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*Structural Change and the Disadvantaged:  
An Empirical Test of Culture  
of Poverty/Situational Theories  
of Hard-Core Work Behavior*

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The existence of a "culture of poverty" among the poor has been an issue of fierce controversy in the sociological literature (see Winter 1971). Much of the controversy has revolved around Lewis' (1966:xliv)

contention that this subculture is self-perpetuating; that is, though the behavioral patterns of the subculture are originally formed in response to objective structural conditions, these patterns are perpetuated via socialization of the young.

Though Lewis refers to a small segment of the poor, this in-the-individual viewpoint has often been extended to Americans classified as hard-core unemployed or disadvantaged. Such a view suggests that poverty is in substantial part the product of a "disadvantaged American Negro personality" (Rutledge and Gass 1967: 18) or the "unstable" family structure within the lower class (Moynihan 1967:51). Alternately, situationalist researchers view the basic personality and values of the poor as similar to that of the middle class (Liebow 1967; Rosen 1970), or claim that the poor subscribe to middle class values but develop alternative values to adjust to present situational pressures (Rodman 1963; Rainwater 1970).

This controversy cannot be resolved by theory alone; to determine if behavioral patterns vary under changed environments, substantial environmental change must be observed. The previous studies, some of which examine minority employment programs, are subject to this failing because they look at the personality of the poor within a relatively unchanging environment. Though it might appear that an employment program would be an excellent setting to study the effects of improved work environments on individual personality, this is generally not the case. If such programs place trainees at all, it is often in secondary labor market jobs that contain little advancement opportunity (cf., H.E.W. 1972:172).

Unlike many other programs, an employment program was encountered that (1) offered substantial improvement over secondary labor market jobs, and (2) changed radically in opportunity structure during the course of its operation. Two natural experiments were observed in this program that reflect on the in-the-individual/situational controversy.

**THE TOP PROGRAM AND RESEARCH METHODS.<sup>1</sup>**  
In 1968, Deeco, a large manufacturing firm, set up a training facility in the predominantly Black ghetto of an eastern city. At the TOP facility, disadvantaged community residents were trained for entry level Deeco jobs. After obtaining two to four months of orientation and job exposure, trainees were placed in Deeco if their attendance and performance were judged satisfactory. Between 1968 and 1972 about half of 515 TOP entrants were placed.

In studying this program, entry was negotiated with the program staff to do a year and a half of overt participant observation in TOP and Deeco, and to analyze personnel records of all program entrants. A

main sample of intensive study was composed of 15 program staff, 51 program participants, and 52 Deeco supervisors. Longitudinal observation of two to eight months was completed on 29 of 36 recent program participants and their supervisors. At least two interviews were completed with 26 of the recent and all 15 early participants and their supervisors. In addition to this main sample, many other TOP and Deeco employees were interviewed and observed in less depth.

#### EXPERIMENT 1—THE MYTH OF THE HARDCORE.

Interviews with the program staff consistently suggested that male trainees performed much poorer in the early years of TOP (1968-69) than in recent years (1971-72). These remembrances were confirmed by analysis of personnel records and interviews with TOP graduates. Personnel data indicated that early trainees performed substantially poorer on attendance, time to placement certification, and placement record. In interviews, early grads described themselves as being less open, showing less motivation, and getting along less well with coworkers and supervisors.<sup>2</sup>

The staff's usual explanation of these findings was that the early TOP population was more hard-core. This is an in-the-individual explanation, for it indicates that poorer performance was due to poorer individual backgrounds. Illustratively, a staff member noted:

In the early days of TOP there were about 36 men here on two shifts. There was a lot of absence, about 15 or 20%, and a lot of turnover. About 50% were the hard core—they are the game-players who go from one program to another but prefer to do their thing on the street. It's changed more [in recent years] to the underemployed and undereducated, but not due to selection, since we don't screen.

Though the informant pointed out that the staff hadn't tried to select higher quality trainees, he nevertheless believed that fewer hard-core trainees entered TOP in recent years. This individual explanation of trainee performance differences can be tested by comparing personnel records and interview responses of early and recent trainees. We would expect to find more disadvantaged backgrounds among early trainees, and, in the extreme, no differences in program structure if the culture of poverty explanation of employee behavior was valid. Conversely, a poorer program environment but similar individual backgrounds would provide confirmation of situationalist theory.

Analysis of trainee background is presented in Table 1. It can be seen that there was no difference in age or nationality between early and recent trainees. Their marital and family statuses were also similar except that early trainees tended to have one more child to support. Further, their job histories were not significantly

different on seven dimensions. However, one trend was observed in job history: prior to TOP, recent trainees were out of work a median time of 22 weeks *longer* than early trainees. Recent trainees also had a background advantage in having completed about one more year of high school. Location of high school and present residence patterns were similar for both groups.

Overall, these data are similar for the two groups and do not support the individualist position that early trainees were more disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup> A better explanation of the radically lower performance of early male trainees was found in analysis of the training program itself.

Early trainees experienced a program that was poorer in many ways. For instance, personnel records indicated that it took a median time of 10 weeks longer to get placed into Deeco in the early period. Besides reflecting the poorer performance of the earlier group, this longer placement time reflected less willingness among Deeco supervisors to hire early TOP trainees due to the great strength of the "TOP Stigma"—a widely documented pattern of negative expectations toward TOP trainees. Equally discouraging and analytically purer, the median time to wait for a Deeco job *after the trainee had been certified placeable* was five weeks longer for the earlier group.

Another key difference was the wage policy at TOP. Not only were the earlier wages \$.19/hour lower on the median, but these wages compared less favorably to final pay at past jobs. Early trainees took a median pay cut of \$.25/hour in coming to TOP, while recent trainees earned an amount similar to their wages at former jobs.<sup>2</sup>

Differences in the program were also reflected in interviews with graduates. Early graduates described the program as much poorer. They faced fewer jobs, evaluated the TOP pay more negatively, and received less training and basic education.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the major difference between early and recent programs was that the program encountered by early trainees was in a start-up phase, and the opportunity for a career in Deeco was realistically suspect. This lack of "credibility," as one staff member called it, was reflected not only in the previously mentioned deficiencies in the technical-economic job environment (i.e., pay, training, job content, promotion), but also in social environment inadequacies. For example, early trainees received less sponsorship from referral sources and TOP staff (see Davidson 1976). While most recent graduates were referred by trusted friends, neighbors, or relatives who knew of TOP and Deeco and could facilitate trainee careers, most early graduates were referred by agencies. Early trainees also received less coaching and were delegated less responsibility by their less experienced supervisors. This was reflected in graduate characterizations of early supervi-

TABLE 1. PERSONNEL RECORD COMPARISON OF THE BACKGROUNDS OF EARLY AND RECENT TRAINEES

	Early				Recent			
	X	Median	(Total N)	%	X	Median	(Total N)	%
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>								
Age	24.8	21	(77)		24.8	21	(28)	
American Negro nationality			(136)	93			(34)	91
<i>Marital &amp; Family Status</i>								
Single marital status			(119)	60			(34)	68
Have children			(136)	41			(34)	41
Number of children	2.6	2	(56)		1.9*	1	(14)	
Age of youngest child	3.7	2	(54)		4.8	2.5	(14)	
<i>Job History</i>								
Starting pay at last job prior to TOP	\$2.03	2.00	(88)		\$2.27	2.01	(22)	
Final pay at last job	2.45	2.25	(63)		2.53	2.00	(13)	
Pay progress at last job	.25	.11	(62)		.32	.20	(13)	
Tenure (in years) at last job	1.37	.75	(56)		1.65	1.00	(19)	
Time out of work (in years) prior to TOP	.46	.17	(56)		.79	.59	(19)	
Manual work at last job (vs. clerical, technical, and other)			(73)	67			(18)	50
Unskilled work at last job (vs. semiskilled or skilled)			(69)	55			(17)	47
<i>Education</i>								
Years of education	10.0	10	(114)		10.7*	11	(33)	
Southern high school attendance (vs. Northern or Eastern)			(87)	34			(23)	22
<i>Address</i>								
Inner city residence (vs. surrounding towns)			(123)	90			(34)	85

\*T-test difference significant at  $P < .05$

†No 2-by-2  $X^2$  were significant at  $P \leq .1$  using Yates correction

sors as less "people oriented" and less likely to use "general supervision."<sup>2</sup>

Comments of many early trainees reflected a lack of trainee motivation until opportunity was demonstrated. This trainee dropped out of TOP due to the program's lack of placement opportunity, but returned when jobs opened up in Deeco. He remembered:

I came in every day but after a while I started dropping out and coming in every other day since nothing was happening in seven months. But then they started to get jobs [in Deeco] so I was disappointed I left. I came back and saw what I had to do. They counseled me and recognized me and I took off and did everything. (emphasis mine).

Thus it is clear that trainees would not demonstrate a career perspective at TOP unless the situation contained

real opportunity. Trainee effort was tied to a realistic assessment of the situational possibilities, and lower effort was due to a poorer program, not to more disadvantaged or hard core backgrounds.

While this discussion reflects the influence of major changes in the program structure on collective trainee behavior, the analysis depended largely on personnel records and interviews. An analysis of this type does not adequately demonstrate the day-to-day process of individual adjustment to varying job and social environmental conditions. However, such a process was observed during one year in which radical changes in the program structure occurred.

EXPERIMENT 2—HIRING FREEZE, FAMILY, AND STAFF TURNOVER AT TOP. During a year of

participant observation at TOP, three very different program structures were encountered. Each structure lasted about four months and varied on dimensions of technical-economic opportunity and social environment supportiveness. These varying situational configurations had extreme effects on trainee behavior.

*Period I: Hiring Freeze.* During the first four months of my observation, the central issue on the minds of trainees and staff was a hiring freeze in Deeco. Because Deeco business had slacked off, there was little demand for the manufacturing components that the TOP plant produced. As a result, trainees were given make-work at TOP, taken by cab to low level, temporary Deeco jobs, or laid off. At a TOP personnel meeting, a supervisor described how previously cooperative trainees became defensive as layoff rumors circulated. In a distressed voice she said:

I assume Darlene Evans has been listening to Andrea Johnson [a trainee who complained strongly about layoffs]. Darlene says TOP is totally no good—she's very bitter. I can't work with her under these circumstances. Monday in the cab the whole group was cold. Ruth had an attitude, too. I asked her about it and she refused to discuss it.

At this time a great deal of gameplaying, dissatisfaction, and boredom was observed, particularly among placeable trainees who had been at TOP for six or seven months and had been promised Deeco placement after three months. Though the staff population was generally stable, experienced, and extremely concerned about trainee welfare throughout this period, there was little they could do to aid trainees in obtaining placement. Only a few trainees could be placed through exceptional or unofficial procedures, and layoffs could not be avoided, though the visibly upset staff was able to postpone them until after Christmas. Many trainees left TOP and others were terminated during period I, as seen in Table 2.

*Period II: Family.* When Deeco jobs started to open up, the TOP atmosphere changed radically. Three trainees who were in the most socially prominent clique and who had been at TOP for about seven months were placed. They came back to TOP often and spoke positively about their Deeco jobs. One of these graduates had a wife working at TOP who passed on word about Deeco. Another trainee was hired who had relatives in Deeco, and he spoke to his coworkers about Deeco opportunity. Trainees were no longer given temporary or make-work assignments, but were employed on higher level TOP jobs.

While these improvements in the opportunity structure were occurring, the staff population remained

stable and supportive, and trainees became more responsive to the personal attention offered by the staff. A closer atmosphere developed as trainees often spoke of a "TOP family."

Within this warm period II atmosphere, trainee conversation and behavior reflected a career perspective toward Deeco rather than the gameplaying seen during period I. Performance improvements snowballed as senior trainees and new recruits learned of Deeco opportunities through friendship networks and close relations with TOP staff. These performance improvements were so extreme that during this second period every trainee was placed or stayed on at TOP (see Table 2).

*Period III: Staff Turnover.* During period II, a new program director began to plan changes in the TOP operation. He designed a new organization structure which would formalize the program, giving it a greater profit and production emphasis. Though the changes were discussed during period II, they did not affect trainees until widespread replacement of supervisory personnel took place. The precipitating event which initiated the final period was the replacement of the most experienced and employee oriented supervisor by a new staff member who had little rapport with trainees. He was described by the other staff as "insensitive" and "a poor listener."

During period III, group leaders, formerly the staff members who spent the greatest time interacting with trainees, were asked to leave due to the new organization structure. Because of conflicts with the administration, many higher level supervisors also left voluntarily. Trainees were given little attention during this period as staff spent their time talking about the administration, fighting among themselves, and trying to find new jobs.

Other administrative directives added to these social environment problems, causing the climate to become more formal and bureaucratic in tone. Along with increased production pressure, desk and chair positions were changed in staff offices, creating barriers between office holders and office visitors. Signs went up outside every office and every work area announcing the position of the office holder and task done in that area.

Though the availability of Deeco jobs stayed high during period III, job content at TOP suffered. New products were planned but the supply of necessary materials and machines was sometimes delayed, leaving trainees with little to do.

As a result of these changes in the job and social environment, trainee defensiveness shot up to period I levels. Talk of a TOP family ceased, while gameplaying and "playing one supervisor against another" increased. Trainees requested a number of gripe meetings which revealed intense suspicion and hostility toward TOP.

TABLE 2. PERFORMANCE OF TOP TRAINEES DURING THREE TIME PERIODS IN WHICH THE PROGRAM STRUCTURE VARIED

		<i>Period I</i> 10-1-71 to 1-31-72 (to 2-28-72 for females)		<i>Period II</i> 2-1-72 to 5-31-72		<i>Period III</i> 6-1-72 to 9-30-72	
SITUATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TOP PROGRAM	Technical-economic Job Opportunity	<i>LOW</i> : Deeco hiring freeze until 1-31 on jobs filled by TOP males and until 2-28 for females; temporary and "make work" training jobs at TOP.		<i>HIGH</i> : Jobs available in Deeco; normal training jobs at TOP.		<i>MODERATE</i> : Jobs available in Deeco; normal training jobs at TOP but shortages of materials and machines; jobs become more bureaucratic.	
	Supervisory Supportiveness	<i>HIGH</i> : Experienced and concerned staff at TOP.		<i>HIGH</i> : Experienced and concerned staff at TOP.		<i>LOW</i> : Widespread staff turnover and dissent; social environment becomes more bureaucratic.	
TRAINEE PERFORMANCE MEASURES		N	%	N	%	N	%
	Termination	8	(23)	0	(0)	6	(26)
	Resignation	6	(17)	0	(0)	3	(13)
	Lay-off	7	(20)	0	(0)	0	(0)
	Placed	4	(11)	17	(68)	4	(17)
	Stayed to Next Period	10	(29)	8	(32)	10	(43)
	Total	35	(100)	25	(100)	23	(99)*

\*Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding off.

As demonstrated in the Table 2 performance measures, it was difficult to recognize TOP trainees as members of the same program during the three periods. Trainee behavior was radically different as the TOP situation changed in character.

**CONCLUSIONS.** Trainee reactions to the extreme changes in the TOP program structure indicate that the behavioral patterns of disadvantaged minority employees are closely tied to situational realities. These findings provide evidence that in regard to the world of work, the impact of the minority individual's personality has been overstated and misunderstood in the culture of poverty literature. Rather than viewing motivational states as permanent parts of the individual's personality, their adaptive nature should be emphasized.

By labeling people as hard-core unemployables we lose sight of this adaptive quality and imply that

psychological traits are independent variables which cause employment success or failure. Such a view is easily supported through static analysis and simple statistical relations. While many early, period I, and period III trainees demonstrated a lack of interpersonal trust, an external locus of control, and low achievement motivation, to imply from such findings that personality caused employment failure would be misleading. Such a static approach ignores the quality of the work environment. Unlike the present longitudinal observational study, culture of poverty research generally does not follow disadvantaged employees through significant changes in their work world, or examine the behavior of the disadvantaged within an environment that contains substantial opportunity.

This is not to imply that individual background was totally unimportant. Indeed, interaction with TOP trainees revealed that personal problems often had a

significant effect on work behavior. However, the economic underpinnings of such problems should be recognized. Continued primary employment allowed employees to live under conditions in which many of the family, legal, medical, and psychological problems were alleviated (see Davidson 1973; Padfield and Rainwater 1973: 229-32).

If we are to understand employee behavioral patterns we will thus have to take a closer look at the employee's work environment. The present analysis indicated that within the social and technical-economic environment had to be viewed as worthwhile or trainees would significantly limit their effort. The supportiveness of the period I staff and availability of Deeco jobs during period III were not enough, alone, to elicit high motivational levels. But during period II, when both factors were present, trainee motivation and career orientation reached impressive levels.

The strength of these career perspectives suggests a paradox in the way poor minority employees relate to their jobs. Below the surface face of many black males confined to secondary labor market jobs, there appears to be a boiling desire to advance. This desire is suppressed due to the limited opportunity structure encountered, but when allowed expression it is a powerful force. This was not only demonstrated by period II trainee performance, but later by a 90% retention rate among graduates who advanced beyond Deeco entry level jobs (see Davidson 1976).

The presence of this underlying career orientation in conjunction with protective faces for dealing with limited career opportunity supports the "lower class value stretch" positions of Rodman (1963) and Rainwater (1970). Such a theoretical perspective has important applied implications for the structuring of employment for the disadvantaged. Such opportunities should allow the expression of values that are held but hidden, rather than attempt to create new values. What is thus called for is a structural model of changing work environments to alter individuals rather than a psychiatric model of changing the individual and ignoring the environment. To blame the individual for "playing a game" while he is locked into a secondary labor market job is, as Ryan (1971) says, to blame the victim.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>More detailed information on the TOP program and methods can be found in Davidson (1973 and 1976).

<sup>2</sup>These data have been excluded due to space limitations but are available on request.

<sup>3</sup>In fact, the two (of 16) factors which varied significantly, number of children and educational level, were not related to placement success of the TOP male population as a whole. Number of children was similar for placed and nonplaced trainees, as was educational level. Further, if it had any impact, the trend noticed in time out of work favored success of the

early group. Their shorter median time unemployed was slightly related to placement success. Thus, not only were early and recent trainees similar on most background characteristics, but where they did diverge, the characteristic was unimportant to success or favored success of the early group.

In addition, the literature highlights three individual characteristics which demonstrate the most consistent empirical link with trainee performance. As summarized by Goodman et al. (1973), unsuccessful trainees tend to be younger, unmarried, and born in the urban North. There is a noticeable lack of difference in the present data on these dimensions, and if anything, the data on marital status and Southern high school education reverse the predicted trend—early trainees being slightly more likely to be married and to come from the South.

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#### *A Case Study of Economic Distribution Via Social Networks*

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