Title:

A Brave Look at Disadvantage, Black Youth, and Culture: Patterson and Fosse's

The Cultural Matrix.

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Abstract:

This article provides a review of *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, edited by Orlando Patterson with Ethan Fosse (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-674-72875-2, cloth, £33.95). In the collection, Patterson and Fosse bring together theoretical and empirical work that focuses on culture and disadvantage in the African-American community. This book is important. It is packed with fresh insights and excellent scholarship, and it grasps thorny issues: the role of culture in the persistence of disadvantage and the features of culture that ameliorate disadvantage or that allow people to resist, reduce, or manage its concomitants, such as neighbourhood violence. The

book's authors offer careful, nuanced treatments of these topics, while always showing a profound respect for the disadvantaged subjects of the research. However, in bringing together concepts of 'culture' and 'poverty', the book is also likely to spark debate.

Article:

This is a big, brave book. With 675 pages, 18 chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) and weighing in at 1.2 kilos (in hardback), it is a physically weighty tome. Fortunately, it is also weighty intellectually, and is likely to become a crucial resource for scholars interested in disadvantaged black youth in the United States. The book is brave because it takes up the question of culture, and as Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse explain, culture has been neglected in studies of disadvantaged black youth ever since the 'culture of poverty' arguments came to be seen (with some merit, but also somewhat unfairly) as 'blaming the victim'. This book redresses the balance here with excellent scholarship, both theoretical and empirical.

The book opens with an introductory chapter by Patterson and Fosse, who point out a paradox: Black youth, especially young black men, are so beleaguered as to be described by some authors as an 'endangered species' (p. 2), and yet, through hip-hop and rap, black youth in America have profoundly influenced popular culture, transcending class, race, and national boundaries. The bulk of the

Introduction explains 'the origin and full extent of scholarly discomfort with the culture concept in so far as it relates to the black poor' (p. 2). Patterson and Fosse divide scholarship from 1899 to the present into five periods, and provide an accessible review that describes and critiques key works in each.

After the introduction, the book is divided into five sections, plus a conclusion. The first section is an 'overview' that includes, in two chapters, a theoretical discussion of culture and a substantive discussion of the diversity of lifestyles among black youth. Since both of these chapters are written by Patterson, the first 135 pages of the book give an initial feeling of reading a sole-authored monograph rather than an edited book.

Patterson's theoretical Chapter 1 sets out his conception of culture and discusses a blending of norms, values, interests, knowledge, and practice that he terms the 'sociocultural configuration' (p. 41). In short, he asserts that culture and structure work together in the lives of people. The chapter addresses issues that have been debated by sociologists and other scholars for some time. Patterson stakes his claims clearly and cogently, but in doing so, he takes aim at a variety of theorists who are likely to disagree with his stance, especially as he asserts that he 'provides a more integrated and balanced approach to culture than is generally available in contemporary cultural sociology' (p. 9).

Patterson's Chapter 2 describes a diversity of lifestyles among black youth, and identifies four sociocultural configurations – the 'adapted mainstream', the 'proletarian', the 'street', and the 'hip-hop' configurations. He discusses their

relationship to the dominant mainstream and the problems of violence and unemployment among black youth. In this 90-page *tour de force*, Patterson reviews and interprets research literature, covering factors from neurotoxicity to (segregated) neighbourhoods, and prisons to parenting, culminating in a schematic 'matrix of interacting cultural and structural factors explaining the condition of black youth' (p. 126). A bold overview such as this is enlightening – and is also likely to be contested.

A chief strength of the book is its empirical grounding, in both qualitative and quantitative work. Most of the chapters in the subsequent Sections 2-5 are based on empirical work. On the quantitative side, Ethan Fosse (Chapter 3) does a meta-analysis of surveys to explore the attitudes of young people. He draws on multiple surveys to increase the statistical power of his analysis, as most surveys do not tap disadvantaged black youth in sufficient numbers to allow researchers to draw valid conclusions. He creates four categories of youth by cross-classifying them as either connected or disconnected and either black or white, where 'disconnected' refers to young people who are 'neither working nor in school' (p. 142). Disconnected black youth score poorly (are 'most divergent', p. 148) with respect to other youth on outcomes in six cultural domains, and Fosse discusses the complexity in the details.

Rajeev Dehejia, Thomas DeLeire, Erzo F.P. Luttmer, and Josh Mitchell (Chapter 8) use panel data from the National Survey of Families and Households to explore how participating in religion can affect life outcomes. They show that religious participation can buffer the effects of significant disadvantage in childhood, at

least for some outcomes. Robert J. Sampson (Chapter 5) uses quantitative data

including measures of 'altruistic public behaviors' (p. 206) – whether people

return dropped letters (in a social experiment) and whether people administer

CPR to heart attack victims (drawing on data from the emergency services) – and

measures of cynicism to map cultural differences across neighbourhoods in

Chicago. His findings suggest persistent intertwining of culture and

disadvantage. He states, 'Put simply, there appear to be cultural mechanisms

embedded in reinforcing cycles of structural disadvantage' (p. 226).

Other quantitative chapters include James E. Rosenbaum, Jennifer Stephan, Janet

Rosenbaum, Amy E. Foran, and Pam Schuetz's (Chapter 15) look at completion

rates in community and occupational colleges, and labour market success after

graduation. Their research leads them to formulate a 'sociology of ability' that

suggests academic ability is more a factor of social context than it is a fixed

personal trait. Their work addresses the barriers to social mobility that are

hidden within cultural assumptions (what they call 'BA Blinders') of traditional

college graduates, employers and college professionals, and they suggest some

relatively simple changes to college procedures that could ameliorate drop-out

problems among students from various disadvantaged groups. Van C. Tran

(Chapter 7), who focuses on culture and on neighbourhoods, uses a mixed

methods approach to study 'how different ethnic groups navigate disadvantaged,

inner-city context' (p. 253) comparing second-generation Caribbean blacks to

native-born American blacks to study the 'so-called West Indian advantage' (p.

256). His results show that West Indians live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods,

but ones with lower levels of 'concentrated disadvantage' than the

neighbourhoods of poor, native blacks. In addition, West Indian parents are found to be stricter, and their children are, as a likely consequence, less involved in street culture and the drug trade.

Rich ethnographic and qualitative studies are reported in several chapters. Joseph C. Krupnick and Christopher Winship (Chapter 9) ask why there is not more violence in violent neighbourhoods. Inspired by Erving Goffman, they show how young men draw on different types of 'ritual interaction' to *avoid* violence. Kathryn Edin, Peter Rosenblatt, and Queenie Zhu[2] (Chapter 6) explore strategies that young black men in an extremely disadvantaged neighbourhood use to resist 'the street' and delinquent or criminal behaviour. Sudhir Venkatesh (Chapter 10) discusses informal neighbourhood interventions that help restore the peace after incidents of violence or crime. Local mediation of disputes or 'street diplomacy' (p. 362) shapes participants' views on offending in complex ways. Taken together these chapters show the importance of cultural factors in the local contexts where the studies took place, and moreover, demonstrate that cultural factors often contribute positively to the lives of those in disadvantaged areas.

On the whole, the book focuses either on American black youth without regard to gender, or on young black men in particular. It pays much less attention to young black women, reflecting the state of the larger literature. However, as Jody Miller (Chapter 11) argues, 'urban scholars' understandings of the challenges facing African American youth in neighbourhoods of concentrated segregation and poverty *must include attention to the gendered facets of these*

challenges' (p. 374, emphasis added). Her chapter, based on interviews with young men and women, explores sexual violence, which is a frighteningly common experience for black girls in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. She argues that 'young men's solidarity with and commitment to their male peers is guided in part by personal safety concerns' but 'the strategies that many young men employ to navigate these structural terrains … are precisely the kinds of cultural adaptations that position the girls as "other" and place them at risk for exclusion and victimization' (p. 380).

Patterson and Fosse (Conclusion) explicitly address a range of gender differences among black youth.   They also report that Simone Ispa-Landa (author of Chapter 12) found a significant gender effect in her study of disadvantaged black youth bussed to affluent white schools. Bussed girls were often chastised for their self-presentation (such as 'verbal contestations in ghetto girl-talk', p. 540), as it did not fit white, middle-class norms of femininity. However, bussed boys found that they could gain status by taking on a hip-hop persona, and often exaggerated this style in school.

 Ispa-Landa's chapter does not flesh out these gender differences, but instead, focuses on 'how schools act as transformative agents' (p. 394). Pupils bussed to affluent schools learned how to self-advocate, and saw school rules and procedures, appropriately, as malleable. This is in contrast to pupils who attended low-performing schools, where assertiveness was seen as 'sass' or 'attitude', and was not tolerated. The bussed students learned strategies to negotiate for themselves in a variety of school circumstances, and thereby

received positive reinforcement and acquired skills that could be used later in life. Consequently, Ispa-Landa suggests, 'students exposed to upper-middle-class schools are at a distinct cultural advantage for success in the professional milieus over those who are not' (p. 395).

Along with Ispa-Landa, several authors explore policy interventions and the possibility of cultural change. Patterson and Jacqueline Rivers (Chapter 13) study ABC, a 'cultural and attitudinal training programme' for the chronically unemployed (p. 417). They used interviews to explore participants' explanations and understandings of their situations. Participants professed a belief in the mainstream work ethic, as part of the American dream, and were willing to change a number of aspects about themselves – wearing more standard work clothes or choosing 'appropriate' language, for instance – in order to get a job. However, many were unwilling to change their habitual facial expression or 'protective scowl' (p. 430), which they saw as a way to deflect potential aggression in their neighbourhoods, and which masked significant psychological pain and emotional suffering (p. 431).

Andrew Clarkwest, Alexandra A. Killewald, and Robert G. Wood (Chapter 14) report on an evaluation of the Building Strong Families Program, which was offered in several locations. Overall, the Program's interventions had little impact on the couples that took part; however, in one site, Baltimore, they produced significant negative effects. The authors found that the Baltimore couples were significantly more disadvantaged than couples from the other sites of the programme, and they hypothesised that the programme may have altered

'the meanings that participants attached to relationship roles and the expected behaviors of partners in ways that they may not have been able or willing to meet' (p. 460). Their research provides a cautionary tale regarding social interventions, as negative and unanticipated consequences may occur in the absence of a clear understanding of the lives of the people targeted. And in a related, philosophical chapter, Tommie Shelby (Chapter 16) discusses the possibilities and the ethical issues involved in 'cultural reform' (p. 507), that is, in attempts to change cultural beliefs of the poor. More specifically, he explores 'the practical limits, moral permissibility, and overall wisdom of state-sponsored cultural reform' (p. 501). This chapter provides a cautionary tale of a different sort, because attempts at changing culture risk being interpreted as, or actually being, racist and paternalistic, and are problematic in multiple ways, not the least of which is their conflict with the personal freedom of choice accorded to individuals in a liberal democracy such as the United States. 'The difficulty is how to effect this cultural change without undermining the self-esteem, attacking the self-respect, or calling into question the dignity of those who have been most burdened by social injustices' (p. 530).

In a chapter that is relevant to the collection, but presented in a different key, ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall (Chapter 4) discusses the history of rap and how it developed from its 1970s roots in a local youth culture in the Bronx to its transnational success in the present. An absorbing chapter, rich with detail, it argues that to 'put questions of content aside' allows us 'to appreciate the importance of craft, innovation, media literacy, and other practices that have made hip-hop such an enduring and inspiring force in the lives of young people,

especially black youth' (p. 168); indeed, he asserts, it is 'better to attend to the aesthetic principles' of the music, rather than 'dwelling on' content that is 'absurd, vulgar, or needlessly demeaning' (p. 196). Marshall focuses on how the innovative aesthetic form of the music developed and transformed, how it refashioned popular culture, and through its own flexibility, how it has remained a vital cultural force for over forty years. While his point about innovation, hip-hop's 'irrepressible refashionability' (p. 195), is well-taken, it seems only part of the story. Content in fact does matter, as Jody Miller argues in Chapter 11 (see pp. 375-6, 384-5), pointing to its objectification of women and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity.

Patterson himself is even more fiercely critical of the content of the media-distorted 'gangsta' version of rap (see pp. 92-104), calling it 'morally bankrupt' and composed of 'self-evidently evil speech acts' (p. 103). But what about the paradox Patterson raised at the beginning of the book, the disjuncture between black influence on popular culture and black disadvantage? Marshall's chapter on hip-hop addresses one side of the coin and the empirical chapters address the other, but the two sides are not linked in these chapters. Patterson (Chapter 2), however, does suggest an explanation, albeit one that shows this paradox is not entirely new. He argues that the success of hip-hop is another instance of the cultural appropriation that traces back to the minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth century, in which white musicians in black face played purloined black folk music. The contemporary appropriation of hip-hop, however, does not exclude black artists, but nevertheless, their creativity has become a commodity to profit large, multinational corporations. To explain the consequences of this

appropriation, Patterson draws on Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian (order, clarity, and lucidity) and the Dionysian (revelry, insanity, and drunkenness), suggesting that the white mainstream is largely Apollonian, but with a need to escape to the Dionysian from time to time. He explains that the music industry has capitalised on, and distorted, hip-hop

> into a form that, while it works perfectly as a Dionysian counterpoise to those already disciplined by their hyperscheduled suburban upbringing and schooling and the rigors of the corporate office, achieves just the opposite for the disconnected and deprived youth of the toxic ghettos – reinforcing their anger, misogyny, addiction, criminality, and violence – the destructive side of the Dionysian impulse that leads to chaos, the urge to disfigure and destroy all that is structured and enduring. (p. 135)

And he continues,

> To contain the chaos, to protect the orderly majority of working- and middle-class blacks who live in the inner cities, and to prevent any chance of their violence spilling out from the confines of the ghettos, there exists the vast network of profitmaking gulags that is America's prison-industrial complex. Thus the creative rage of the dispossessed resolves the cultural contradictions of post-industrial American and its bourgeois youth, even as it traps and eviscerates its creators in a matrix of internal self-destruction and external imprisonment. (p. 135)

In contrast to this dystopian image, perhaps quite correct, of the corrosive effects of rapacious capitalism, the subsequent, empirical chapters on extremely disadvantaged black youth, while not underestimating the terrible problems of

the ghetto, provide an understanding of and a respect for the people who participated in the research and, in most cases, offer some modicum of hope.

At the end of the book, Patterson and Fosse (Conclusion) ask what we have learned through the collected research in the volume. They point out that, even in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the proportion of people who are violent is a minority: 'What our studies make clear is that it is extremely inaccurate and egregiously unfair to spear entire neighborhoods of black youth with the violence and thug-life of the minority who terrorize them' (p. 542). Patterson and Fosse also point out that culture can be a positive influence on young people, but, importantly, *segregation matters*' (p. 542, emphasis in the original). This matters in many ways, but an explicitly cultural effect of 'ghettoization is … exclusion from the procedural knowledge or tacit cultural capital of the mainstream that comes only from growing up and networking with other mainstream children and youth' (p. 542), an issue also addressed earlier in the book by Patterson's Chapter 2. Patterson and Fosse close with a discussion of public policy, looking at the success of various intervention programmes and making some policy recommendations.

This book will be of interest to scholars, policy makers, and practitioners, from teachers to social workers, who are interested in disadvantaged black youth, as well as to scholars interested in culture and how it works. Though the collection is entirely focused on the American situation, there are lessons in the book that may apply elsewhere. Overall, the book is timely and important in a land where, after all, black lives should matter.

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[2] This is the order of names as shown in the Table of Contents on p. vi. In the chapter, on p. 229, the order is Peter Rosenblatt, Kathryn Edin, and Queenie Zhu.