The Dangers of "Strong" Causal Reasoning in Social Policy

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The federal welfare reforms enacted in 1996 constitute a new chapter in the long history of American poverty policy. As has occurred so frequently in the past, there was sharp disagreement about the causes and consequences of poverty, and as a result, what types of reforms were needed and what their likely consequences would be. When a reform package was finally enacted, two of President Clinton's key poverty advisors (Bane and Primus) were so appalled by the legislation that they resigned in protest.

Reaching a policy consensus on an issue as divisive as poverty in a society as ideologically, economically, and ethnically diverse as the United States is an enormous challenge. Within the United States, it was primarily during the depression years that poverty was thought of simply as a problem of economic deprivation. More recently it has been more broadly conceived as relating to a whole set of related behaviors, including a contrasting focus on moral hazard vs employment opportunities, and norm violating behavior like unmarried female headed households, and law violating behavior like delinquency and crime.

One way to mitigate poverty policy controversies is by appealing to social science and its assertions about the causal connections between various phenomena. Many social scientists and politicians believe that this is a good way to proceed. The recent discussion in the 1998 *Economic Report of the President* of the economic well-being of children illustrates how issues of causality can enter poverty research and how these issues link to policy recommendations. The starting point of the analysis is a simple description that two things appear to be associated with each other—economic status and child well-being. This association is assumed to be valid, robust and especially relevant to understanding the consequences of poverty on later development.

The report asserts that it is the case that "children who grow up in low income families score lower on standardized academic achievement tests, are less likely to complete high school, complete fewer years of school, and are likely to have lower earnings when they enter the labor market than children who grow up in higher income families" (p. 90). Of course, low income needs to be defined and the report does this with reference to three measures of poverty: the conventional approach, half the poverty line, and twice the poverty line. Let us assume that the results are robust, supported by most such studies so that we have confidence that we are dealing with a real and important relation.

The next task then is to offer an explanation of the event. One common, but not the only approach to explaining something, is in terms of its relevant causes. The report asks a modest causal question: How is it that income has this constellation of impacts? It offers three plausible explanations: Parents can't afford to invest as much in the things that im-

prove children's well-being; the neighborhoods the children reside in have more limited access to mainstream facilities, like good schools; and with objective detachment, the report suggests that perhaps the finding is not really an effect of income, but something else which is related to income, like the value that parents place on education, so that raising the income level will not affect academic achievement.

The causal explanation in terms of social mechanisms is not pursued further. Instead, the report shifts ground, and while assuming that income is important, proceeds to ask a "why" question, namely, why have childhood poverty rates changed between 1979 and 1996? Again, three causal explanations are offered: changes in family structure; changes in macro-economic and labor market conditions; and changes in transfer policy. The next step in analyzing these multiple causes is to determine "the full impact of each of these factors on poverty," noting cautiously that "these estimates may also be sensitive to the order in which each income source is accounted for in the analysis." The type of analysis that follows involves analyzing how a specific percent change in the official poverty rate is attributable to a percent change in each of the three independent variables. The last step is to relate the scientific analysis to conclusions about policy initiatives that the administration is pursing in order to create positive incentives to promote work and personal responsibility, assuming of course that income and children's well-being are linked.

From this concrete example of an official policy analysis we learn that 1) the sources for developing casual hypotheses are a mixture of data, theory, belief, and political preferences; 2) the set of possible causes is always much larger than the specific analytic exercise; 3) the explanation tends to be inconclusive; 4) whatever evidence is brought to bear does not undermine the starting generalization; and 5) inadequate income must somehow be an important cause of the failure of children to develop later in life. We will examine this case in more detail later in this article. What the example illustrates is that even when research provides evidence of only weak effects, the analysis is used to make strong claims that are then brought to bear on the policy debate.

This approach to poverty is based on a type of reasoning we term "strong" causal reasoning. The analysis of the Council assumes that the particular symptoms of concern—economic deprivation, female headed households, joblessness, crime—can be dealt with by determining their particular causes and then developing policies that are directed at these factors. We term this type of reasoning "strong" causal reasoning because any approach of this type will work only if the causal factors strongly affect the symptoms. Our interest is in the use of this type of social science reasoning in the debate about and justification for different poverty policies. As James Q. Wilson argues in his classic work, *Thinking about Crime*, the social science view is one that believes that "the only morally defensible and substantively efficacious strategy for reducing crime is to attack its "root causes." Our point is that this can just as easily be said about poverty .

Poverty policy in the United States, even in the most recent decades, has certainly been driven by factors other than science. In fact, the newest round of welfare reform was passed over the objections of most of the social–scientific community doing research on poverty. Science, however, has greatly influenced the process and the public understanding of what a policy solution to the problems of poverty would constitute. For example, the current welfare reform was critically influenced by the finding that poverty for many individuals was not a permanent state, but rather represented a spell of bad luck, often due to divorce, loss of job, sickness, etc. The conclusion was that the state should provide temporary short–term relief to poor families as opposed to indefinite support.

Attractiveness of "Strong" Causal Thinking

Objective procedures and criteria always appear attractive when parties disagree about what should be done. Science is attractive in that it represents a set of agreed upon procedures for answering questions and reaching consensus. In his influential 1877 essay on "The Fixation of Belief" the philosopher Charles S. Peirce argued for the establishment of authority based on the scientific method of inquiry involving investigation, testing, experience, and experimentation. Peirce contended that scientific inquiry required the creation of a community of inquirers. "The members of the community of competent knowers continuously check and challenge the findings of other scholars." What we mean by truth then is the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate.

The scientific approach is decidedly divorced from statements about morality. This, however, does not mean that values do not influence a particular piece of scientific research. Rather, science provides an explicit set of rules by which disagreements are resolved. To the degree that these rules put a priority on

testing theories against facts and there is agreement about what constitutes a test, science can be thought of as objective.

For most of this century, observers have thought that social science would and could play a critical role in providing an objective means for resolving policy disagreements about poverty. Because poverty involves a host of symptoms—economic deprivation, family breakdown, joblessness, crime, etc.—the identification of causes offers the hope of potentially solving a range of different problems with a single cure. For example, the left in this country has long taken the position that the elimination of economic deprivation would substantially eliminate the other symptoms of poverty. This position was most strongly stated by President Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 *Economic Report of the President*: "(Poverty's) ugly by-products include ignorance, disease, delinquency, crime, irresponsibility, immorality, and indifference. None of these social evils and hazards will, of course, wholly disappear with the elimination of poverty. But their severity will be markedly reduced."

The identification of the causes of poverty also has the potential to resolve the moral conflict around who is responsible for poverty. For example, we might find that poverty was principally a function of discrimination faced by blacks in the labor market. Or we might find that the poor could not find jobs, because of a lack of education. Or we might find that the poor can not hold jobs because of their dysfunctional family structures. Any of these findings would have two-implications. They suggest where policy needs to intervene. As a society, should we invest more in enforcing our laws, improving our schools, or supporting families? They also indicate who it is that must change—employers, schools, families, etc. In this area, causal analysis has the potential to resolve the thorny moral question of who should be held responsible for the current state of affairs and thus asked to change or even provide restitution. Given the difficulty in a society as diverse as ours of resolving moral questions using other means, the power of causal analysis to determine who is responsible is most attractive. This is particularly the case if there is a "strong" causal analysis—the factors involved are limited and their effects are large. Then the culprit can be easily identified and held responsible.

Failure of Causal Analysis

Causal analysis potentially fails in two ways. First, social science has been able to provide only what we would call "weak" causal theories. In the vast majority of cases the effects that are found are of modest size and only a small amount of the variation in the dependent variable is explained. It is doubtful that complete explanations will ever be forthcoming in most social science. The use of "weak" theories as the basis for social policy implies that the policy's effectiveness is far from assured. Second, causal analysis in the social sciences fails because it is incomplete in that there are essentially normative questions that it cannot answer. This can happen in two ways. First, there is the question of what is the problem. Is the concern the material standard of living of some individuals or is it that there are so many children being raised by a single parent? Second, in cases where there are multiple factors involved in a problem, which is typical, there is the question of which factor should societal or government policy focus on. For example, assume that youth violence is a function of both family breakdown and the absence of formal institutions in inner city neighborhoods. The question then is where should policy intervene?

It is a common observation that quantitative empirical-models in the social sciences have extremely weak predictive power. R-square, which measures the total variation in the dependent variable explained by a model, is almost never greater than 50 percent, most of the time is less than 30 percent, and often below 20 percent. This holds true in all cross-sectional analyses. In most cases, social science is able to explain only a small portion of the outcome of interest. Although the empirical weakness of social science models is well recognized, the implications of these weaknesses for public policy are often not appreciated.

The strongest and best known analysis is Christopher Jencks's 1972 book *Inequality*. Jencks addresses the assumption popular on the left in the 1960s and early 1970s (and still fashionable in some circles today) that by equalizing educational opportunity and attainment, the problems of economic inequality in the United States can be largely resolved. Jencks shows that most of the variance in economic outcomes is unexplained by education as well as other observed variables. Jencks finds, as have many others, that education affects earnings and income only at a more general level. Decades of research in economics has shown that estimates of the returns to schooling in the literature typically range between 4% and 10% per year of schooling. Despite this substantial effect of education on earnings, Jencks shows that most of the variance in economic outcomes is unexplained by education as well as other observed variables. As a re-

sult, equalizing educational attainment will have only modest effects in reducing economic inequality.

The problems of social science go beyond weak predictions. The results they do produce can be quite sensitive to how the models are specified. As an example, consider the fact that according to standard indicators, child poverty has risen considerably over the past several decades, and the resulting concern about the consequences of this for the welfare and development of the current generation of children. In a recent and massive edited volume, *The Consequences of Growing Up Poor,* Greg Duncan and others carry out a set of parallel cross-sectional analyses that examine the effect of poverty on a wide variety of outcomes for children. They brought together twelve studies which tried to replicate the same causal model. Each of the studies used similar measures of family income, mother's education and family structure to predict children's performance as adults in two broad areas: school performance and later work behavior on the one hand, and health and behavioral problems on the other. Behavioral problems were based on an index that measured whether children had problems in school with emotional well-being as well as having children out of wedlock. In brief, the findings show that family income during the early childhood experience has a strong positive impact on school performance, but virtually no effect on behavior, mental health, or physical health measures.

The critical question is whether these results are spurious and obscure an understanding of the true causal factors. The true cause of a child's later performance in school or in the labor market may not be the family's income but some omitted variable that was not taken into account in the regression analysis. It is hard to get agreement on the importance of the final result since a critic can always challenge the estimate by arguing that a variable has been omitted from the analysis. As a result, causal analysis is always in doubt. In a multi-causal world where family income is one cause rather than *the* cause of later performance of children, omitted variables are particularly troublesome. Duncan is forced (despite his political inclinations) to acknowledge that even the relatively small effects he and his colleagues may have identified may overstate the effect of poverty on children's well-being. He discusses Susan Mayer's then forthcoming and now published book *What Money Can't Buy: Family Income and Children's Life Chances* which argues that income has almost no effect on child well-being. Specifically, Mayer carefully analyzes the problem of omitted variable bias in work of the type done by

Duncan and others. She finds that when one controls for future income, the effect of current income is reduced substantially. She argues that since it is difficult for future income to affect the current well-being of children that future income is really a proxy for unmeasured characteristics of a child's family that have not been controlled for. She also examines the effects of income other than earnings (e.g. government benefits), and finds their effect on a variety of outcomes to be quite small. She suggests this is evidence that the estimated effect of current earnings in part reflects the effect of unmeasured variables. If this is correct, then the effect of poverty on child well-being may well be quite minimal.

Social science models almost always have weak explanatory power and results are often sensitive to the model specification used. What is problematic is that in arguing for particular policies we often argue as if social science's findings imply that there are strong determinative relations between particular causes and outcomes. Certainly, education affects earnings, but this does not mean that equalizing education will have much effect on earnings inequality. Similarly, economic poverty certainly affects child development, but this does not mean that reducing economic poverty will substantially improve child development. Weak causal links do not lead to strong policy effects.

Poverty is not one problem, but many. For some it is an issue of economic inequality, for others it is a question of the lack of a minimally adequate standard of living for those at the bottom of the social ladder. For still others poverty is a problem of crime and deviance, and for others it is a question of who will take care of those who can not care for themselves. When we have strong explanatory theories of behavior, the findings of research may provide a reliable guide on which policy question to focus.

The claim that economic poverty "causes" crime is ambiguous. Aside from the obvious ambiguity that there are many types of crime, the causal proposition linking poverty to all crime is too general. It can mean that economic poverty is *one of several causes of crime.* Alternatively, it can be interpreted as meaning that poverty is *the cause of crime.* If economic poverty is *the cause* of crime then even if our primary concern is with crime, it is economic poverty that policy should be concerned with since it is the causal factor. There are two reasons for this. First, since economic poverty is the cause of crime, then attacking poverty should effectively reduce crime. Second, if economic poverty is the cause of crime, then on

moral grounds we are compelled to address poverty. It makes no sense to hold individuals responsible for their behavior, if they behave that way due to factors outside of their control.

Social science almost never is able to show that one factor in isolation from all other factors is *the cause* of an phenomenon. In fact, even claims about a factor being one of several possible causes typically need to be tentative. There are at least two issues. The relationships between different dimensions of poverty are often quite weak. For example, Tittle, Villemez, and Smith in a 1978 article in the *American Sociological Review* entitled "The Myth of Social Class and Criminality: Empirical Assessment of the Empirical Evidence" suggest that after reviewing a host of studies, the best estimate of the association between social class and crime/delinquency (as measured by gamma, an ordinal measure of association) is -.09. More recent work by these researchers has provided further support for this finding. There is always the question of whether association represents causation. Are poverty and crime possibly associated because they are mutually dependent on some third factor? Even if this is not the case, there is the question of the direction of causality. Is it poverty that produces crime, or is it crime and deviance more generally that leads to poverty? These are questions that are difficult to answer with any degree of certainty.

There are at least two normative issues here. If there are multiple symptoms of poverty that are only weakly inter-linked, then there is the question of where policy should focus. If we are unable to argue that one factor is causally prior to others and it has substantial effects, then causal analysis provides little or no guidance as to where intervention should occur. We must decide on normative grounds (generally conceived and including cost-benefit analysis) where intervention should occur.

Even if there is agreement about which symptom should be of concern, if a symptom has multiple causes (which it almost always does), there is always the question of which cause on which to focus a policy intervention. Consider the problem of youth violence. Youth violence might be thought of as a function of: (1) breakdown of family structures; (2) the accessibility of guns; (3) lack of aggressive policing; (4) the drug trade; or, (5) the absence of formal institutions in the inner city. There is the potential for policy intervention in each of these domains. Such intervention might ameliorate the problem of youth violence, though it would be highly unlikely that intervention in any single area would be totally effective.

Analogous to the multi-symptom situation, in the multi-causal situation we must decide where to intervene. Two sets of criteria come into play. There is the question of where policy can possibly make a change. In his 1985 book, *Thinking About Crime*, James Q. Wilson makes the obvious, but often neglected, point that factors that are causally critical are not necessarily factors that can be easily changed. Gender and crime are examples. In the end these are questions of cost effectiveness. It may be difficult to near impossible to affect family structures, but relatively inexpensive to substantially reduce the accessibility of guns. However, there are normative questions. Although reducing the accessibility of guns may be cost effective, some actors, like the National Rifle Association, may take the position that as a society we have a legal and normative commitment to having guns easily accessible. Conversely, although changing family structures may be difficult, there are groups such as the religious right that strongly believe that children should be brought up in two-parent households. Feminist groups or others on the left may well take the opposing position that the choice individuals make about family structure is none of the government's business.

In situations where there are multiple symptoms and multiple causes, the type of causal analysis that social science has been able to achieve is unlikely to provide definitive answers as to where policy intervention would have a substantial effect on reducing poverty. Efforts to build policies on the weak and fragile links that social science typically finds are likely to fail. Decisions about where policy should intervene involve choices with cost-benefit and normative considerations. These are outside the purview of causal analysis.

The Dangers of "Strong" Casual Reasoning

Social science theories are weak and incomplete. So what? These are hardly new observations. Many would argue that although social–scientific knowledge is imperfect, it is the best basis we have for developing policy. Despite its weaknesses, social science should be the principal tool for the development of sound policy.

Although we concur with this position, we think that there are many dangers in its unthinking and unconditional acceptance. To use an analogy, it is quite a different matter to start on a cross–country trip in a new car that has been thoroughly road tested and inspected by a mechanic than it is to start off in a twenty-year-old "clunker" with several thousand

miles on the odometer that has a history of beaking down.

Although the "clunker" (social science) may be the best alternative available, we need to prepare for its failure and we certainly want to take bus money. To assume that our "clunker" is in great shape is only to court disaster. Our argument is that social science is a "clunker," flawed, but still useful transportation. There is an additional issue. A car, by itself, is also not sufficient for a cross–country trip. One will need gasoline, food, maps, and money. Similarly, in even the best of circumstances it is unlikely that social science by itself is sufficient for policy making. Thus our argument is first that social science is a critical, but not fully dependable vehicle for policy making, and second, that normative and moral factors that fall beyond science also need to be considered. What are the dangers to the policy process of an overly confident adoption of a scientific approach based on "strong" causal analysis?

If we believe deeply in our causal models, then we are likely to construct social policy based on them, and make strong assertions about their future effectiveness. There can be perhaps no better examples of "overselling" than those which occurred during the War on Poverty in the 1960s when social science was at its zenith in its claims about what it could understand and the problems it could solve. As we saw above, President Johnson argued that eliminating economic poverty would go a long way to ameliorating a host of other problems. Charles Murray, however, has argued in a 1995 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, that the War on Poverty is a total failure since welfare, out-of-wedlock births, and crime rates have all risen dramatically since the 1960s.

There are also more current examples of overselling. In 1997, Donna Shalelah, secretary of health and human services in the United States (as quoted in the *New York Times*), described the purpose of 1996 welfare reform legislation as: the elimination of "poverty in the United States, not just to get people off of welfare." Of course, the new welfare reform effort to mandate work cannot eliminate poverty or the problematic behaviors associated with it. But this type of overselling leads the secretary to promise more than the program is able to deliver.

"Strong" causal analysis holds the promise of providing an objective rationale for a policy. If the causal analysis is believed, then we can avoid confronting other arguments for a specific policy. But what happens to our rationale when we discover the analysis is wrong and/or that the causal relations are quite weak?

This is precisely the situation we are in today with respect to school desegregation. Michael Danielson and Jennifer Hochschild, in discussing the problem of school desegregation in Yonkers in their unpublished paper, "Can We Desegregate Public Schools and Subsidized Housing?: Lessons from the Sorry History of Yonkers, N.Y.," point out that the Yonkers Board of Education in 1960 concluded, as did many other cities based on social science testimony in *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, that segregated schools "damage the personality of minority children" and "decrease their motivation and thus impair their ability to learn." As a result, they argued segregation should be ended.

Social scientists had strongly argued that black children were being given inferior education by being kept in segregated schools, and that by being in integrated schools they would learn considerably more. This argument had two implications. First it became the principal rationale for school desegregation. The more general question as to whether integration was an important value in and of itself was not pursued. Second, because it was blacks who were going to benefit from integration, many cities adopted policies where they bore most of the direct costs of desegregation—in many cases it was blacks, not whites who were bused in order to integrate schools.

We are facing a situation today where the effects of integration promised by social science have not materialized. Both research as well as the experience of black parents suggests that the benefits have been minor and the community opposition strong. As a result, support for desegregation is now disappearing even among black parents. In Evanston, Illinois, one of America's most liberal communities and the first city in the country to voluntarily desegregate, there is now a coalition of black and conservative white parents arguing for the return of neighborhood schools.

As with the War on Poverty and the new welfare reform legislation, the problem here is in part a problem of overselling. The benefits of desegregation have not been as substantial as social scientists argued. Furthermore, because of the perceived objectivity of the causal reasoning, the strong predictions made by social scientists, and the consequences of this for policy design, other arguments for integration were crowded out. Most importantly, after we change the rationale and terms of the justifications for the intervention we propose, it is difficult, if not impossible, to successfully advocate for a position which justifies integration as an important societal value in and of

itself and not merely a means to promote the education of children.

If effects are not strong, then indirect interventions are likely to have only small effects. For example, if we believe that growing up in a single parent household adversely affects child development, then we may want to argue for policies that increase the attractiveness of marriage. With indirect interventions the effects need to be large since the policy must first substantially affect marriage rates, which, in turn, must substantially affect child development, if the policy can hope to have any effect on child development. David Ellwood, however, observes in an unpublished 1998 paper entitled "The Impact of the Earned Income Tax Credit and Other Social Policy Changes on Work and Marriage in the United States," that "It has proved remarkably difficult for social scientists to reach a definitive consensus about the influence of social policies on marriage and family formation. The evidence seems to hint at some very modest impacts of social policy on family structure, but the findings remain highly scattered and problematic and often contradictory." Under these circumstances it may well prove more efficient to develop policies that intervene directly to promote child development than attempting to affect child development indirectly through policies aimed at having an effect upon family formation.

During the last two decades there has been considerable discussion of the problem of poverty as being a problem of the urban underclass. The seminal statement in this debate has certainly been William Julius Wilson's 1987 book *The Truly Disadvantaged*. There has been much argument about the usefulness of the underclass concept and its potential for stigmatizing the poor. One of the criticisms is that the use of the term "underclass" results in us thinking about the poor as a single homogenous group. This is a problem more generally with "strong" causal thinking. If individuals are in some particular situation or behave in some way because of some specific factor, then if the causal effect is strong, this should be true for most individuals where this factor is present. Return to the question of economic poverty and crime: if economic poverty is the cause of crime, or even if it has an especially strong effect on criminality, then most if not all poor individuals should be criminals. Of course, this is not the case. Without even getting into the difficult questions of causality, we noted that the association between economic poverty and crime is quite weak. Notice, however, that if we accept the premise that

economic poverty is the cause of crime, the potentially stigmatizing effect that this has on the poor. More generally, "strong" causal thinking inclines us to think of the poor as a homogenous group facing a common set of issues and thus exhibiting common sets of behavior. As is well known, the poor are anything but a homogenous group. Certainly, the vast majority of poor individuals are not criminals.

One of the virtues of "strong" causal reasoning is that it identifies who is responsible. This, however, is only a virtue when the reasoning is correct and convincing. A whole array of poverty researchers have argued that poverty and the behavior of the poor need to be understood as being solely determined by their environment and structural factors. The most vivid example of this strain of thinking was around the Moynihan report, and the claim made famous by William Ryan's 1971 book, *Blaming the Victim*.

As Orlando Patterson has forcefully argued in his 1997 book, *The Ordeal of Integration*, the theory that individual behavior is fully determined by structural factors eliminates the possibility of individual will and responsibility. The poor are no longer fully human individuals capable of making choices for which they are held responsible. As Patterson shows, this involves us in the deep and complicated argument that philosophers have been engaged in over the millennium: the question of free will versus determinism. Patterson argues, as have many others, that the assumption of complete determinism is unworkable in a society in which social order is based on holding individuals, poor or otherwise, accountable for their actions. More specifically, he explains the contradiction of an over-deterministic view: "The cry of the victim, then, is doubly futile: not only does it demean the victim by attributing all agency to the victimizer, but in assuming and legitimizing a wholly determinist social and moral universe, it explains away the injustice of the victimizer. After all, his hatred is also conditioned by the racist culture he was raised in." Strong causal reasoning forces out discussion of individual moral responsibility, thus leading to ethical stalemate.

As we argued above, if economic deprivation is the cause of crime, then we are morally compelled to alleviate economic deprivation of the criminal. Punishing him for his behavior is morally unacceptable. "Strong" causal reasoning can imply narrow policy interventions both for empirical and moral reasons. In his 1996 book, *Whose Welfare?*, Steven M. Teles argues that in the last couple of decades American

politics has become polarized around the extreme positions of ideological elites. Specifically, he sees three different positions competing with each other— an elite concerned with economic equity, a group concerned with the need for hierarchy in order to achieve social control, and libertarians who are concerned with individual freedom. Each group believes in a different form of "strong" causal reasoning—that the poor are poor due to structural and environmental constraints; that it is necessary to constrain the poor from engaging in self-destructive behavior; that the poor are poor because of the choices they have made as individuals. Teles argues that the "strong" causal positions of these different ideological elites has led to a policy gridlock where each group has argued for policies that are in conflict with the principles of the others. Thus the commitment to "strong" causal reasoning has led each group to support one set of policies and to strongly oppose others.

What is wrong here is the commitment to "strong" causal thinking. What social science has shown, if anything, is that different dimensions of poverty are at best weakly linked. Attempting to deal with crime and to improve child development by reducing economic deprivation makes little sense if poverty and crime are not strongly causally connected and money does not matter for child development. Such an effort is likely to be expensive and ineffective. Given the weak linkages that social science has found it is much more sensible to think of policies in a de-coupled fashion. If one's goal is to ameliorate the economic deprivation of the poor, then develop programs directly aimed at this. If one's goal is to reduce crime, then develop programs directly aimed at crime. If one's goal is to improve child development, then create programs directly aimed at improving child development. If we accept for now that the different dimensions of poverty are weakly interconnected then there is much less reason for ideological gridlock over what policy should be given priority. Poverty is not a problem, but is a set of problems that at best are loosely interrelated. As such, we need a variety of policies to deal with poverty.

Making Policies with Weak Theories

Does it make a difference to realize that, at least for the present, that social policy needs to be based on "weak" as opposed to "strong" causal theories? We believe that it does. At the obvious level, if the theories that we base policy on are wrong or misconstrued in terms of their empirical strength, it is likely that our policies will be ineffective. We are in danger of overselling our policies, basing them on potentially fragile rationales, and over-generalizing our results. Besides these general points, however, we think that there are two specific lessons to be learned that are of critical importance.

Above we discussed Murray's 1995 op-ed piece that described the War on Poverty as a total failure. In a *New York Times* op-ed piece published in 1995 just prior to Murray's, Susan Mayer and Christopher Jencks declared that the War on Poverty was a considerable success in that its programs did much to ameliorate the social and economic hardships suffered by the poor. They further argued that these programs were not designed to deal with the types of dysfunctional behaviors of the poor with which Murray is concerned —single parent households, crime, joblessness, etc.

The alternative evaluations of the War on Poverty in these two op-ed pieces reflect different understandings of what were the goals of the War on Poverty. Murray wants to evaluate the War on Poverty in terms of its stated goals in the inflated language of President Johnson, whereas Mayer and Jencks want to evaluate outcomes with respect to the more modest objectives that were built into the limited aims of specific program designs, for example, a food program designed to reduce hunger.

In a world of weak causal relations, policy should have two objectives. First, policy should be designed to directly intervene. If you want the poor to have better medical care, provide them with better access. If you want to improve their financial status, directly transfer funds to them. Indirect interventions are unlikely to have effects. One way to understand the Murray— Mayer/Jencks debate is that the War on Poverty's programs had the direct effects they were designed to have, but not the indirect effects that wishfully had been promised by Johnson and others. Second, at least at this time, poverty policy can be much more effective at ameliorating the conditions of poverty than in eliminating its "root" causes, unless we view poverty as a lack of income and not as a behavioral problem linked to family structure or social exclusion. We can achieve much more by dealing with the symptoms.

The second consequence of having "weak" causal theories is the recognition that as a society we need to develop consensus on a set of values for dealing with the poor. This consensus must be based on moral arguments about justice and fairness combined with social science knowledge. As we pointed out at the beginning of this article, despite the substantial

investment in research about poverty in the United States it has been difficult to reach political agreement about a coherent approach to the issues of welfare and poverty. Kenneth Burke in his 1969 book *A Grammar of Motives* puts the argument with clarity and force: "We should not expect a dualism of motives to be automatically dissolved, as with those apologists of science who believe that in a scientific world ethics become unnecessary." On the contrary, the stronger the influence of social science the greater the need for moral and ethical principles to act as a guide.

The difficult question that this issue poses is: What is the relationship between social science and morality? We cannot develop the argument in detail here. Many will object that in a society as ideologically diverse as ours connecting morality and science is impossible. But actually in the last decade progress has been made. In his 1988 book, *Poor Support*, David Ellwood strongly argued that individuals and families who "play by the rules" should not be poor. Families where at least one adult worked full time throughout the year should have an income above the poverty line. This argument has been the basis for the earned income tax credit, which Clinton was able to expand substantially during his first term. The EITC has received greater bipartisan support than any other poverty program. But these examples suggest that moral evaluation should be an integral part of the test for truth and not simply a casual add-on. It appears that a new consensus seems to have been forged on the issue that work should come first, being mandated with time limits for welfare mothers with young children. However the political and moral issues have not gone away, but have been reconfigured around a work, services and poverty triad. The rationale on which Ellwood's position is based is that work and welfare go together, since the low wages require an income package supplemented by universal tax credits and other programs that make work a condition of eligibility. In the past welfare need was the basis for entitlement and work incentive programs were added to welfare. On these questions we have to come to a value consensus separate from social science, but not wholly independent of it.

The recent welfare reform legislation for all of its problems has been based on principles, some of which have been accepted by many members of both parties and much of the American public, that the poor deserve to be helped, but that there is a reciprocal responsibility that the poor contribute and help themselves also. Thus the core of the new legislation involves the requirement that individuals who have the capability of working, work in the private sector, or if they cannot find a job there, in community service. Where the new welfare legislation failed was in not incorporating a requirement that the government provide jobs to the poor if it was going to require them to work, a position that the American public also supports. At the present, with an economy where the unemployment rate is less than 5 percent, this is not much of a problem. Only time will tell whether the government, federal or state, will meet its reciprocal moral obligations to provide jobs when unemployment is much higher.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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