
Book Review

O'Connor, A. (2001). *Poverty knowledge: Social science, social policy, and the poor in twentieth-century U. S. history.* **Princeton: Princeton University Press.**

Reviewed by Peter Kindle, Doctoral Candidate, LMSW
University of Houston

In less than 300 pages of text, Alice O'Connor, currently associate professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, unveils how knowledge is constructed and how, once constructed, knowledge can become fodder for ideology and political manipulation. Thus used (or abused), knowledge shapes both the institutions (i.e., policies, procedures, eligibility standards) and the broader cultural meanings associated with the concept of poverty.

Her central premise, written self-consciously in the frustrating (to liberals) period following the *end of welfare* promised in the 1994 Clinton welfare reform, is that future solutions to the problem of poverty are contingent upon “a redirection in contemporary social scientific poverty knowledge” (p. 4). Yet this volume does not contain a detailed blueprint for a future research agenda. In fact, she claims that “reconstructing poverty knowledge is more than simply a matter of generating new research questions for social scientists to pursue” (p. 8). What O'Connor is attempting to do is to awaken in her readers a deeper understanding of how knowledge is socially constructed. Her history of *poverty knowledge* becomes, then, a kind of case study or primer on how social scientists who desire to make a contemporary impact on social policy need to reflectively process the institutional, societal, and cultural import of their work.

The first section, from the Progressive Era in chapter one to the antecedents of Kennedy/Johnson's War on Poverty in chapter five, anchors 20th century poverty knowledge in reactions to the natural law defense of Social Darwinism and the moralism of relief agencies. This poverty knowledge was intentionally quantitative and focused on collecting objective social facts, not individual moral failings. The dominant paradigm for poverty knowledge became Chicago's social ecology that understood poverty to be the natural consequence of the cultural disorganization accompanying immigration with an anticipated terminus in future assimilation; however, cultural disorganization was understood to be a treatable symptom rather than a causal contributor to poverty. Poverty knowledge was purposive, directed at structural, economic, and labor reform to produce more egalitarian distributions of wealth and power.

The collapse of the economy in the 1930s resulted in a subtle change in the focus of poverty knowledge (chapter two). In this phase, immigrant deviant cultural patterns in the north and cultural (i.e., racial) pathologies in the south were perceived to be determinative of working class poverty. Further, as African Americans migrated north during the 1940s, the racial barriers

to black assimilation became more apparent (chapter three). Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) set the framework for the racialization of poverty with black Americans relegated to a lower caste-like status reinforced by white racism. The economic prosperity of the post-war years, Cold War competition for influence in poor third world nations, the behavioral science explosion, and idealization of the (new) nuclear family created the context for development of the idea of a *culture of poverty* (chapter four). Poverty knowledge was now relegated to a list of behavioral and psychological traits rooted in dysfunctional family patterns sustaining pockets of poverty. The "isolated, maladjusted, and politically passive" poor "needed the galvanizing force of outside intervention to break what had become an internalized 'vicious circle'" (p. 123).

Chapter five is a short parenthetical insert laying the background of experimental community action programs – a pattern that took on a temporary but highly important role in Kennedy/Johnson's War on Poverty.

In the second section, the War on Poverty made a significant impact on poverty knowledge (chapter six through eight). Chapter six deals with the broad political issues related to poverty knowledge; chapter seven in more detail with the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO); and chapter eight with the academic consideration of the Culture Wars. It was during the decade of the 1960s that poverty became identified, for the first time, as a distinct social problem that required specific government action. Targeted first through an economic growth initiative, then through consideration of economic restructuring and income distribution, and finally settling on community action programs, the War on Poverty in O'Connor's hands becomes a case study of how political considerations and scientific research interact to produce conflicting and ineffective policy decisions. By the end of the 1960s, poverty had been objectified as inadequate income, the culture of poverty had morphed into discussions of human capital deficits, and poverty issues were no longer coupled in policy and political discourse with issues of race or economic structural inequities. Poverty knowledge, under OEO auspices became specialized, individualized, and statistical. Academic researchers did not completely forsake racial and structural considerations; however, academic research was largely severed from reform initiatives, and the techniques of quantitative poverty research focused on individual human capital deficits had much in common with the earlier culture of poverty. In conservative hands, the research and techniques developed to understand and prevent poverty were redirected, in the third section of the book, against welfare rather than against poverty.

Chapter nine, the beginning of the last section of the book, chronicles the poverty research industry spawned by the War on Poverty. Poverty research from 1965 to 1980 grew from \$3 million to \$200 million annually. Poverty knowledge was again changed as a result of federal funding. The questions raised by federal funding agencies were narrow, not expansive, and focused on the identification of the human capital deficits of the poor and on measurement of the effectiveness and efficiency of government income support programs. Even high unemployment and chronic inflation in the 1970s did not result in challenges to the dominant market-centered worldview or existing structural inequities. In the 1980s, the problem of poverty was reinterpreted as a problem of dependency. Liberal analysts advocating structural changes to enhance opportunity and erode dependency provided the data and frameworks later used by conservative analysts to attack welfare itself. The problem was no longer poverty; the problem had become welfare dependency. Chapter eleven traces the *end of welfare* and presents an outline of what poverty knowledge must become to address alleviation of poverty rather than reduction of the number on welfare rolls. This brief four page section basically calls for

redefinition of poverty knowledge as analysis of the political economy and the related structural impediments to economic opportunity.

This ending is clearly the greatest weakness of *Poverty Knowledge*. If political decisions are only rarely a product of rational analysis, as O'Connor has so compellingly shown, then the challenge for liberal/progressive researchers is to understand the contemporary political Zeitgeist in which poverty knowledge is embedded. The recent inauguration of the Obama administration signaled a distinct repudiation of the conservative perspective that has dominated poverty knowledge since the 1970s. This perspective, rooted in understanding poverty as a specialized domain in which individual characteristics are the most significant factors, has impeded consideration of institutional and structural obstacles to poverty alleviation. Progressive and liberal researchers and policy analysts may be facing a time when executive attention can be refocused away from individual deficits to modification of social, structural, and institutional factors that create bridges of opportunity through which the poor might crossover to middle class stability.

What is needed is an understanding of how progressive poverty research can best impact the existing political discourse. It is unfortunate that O'Connor provides so little of this guidance considering the wealth of historical background of which she displays so much mastery. However, one need not be a historian to notice that political and policy discourse has become dominated by the constructs and vocabulary of economics. Social workers in practice and academe who hope to impact poverty knowledge may well consider the investment of time and energy to master the art of expressing the systems analyses to which we are accustomed in the thought forms and categories of the economist. Even Obama's opportunity-directed approach is most likely to be persuaded by innovative system analyses that identify structural barriers and propose new openings to economic advance. There seems little reason why the social work community should not take an active lead in generating a new systems understanding of poverty knowledge.