

RESEARCH AMONG THE ETHNIC POOR; THE PROBLEM OF THEORETICAL MODELS<sup>1</sup>

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Increased research activity among the poor, and the ethnic poor in particular, has generated considerable cross-disciplinary discussion and frequently competing attempts to explain the same phenomena (e.g., poverty attributes). From these exchanges has grown a finer appreciation of the limitations imposed by over-reliance on a single model of analysis, whether one's preference is psychological, sociological or economic. Traditionally each discipline has studied a population for limited purposes, while either taking as valid tentative generalizations from adjacent disciplines or uncritically borrowing their methodologies when questions arose that fell outside the domain of the particular discipline involved. For example, anthropologists plunged into the personality-in-culture problem with the "aid" of projective tests such as the Rorschach while such tests were viewed with considerable skepticism by the majority of personality measurement theorists. Correspondingly, psychologists have often taken cultural parameters for granted and have at times over generalized the effects of processes that are culture-specific to the populations they are accustomed to studying.

Our collaboration on a research project among low income Hawaiians in a rural community on Oahu has made us acutely aware of the limitations of our respective disciplines, psychology and anthropology; consequently, we are working to develop a theoretical model that accounts for the attributes of our subject population at the same time that it transcends disciplinary barriers. The stakes in the theoretical game we are playing have been raised by the knowledge that our findings will provide the basis for an action program by Federal, State and local welfare agencies.

The Hawaiian sub-culture manifests most of the social problems associated with poverty, there being present high rates of health, economic, and socio-behavioral problems. Infant mortality, secondary ear infections, respiratory illness, and dental problems are all dramatically over-represented, making this a high-risk population health-wise; there are abnormally high rates of school dropouts, unemployment, and welfare cases; and illegitimacy, family dissolution, and

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delinquency exceed the State's averages. Racially and ethnically, these people are best considered part-Hawaiian. Virtually all have some Hawaiian ancestry but few, if any, could be considered pure- Hawaiians. Most identify themselves as Hawaiian-other combinations, the other usually being Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, "Haole" (i.e., Caucasian), Portuguese, Korean, or Puerto Rican. They speak a sub-standard colloquial English, often described as "pidgin," which includes some words from Hawaiian and a few from other languages. Hawaiian is spoken only by a small minority of the older people: familiarity with the old culture in general has been substantially eroded,

One area in which we have been forced to confront problems of theory integration created by our collaboration has been that of social problems. We are approaching these processes at three levels: (1) those which operate within the community as a whole and affect the capacity of its members to resolve jointly some of their shared problems; (2) those which affect the family as a unit and render it effective or ineffective as a functional unit; and (3) those which directly affect the individual and his capacity to resolve successfully the problems of adjustment to modern society. Our search of the literature revealed a wide range of explanatory models for the phenomena in which we are interested. They range from specific to general and a-historic and can be conceived as constituting a four-fold typology. These are as follows:

A. Historic - Specific: This type of model accounts for the characteristics of the population in question on the basis of their particular group history. Using this model the current status of Hawaiians (including part-Hawaiian) is considered to have resulted from the disastrous effects of post-discovery invasions by other ethnic groups. These include the affects of disease for which there was little immunity, the loss of land, the destruction of the old religion and other integrative institutions, and a general demoralization. In summation, this could be termed the "ruin hypothesis." It presumes that a viable set of coping mechanisms was destroyed by the introduction of alien factors. An action implication sometimes drawn from this viewpoint is that a revitalization of the "positive" aspects of the old culture is needed, and that a restored pride in one's ethnic heritage will produce beneficial effects.

B. Historic - General: This model has been popular in anthropology and has figured heavily in theories of acculturation. In its most general form, it accounts for the failure of certain ethnic minorities to cope successfully in terms of their subjection to a socio-cultural system which emphasizes values contrary to the ones prevailing within the minority group. In this event,

the Hawaiian case becomes just one instance among many in which traditional behavioral strategies were ill-suited to the modern market economy, while counter-instances are provided by the more successful Chinese and Japanese groups. This view suggests that what is needed to correct the situation is for the Hawaiians to assimilate, for them to imitate core successful models and to substitute new life styles for their current strategies. This means elimination of much that can be now regarded as the Hawaiian subculture since it is a product of conditions antithetical to the goals of social action.

C. A-historic - Specific: This approach accounts for coping behavior, successful or unsuccessful, by reference to the specific attributes of the group in question. Extreme, examples of this type of model include suggestions that Hawaiians have lower native intelligence and therefore would be inevitably over-represented at the bottom of the social order. More sophisticated variations emphasize such variables as achievement motivation, cultural-specific values and attitudes, type of control mechanisms, etc. It is presumed that certain social-psychological attributes are instrumental for successful coping, and that for one reason or another the target population has a statistically infrequent distribution of these qualities relative to the competing group. As a guide to social action, this approach suggests that we find ways of increasing the distribution of desirable traits in the population.

D. A-historic - General: This type of model generally emphasizes socio-economic variables as determinants of inadequate coping behavior. There are two main variations of this explanatory position. The first presumes a direct link between economic disadvantage and a self-perpetuated "culture of poverty"; the other a linkage between economic variables and such "efficient;" mediating variables as child-rearing patterns. Proponents of this type of theory are likely to place stress upon altering the economic variables as a technique for enhancing the efficiency of group members' problem solving abilities.

As we have conceived it, the challenge in our study of this relatively circumscribed group is to derive a parsimonious theoretical model that consists of a set of inter-related variables which are general in the sense that their importance can be measured within any population while allowing for specificity in particular cases. For example, the achievement motive might be considered a universally useful explanatory construct, but the amount of performance variance it accounts for within particular groups may vary widely. As for the historic-a-historic dimension, it is entirely reasonable to examine historical events, both general and specific, in relation to

variables postulated in an a-historic model, thereby adding time depth to an explanatory schema rather than casting competitive alternatives.

The use of this approach poses several problems. First and obviously the models generated by this strategy are more complex than those with which psychologists and anthropologists ordinarily proceed. This venture into metatheory is the consequence of each discipline contributing and promoting variables that the other had considered parameter.<sup>2</sup> For example, anthropologists are more likely to attend to the nature of social contexts and relatively subtle status differences and take for granted those individual differences which are often the central concern of psychologists. To simplify, anthropologists look at situations in which people function and psychologists look at persons functioning in situations. Thus the psychologist may conclude that Hawaiians respond to test situations (in the broad sense of performance evaluations) in a manner characteristic of low need Achievement-high fear of failure persons. His consequent concern is to control closely the situation in which he observes the critical response; but cultural variables may become particularly distressing for the psychologist when it comes to operationalization, for many of the assumptions that lie behind operationalizing presume a standardized perception of test situations, a particular level of literacy or verbal ability, shared semantic understandings, etc. These problems bring to the fore the question of controlled comparisons. If different groups respond to the same data-producing operation differently, is it a function of behavioral variation or a variation in the working of the operation? Obtaining control presents no particular problem as long as the research population shares a common culture-determined perception of what constitutes a test situation. However, as in the case of Hawaiians, the question of cultural interpretation is primary in attempts to define operationally a test situation.

The anthropologist is likely, on the other hand, to presume there are individual differences in response but in the interests of simplifying his research problems, he may deal with this source of variation in terms of a modal pattern, treating it as a parameter and not a variable. He is then apt to proceed to determine systematically the rules that distinguish a test

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms parameter and variable in correspondence with the definition in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (c. 1961): "a quantity to which the operator may assign arbitrary values, as distinguished from a variable, which can assume only those values that the form of the function makes possible."

situation from a non-test situation for the particular culture in question. In short, his variables will be situational cues and their associated cultural rules, and his parameters will be personality or individual difference variables. For the psychologist, the reverse is true.

A second major problem is presented by the culture-specific nature of much of American psychology. Need achievement, level of aspiration, etc., are all "American-made" variables and despite the fact that Hawaiians are Americans, there is no sound basis for deciding that low or negative values on these scales have the same implications for behavior among Hawaiians and Caucasian Anglo-Saxons. It is possible, for instance, that certain variables are powerful only in combination with other variables, or that they appear powerful because the population is skewed along a particular dimension. Thus a variable that may quite satisfactorily account for differences between grossly different populations may turn out to be relatively powerless in accounting for within group differences. We have found in our investigation (Gallimore, Howard, and Jordan, 1967) of Hawaiian mothers, for example, that they make earlier independence demands than Mainland Caucasian mothers: this may also be interpreted as an earlier decrease in reward for dependency behavior. Within the Caucasian group, early independence training has been found to correlate with lower first grade achievement (Chance, 1961), and when Hawaiian children as a group are compared with the Mainland sample, the correlation is compelling, but within the Hawaiian group, this variable does not significantly account for first grade performance variation. We must presume that within a population already skewed toward early independence training and low achievement, other variables are more important.

Another source of confusion that the psychologist must be aware of is the tendency to over-rely on index factors built up within a culturally limited research population. For example, the fact that American males and females vary in cognitive style may lead him to associate these styles with "masculinity" and "femininity" per se. This could result in inappropriate comparisons unless the factors which produce the respective cognitive styles (e.g., role ascriptions) are taken into account. The designation of "feminine" to males, or "masculine" to females, implies abnormality precisely because it implies deviation from role expectancies, and these are apt to be culture-specific. Thus if we explicitly recognize that research among the ethnic poor has, as its long-range goal, an increase in the capacity of the target population to cope successfully with the problems of living in a modern society, another series of issues is raised. Such recognition implies, for example, that we must be prepared to submit our theories to the test of social action.

While it is true that a theory may be valid yet not translate easily into social manipulation, the criterion of implementation must be given recognition. This means that in assigning value to variables, we must take account of their significance for changing behavior, in terms of accessibility to change, as well as the degree of variability for which they account. We must also be prepared to incorporate into our theoretical models significant differences as well as similarities between poverty populations. It is easy to overemphasize the way in which such groups differ as a class from non-poverty groups, but while the Hawaiians have much in common with urban Negroes and the poor of Appalachia, there are also significant differences between these ethnic groups. For example, among the Hawaiians, there is profound willingness to accept and nurture dependent outsiders. Along with other social and behavioral consequences, this has resulted in an exceptionally high rate of adoption. Developing specific models to account for differences, while relying on a general theory to account for similarities is not a satisfactory solution. Any theory designed to account for weaknesses (i.e., inability to make a satisfactory adjustment to the modern milieu) must also take into account strengths or assets, and it is these that are most likely to vary since the definition of target populations relies upon a recognition of their inadequacies. In terms of social action, strengths are as significant as weaknesses— optimal strategies for behavioral change must be based on both.

Perhaps the most complex problem presented to us by the commitment to social action has to do with the adhesion of "neutral" inter-group variables to those that we are trying to alter. Can the Hawaiians be transformed into a group of healthy, productive, competent citizens without total destruction of their Hawaiian-ness? Commitment to cultural diversity as opposed to homogeneity compels identification of culturally unique characteristics which do not co-vary with those traits that require change.

## REFERENCES

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