwhelmed with the task of elaborating on his life. In doing so, he undermined the interviewer’s expectation that he could present a biographical narrative of himself. Instead, he remained in the present in his accounts. This becomes particularly clear in the following excerpt. It directly follows the interviewer’s invitation to Dylan to tell his “life story”.



Dylan: Uh, grew up, and my fa– my father fucked off, fucking living on a shitty council estate, (2) fucking bailiffs coming on us door.

I: Okay.

Dylan: Know what I mean?

I: Yeah.

Dylan: (11) It's not too very nice, shit childhood. (2) In and out of jail.

I: In and out of jail, okay.

Dylan: (5) Homeless.

I: Mhm.

Dylan: Baby.

Dylan only called up the most necessary information from his life which seemed to happen to him more than that he could actively influence it. He presented himself as a passenger of his own life. Even the birth of a baby, which in the further course of the interview turned out to be his own, provoked no further elaboration. Thus, Dylan described no development in which individual events influence and stand in a sequence to each other. Although, his life was characterized by individual elements (father, bailiff, prison, homelessness, baby), they were not presented as progression. This was reinforced by the fact that, throughout the interview, Dylan expressed no plans or desires for the future. However, this impression of his life as a stretched, hardly varied present is not to be confused with the idea that Dylan did not experience anything. Quite the contrary: as mentioned, and as also illustrated by the fragmentary excerpts, he had already experienced quite a bit. In addition, he could call up individual stations from his life course as well (parental home, childhood, fatherhood). However, they seemed to not be related to each other. Consequently, in line with the phenomenological framework, it must be assumed that he had a limited capacity for narrative self-presentation because of an experience structure that did not allow him to do so.

In fact, based on the data offered, one can follow that, due to the specific surroundings he was socialized in, it seems consistent that Dylan did not develop any perspectives for longer time spans and did not see any potential for action for himself. He grew up in a precarious environment in which his father abandoned the family (“fucked off”), the family received visits from bailiffs, and he himself came into regular contact with law enforcement (“in and out of jail”). Overall, this “shitty childhood” describes an unstable environment in which there was little reliability and hardly any reason for optimism. Added to this were the restrictions, constraints, and obligations as a young father. It becomes clear that, while middleclass children and youth “learn to imagine and perform an ‘agentic self’ – a future-oriented, persistent actor in control of one’s fate” (Silva and Corse, 2018, p. 236), Dylan had hardly been confronted with prospects for biographical development and alternatives in his life so far. Thus, biographically disoriented, dreams, plans and perspectives for the future became unlikely for him. He could not picture himself as the shaping agent of his life course, which also influenced his current experience of time. With his biography at a standstill, his life appeared to be an indistinctive present to him.



Gavin: personal crisis and biographical dead end

Besides typical socialization experiences, it was a repeating pattern among the respondents that biographical trajectories had come to an abrupt halt due to experiences of upheaval and personal crises, such as the death of significant others, bankruptcies or separations. In these cases, the respondents showed that, for a shorter or longer period of time, they had been integrated into institutionalized life courses. They received education, found jobs, formed families, or established businesses. However, because of “powerful events that cannot be controlled” (Riemann and Schutze 1991, p. 342), they experienced themselves as victims of “overwhelming forces” which lead to a “far-reaching disorganization of everyday affairs” (Riemann and Schutze 1991, p. 342). Self-doubt, pessimism and the feeling of paralysis infiltrated the lives of the respondents. Their biography appeared to have reached a dead end.

A good example for these dynamics is Gavin who was interviewed in a food-bank in a former mining valley in South Wales. At the time of the interview, he was 26, had no professional occupation and struggled with several addictions. In the interview, he mentioned that he constantly thinks about where to get his next drink. Despite coming from difficult circumstances and only living with his mother for a long time, he had had a promising future ahead of him. He had made plans to become a firefighter and even trained himself to get into the professional education program. However, his future outlook was flawed by a dramatic turning point in his life:

Gavin: And I left school at 16. I trained hard to get in there [in the firefighting course, FE] at the age of 18. So, I trained hard for two years. Then is f—the age of 17 on, my mother went bad. She passed away and from the age of 17, when I was 17. [...] And from that day on, everything just start to go downhill then. Um, I hung around the wrong crowd, doing drinking a lot. And just the drinks been a big problem in my life anyway. I’ve been brought up with drink. My father’s aggressive through drink. My brother was a—aggressive through drink. (Close then he) taking drugs as well. So, I was growing up knowing understanding why all this is happening. So then eventually, and I turned the age of 21. And that’s when things started – starting to get problems then. Drinking started. The drugs started. Uh, started off s—smoking cannabis first, from cannabis, then to cocaine. And from cocaine, then to speed. [...] And then from there then, I’ve just been up and down road then. (Il. 57–94)

Gavin’s plans for the future, and the preparations for it, collapsed with the death of his mother. He concluded: “And from that day on, everything just start to go downhill then” – which signals how drastic the event must have been for him. His behavior and the temporal horizons relevant for his actions changed. Without his mother as a stabilizing factor and authority that kept him away from the influences of his father and brothers, he lost track of his formerly formulated biographical goal. Instead of the steady development of a biographical trajectory, he was drawn deeper and deeper into the world of alcohol and drugs. His orientation shifted away from



future achievements and possible job positions and towards more present matters, mainly his addictions. This change influenced his lived experiences and his agility, and resulted in the perception of a biographical dead end. Although he remembered his initial goals, he found it hard to find his way back onto the biographical path in order to realize them and, instead, was frequently thrown back when trying (“up and down the road”). The following statement illustrates this struggle even better and shows how resignation and pessimism spread about the question whether he could find his way back to the biographical trajectory he had pictured for himself.

Gavin: Now I’m trying to just get myself back. I’ve been running now to try and get back in there [the firefighting course, FE]. No, but I’m getting older now. I’m 20, 20 uh 27 now. I’ll be 28 now, uh, next Saturday. So, I’m getting older, really. You know, we’re not younger. I’m getting older as well. And I need to start doing something with my life. That’s the way I see life, anyway. I want, I want to choose something first before I settle down with anyone and have kids. (ll. 219–238)

Gavin expressed the conflicting experiences that he had been trying to get back into the firefighting course and that his biography appeared to be stuck. For him, biographical options were closing or had already closed. Time seemed to fly by, with him just getting older and not achieving anything in life. He therefore felt the unspecific urge to become active in order to actually make any decisions about his life *at all*. To be sure, he did not seem completely disoriented about his biography, which is illustrated by the image of a life with an own home, wife and children, which corresponds with common life goals. However, it becomes almost tangible that he had no specific idea of how to follow this urge. He mainly struggled with the discrepancy between his personal situation and his aspirational goals that he could not live up to – which again fed his perception of himself to stagnate. Thus, the difficulty in escaping the own experience-bound pessimism and the accompanying factors, like addiction, became clear.

Overall, the cases of Dylan and Gavin demonstrate how biographical imprints and experiences of heteronomy can lead to the impression of a biographical deadlock or dead end. For the actors, the perceptions of a stretched present and standstill set in. Demotivation, the loss of agility, and the feeling that time just passes by arise. They conclude for themselves that they have no say in the course of future events, specifically their own biography, and stick to present problems and short term solutions. However, it is important to repeat that these results do not imply any weakness of character or agenda. Instead, as phenomenological theory allows us to show, a specific subjective temporality that is based on a dialectic of obstructive or demoralizing experiences and the narrowing down of time horizons is responsible for it.



The sociality of poverty

In this section, I reflect on the social dimension of the lived experiences of poverty. I focus on devaluations, rejections and forms of shaming that all of my respondents have experienced to different degrees and in various encounters in everyday life. One can find vast quantities of literature on this “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1977) and the resulting depressing emotionality of people in deprivation. Stereotypical and mischievous representations in the mass media (Jensen, 2014; Shildrick, 2018a), or judgmental devaluations by JobCentre staff (Patrick, 2016), for example, are well researched. For this article, therefore, I do not go into detail about these different aspects, but portray the general character of the lived social relations my respondents have had with their “contemporaries” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, p. 84). In doing so, I show that, for my respondents, the standards of the labor society were essential for their subjective experiences. They had internalized the “moral mandate” (Güell and Yopo Díaz 2021, p. 3) of these institutionalized life models and identified with them. At the same time, they were mirrored by their more well off contemporaries that they did not belong to them – of course, my respondents were mostly aware of this fact themselves. Nevertheless, they found it mortifying and offensive to be othered and confronted with stereotypical images of their living situation. Hence, what stressed them in the social dimension was not their material situation, but the loss of social recognition and the step backwards in the social hierarchy. In the interviews, these experiences and fears corresponded with self-representations as willing to perform and improve, as well as with typifications of the “Others” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, p. 84) as relentless.

Keiran: struggling to fit in

A good example for these insights is Keiran. Interviewing him, it became particularly clear how public debates and attributions lead to a deep inner conflict and provoke feelings of not being able to keep up and of not belonging. At the time of the interview, Keiran was 33 years old. For large parts of his childhood and adolescence, he was raised by his grandparents and later in a foster family. He came into contact with alcohol and drugs at an early age, lived on the streets and spent almost ten years in prison. In the interview, he was very reflective. He signaled that after many setbacks and traumatic experiences, he longed, above all, for a normality that he characterized by serenity and steadiness in everyday life. In the following passages, he spoke about labeling processes and stigmatizations, which affected him personally (ll. 255–263):

Keiran: Erm I think more of the out of city areas there’s a lot more working class people, i.e. people who have got jobs, homes, you know better housing and stuff like that. I don’t, I don’t think there’s a divide as such, but I think once you’re under that label of either being homeless or being on drugs, or even an alcoholic, or a nonalcoholic or drugtaker, erm people tend to not give you a chance or



opportunity like the normal person and would get like who doesn't take drugs or whatever.

The passage is dominated by a dichotomy. On the one hand, Keiran identified a group that he called “working class people”, but whom he described with middle-class attributes (“out of city areas”, “jobs, [...] better housing”) and whom he labeled as “normal”. In contrast, he sketched a lifeworld that is very close to his own. Here, basic assumptions about where a person lives are suspended (“homeless”) and deviant, self-destructive behaviors dominate everyday life (“being on drugs or [...] an alcoholic”). It should be emphasized that Keiran did not aim at the material level, but at the symbolic level of these lifeworld differences. In his perception, one's social standing and life chances depended on the life circumstances and everyday practices one is associated with (“under that label”). If one is considered a deviant, which he assumed for himself, one gets fewer chances than a “normal person”. As it turns out, the perception of being an outsider and the striving to be “normal” and to fit in were pivotal to Keiran's experience structure (Il. 270–278):

Keiran: Erm for me I think it's down to my life choices why, why I'm struggling', you know, to have normal things in my life and feel normal. I think as I get more better and weller and progress more in me recrov-, recovery. I'll probably feel less socially detached and more socially-accepted because I'm doing what normal people do, you know, and blending into society rather than sticking out like a sore thumb.

Keiran addressed experiences of social exclusion and devaluation here and repeated his urge to “blend[.] into society.” In addition, he blamed himself (“my life choices”) for the situation he was in. What stressed him was to be (potentially) perceived as different and abnormal – and as passive. This fear of loss-of-reputation and the effort to signal “progress” and insight into one's own culpability were typical for my respondents. In fact, both aspects are two sides of the same coin: they express that one still shares the orientations of the labor society and wishes to be part of it. This is also reflected in the following. However, here Keiran left aside the self-accusations and came to speak about how he perceived the general social environment (Il. 285–294):

Keiran: I, I, I just feel like I'm, I'm excluded or looked down upon in society because I don't, I don't work. And that erm I've lived in [town in Northern England] all my life and I haven't worked and either been in prison, or on drugs, or s-, drink or whatever. And I don't know, now that I'm trying to get better in myself and in recovery, sometimes I feel like people don't want to give you a chance or they don't trust you. So, I, I feel like there's a brick wall up against me or I don't, I don't feel like I fit in.

Firstly, Keiran repeated the familiar: he was not and has never been employed, showed deviant behaviors, but was “trying to get better”, that is, trying to meet the (anticipated) expectations of society. However, he also described his contemporaries



as relentless and even hostile. From his experiences, he was distrusted and confronted with resistance that he could not overcome (“brick wall”). For Keiran, his life was a struggle with a stigma that was seemingly impossible to resolve.

Thus, the case of Keiran once again illustrates the attraction of conforming to established life models. In the social dimension, this can be attributed to a very basic urge for social recognition and is explained by the fact that living in poverty goes hand-in-hand with experiences of being distrusted, shamed and excluded. Being recognized as a proper, decent member of society in everyday life cannot be taken for granted for people in poverty. Many of them are therefore consumed with appearing “normal”: that is, managing the image that contemporaries have of them by (rhetorically) compensating the own shortcomings in relation to the standards of the labor society. However, these efforts are not always successful. In fact, many have the perception of tilting against windmills. Although they want to improve, society does not seem willing to accept them again. This contributes to the demotivating experiences discussed in the previous sections.

Results and discussion

My research uncovered that the *culture* of poverty can be found in the dialectic of experiencing demoralization and disorientation, and an extensive defensive interpretation of the world. This picks up on the basic idea of cultural sociology that the social world cannot be explained (only) by impersonal structural forces. Instead, the focus needs to be on actors who give meaning to their surroundings, and shape them by their actions. Lewis’s theorem could thus be updated and stripped of its (potentially) pejorative implications. The typical strong local and present time orientations of poverty populations, for example, that Lewis has already observed are not due to a habituated subcultural work averseness or unique values. As it turns out, living in situations of deprivation and social exclusion stresses the respective actors beyond the bare material hardship. This situation tends to bring about a collapsing of spatial horizons and stabilizing time structures, and the loss of the taken-for-grantedness of social reputation. As a result, one can observe a “tendency for the existential world in which the person lives to begin to shrink” (Riemann and Schutze 1991, p. 343). Persons are deprived of their learned and previously experienced ways of living out their intentionality and thus lack inner drive and motivation. They become passive and fatalistic.

Of course, these and many other of the observations presented can be found in previous poverty studies as well. Hays (2003) for instance already pointed to the fact that due to their perceived shortcoming relatively to the standards of the middleclass her respondents were caught up in a constant struggle for social recognition and self-worth. However, looking at it through the glasses of phenomenology shows how poverty effects the human condition on a very basic level and thus provides a unique explanatory perspective. Individuals are not just devaluated and do not feel well about it. They no longer find connection to established forms of social integration, lose their feeling of belonging and normality, and thus struggle with basic



sensemaking. In Addition, phenomenology provided a differentiation model to align various empirical insights to this thesis.

These socio-phenomenologically inspired insights provoked several further considerations that should be made explicit once again. Firstly, the relevancy of institutionalized models of general life conduct for basal sensemaking, even for people who are sometimes exoticized, became obvious. Sharing one lifeworld with the middleclass, people in poverty understand and anticipate that they fall short of its ways of living which revolve around gainful employment, meritocracy and consumerism. This results in feelings of inferiority, self-denial and an incapacity for action planning. It thus became apparent that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to appropriate the lifeworld without resorting to socially established models of life. As mentioned above, the idea of a subculture of poverty is thus at least misleading. My respondents could not simply leave aside these models and find “alternative” ways of living. Instead, they struggled with their shortcomings and wished for “fitting in”. To be sure, the poverty population also find strategies of resilience (Lamont et al 2013; Lister 2004) and alternative modes of social recognition, by providing and caring for the own family (Daly and Kelly 2015; Erhard 2020; Gillies 2007; Hays 2003; Shirani et al 2021), for example. At the same time, this does not mean that they live in their own world. It must be admitted, however, that persons who accept, and sometimes even embrace or aestheticize their poverty situation, were just not part of my sample. Finding them, und including their ways of living into research, could certainly expand the results presented here.

Secondly, the thorny discussion about the persistency of poverty and the reproduction of class positions through culture can be informed anew. Analyzing poverty from a lifeworld stance, we understand that an active relationship towards the world is not naturally given. Instead, living under conditions of deprivation tends to sustain itself due to convictions about whether the own spatial arrangement, the own biography and the own social position can be changed. As Schutz pointed out, the scope and “practicability of future actions” is always “biographically–determined” (Schutz, 1951, p. 168). What is therefore shown in the previous pages is that the experiences people in poverty have shape how attainable certain goals and practices seem to them. Situations of personal crisis, unsupportive, or even destructive surroundings at home, stigmatization for not finding a job – lived experiences like these are a starting point for actors refraining from action and experiencing stagnation.

This may also have relevance for political debates. In the light of rising populism and social frictions some scholars have turned to the political implications of a growing impoverished (former) working class (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016, Silva 2019). They argue that the increasing inability and impossibility to reach generalized life goals, like upward mobility through “honest work”, lead to inner detachment from politics and radicalization when it comes to electoral decisions. The perspectives presented here contribute to this argument by stressing that subjective motivation and the feeling of belonging are not only important for the constitution of the individual. Furthermore, they are relevant on a collective level as well. When a critical number of people loses touch with dominant spheres of resonance and are deprived of possibilities to fulfill what gives their lives meaning, societies become unstable. The willingness to deal with political issues in depth decreases



and positions that promise a simple return of an idealized status quo ante become interesting. Resignation and the shrinking of horizons of action are thus interpreted as dangerous political factors that are grounded in personal struggles for self-realization and social recognition.

Thirdly, this proves that we need to include defensively, passively, or even fatalistically oriented patterns of action and experience into cultural analysis of the lifeworld and how it is conceived by certain status groups. Given my respondents, fundamental assumptions about how actors approach the lifeworld need to be reconsidered. Taking up Joas' (1996, p. 167) argument that an "activistic relationship to the world [...] is evidently culture-specific", one can say that it is a specification of the culture of poverty that it provides actors with experiences of heteronomy and a passive interpretation of the world.

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