

Explorations in the Causality of Poverty—Behavior and Adaptation

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Abstract:

This paper is an ethnology of the culture of poverty. The subjects of this culture are seen but not recognized as such, yet they are nevertheless participants in an alien, clandestine culture. Instead of venturing to the far reaches of the Brazilian rainforest for unique anthropological insights, I ventured into the streets of Salt Lake City, not looking for humans in poverty but for poverty in humans. I have chosen two subjects in a watercolor of characters with which I will demonstrate that humans are unique only unto themselves.

INTRODUCTION

I moved to Salt Lake City to attend the University of Utah in January 2002. I was majoring in anthropology and physics. In April of that year, I met LaQuan. It was an association that set me upon a path where I saw a series of individuals who, upon later reflection, in one way or another fit Wright's four categories of class analysis (Wright:86). But those categories did not have an exact fit; I had to wrestle and tug them into shape to fit the data I was witnessing. But this isn't good science, and I'm a behaviorist. To simply observe what was going on around me and try to figure it out later seemed more feasible.

Now armed as an anthropologist, I spent a lot of time with LaQuan and met characters who went by the names Dre, Boss Man, The Navaho, Little G, T, The Botanist, Juice, O.G., and J-Dogg. I personally was given the name "The Professor" because of my university affiliation, although no one had the foggiest idea who I was or what I did. I knew only vaguely the real names of these people, but they formed a social network I call "The Originals". I was later welcomed into the group and got to know these people quite well.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a study of two individuals in the Originals—O.G. and Boss Man—in context with their environment and how their lives have defined them as individuals. A culture is comprised of individuals, and if conclusions are going to be drawn about the culture itself, then one must agree to study human behavior as an adaptive mechanism. All the members of the Originals had their own mechanisms, but I decided to study O.G. and Boss Man because of their diversity. I focus on Wright's classifications of poverty as a result of the inherent properties of the social system as point and argue that an oversimplified class analysis of poverty cannot be

performed if poverty is something needing to be solved. It must be realized that humans are adaptive animals who make choices of their lifestyle based on environmental pressures.

It has been my purpose throughout this research to remain faithful to the data I have gathered. I have included all mannerism and means by which the subjects of this paper try to live their lives in order to understand their behavior. Some behaviors are in agreement with the social norms, but almost all would be considered outside this norm. This includes immoral behavior condemned by the society at large—with particular significance to the stigma of the poor. But this must not conflate the issue of the consequence of individual behavior within the members of a social network who have in common a life of poverty. With this consideration, I introduce the research.

Case Study: O.G.

I had met O.G. with LaQuan one day in May. I was living on 11th East near 5th South and we ventured down the hill toward 8th East. He had been raving about a girl he had met in a club the night before, so we stopped at a payphone to call. After not reaching her, a voice came from a house on the other side of the phones. It screamed:

“What are you doing, motherfuckers?!”

LaQuan, a thirty year old black male, yelled back at the voice and started walking toward the house. We approached an older black man who repeated himself. The three of us stood facing each other in a fictional stand-off. With a few more words said, the older man asked us if we smoked weed—suddenly the situation changed. Instead of an increasingly hostile environment, LaQuan and I filed into the guy’s house and we met O.G.

O.G. is a fifty-three year old black male who has lived between Ogden and Salt Lake City most of his life except for a move to Southern California where he spent 22 years in jail for murder. Before going to jail he attended two years at Weber State. He has been married once and has three children he hasn’t seen in 12 years. He visits his mother in Ogden on holidays but doesn’t see his two living brothers or his sister. Ever since returning to Utah in the late 1990s, he has been employed mostly as a salesman of telemarketed items.

O.G. rents an apartment on 9th East and pays \$525 a month. It is an older house next to a Maverick convenience store. The neighborhood is quiet save the steady stream of traffic on 9th. He has lived in his rented house for 18 months. The ownership of the house has changed three times and he has had to deal with seven different landlords. He has had his rent increased from

\$450 to its present \$525. He only has the one job and realizes his economic base is shaky, but he contends that his current situation is because he is not working hard enough at his job, not that he could do better with another one. He does not admit to being in poverty nor a victim of the society because of his race, instead he is satisfied with his life and continues to work hard.

O.G. regularly drinks beer, smokes cigarettes (Camel unfiltered) and marijuana. He drinks 24-ounce single cans of 3.2% Miller. On a work day he will only drink after coming home from work. He works from 7AM to 1PM five, days a week. He has no benefits or retirement. He is paid weekly, and with his extra money buys beer and marijuana. He has noted that, given the choice, he would give up beer long before giving up marijuana.

Case Study: Boss Man

I met Boss Man under different, although intrinsically similar, circumstances. One summer night in August, LaQuan and I were at his apartment. LaQuan, drunk most of the day, had been arguing with the football players who lived downstairs and was soon gesturing to fight one. The two paced around each other, gesticulating wildly and becoming increasingly louder. Shortly after it had began a man with a baseball bat emerged out of the darkness of the quiet street and demanded to know what was going on. The football players knew who he was. LaQuan and his opponent stopped momentarily to look at him. The man was heavily intoxicated and again demanded what was going on. A moment later another man came out of the shadows and talked to the first man. By the time the bat was out of his hand, the fight in the circle ceased; LaQuan walked and two others walked over to the man. I had seen him before as I had spent most of my first summer in Salt Lake on the street. It wasn't until a few days later that I met him one afternoon—he was introduced to me as Boss Man.

Boss Man's real name was Lin, a fifty-two year old white male, born and raised in Bangor, Maine. His stepmother's family was Italian with connections to the mafia. He spent two years at a community college studying economics and, in his late twenties moved to Las Vegas to make his fortune. Although in the past he worked as an assistant manager of a K-mart store, he became a house painter after moving west. According to him he made a good living in Las Vegas and later in Salt Lake, in other words his needs were met. But this changed when his boss died when paint vapors ignited a furnace pilot.

Things took a worse turn economically at the beginning of 2003 during my research. Two days before Christmas, he and his roommate were evicted from their apartment for non-

payment of rent. In the past I had set up jobs for him in the apartment complex where I was living. After becoming homeless he began squatting in the vacant apartments he had worked on. He had taken it upon himself to make copies of the keys given to him for various jobs. Later, he moved from spending a night on a couch in a house full of young college students, to one apartment, to another, to a couch, to a friend's, to a night in Wendover, and back to an apartment. At one point he had five sets of keys to five vacant apartments at three different addresses.

From the very beginning Boss Man was a self-proclaimed alcoholic with a strong addiction. While homeless, his addiction became stronger, and he needed to stay drunk at all times. As his alcoholism increased, so did his depression while sober. At the time of this writing, he drinks about four twelve-packs of beer a day. Most times he can find a sale on beer at the Top Stop or the 7-11, but he pays \$6.39 per twelve-pack. Usually, though, he will buy 24-ounce single cans of 3.2% Keystone or Miller three or four at a time. He knew exactly where the sales were, and for a time he would hike down the hill between 11th and 9th East to a convenience store where the single cans were 99 cents.

His income is extremely unstable and has been from the beginning of this research. He obtains work by finding jobs with his old customers he got when his boss was alive. If that fails, he lives by referrals and knocking on doors to houses in the neighborhood asking if particularly dilapidated buildings need work. Boss Man has no car and has not had one for several years. While living with a roommate transportation was available and he could expand the radius of his job hunt outside the usual walking distance. This was of particular importance for his richer clients on the benches.

Generally, he made the equivalent of \$12 an hour when he worked. But this wasn't consistent as most often he was negotiated to a more narrow profit margin. The only thing this changed was the amount of food he would be able to consume that week. If it came down to it, he would forgo food for beer and would ask friends for assistance. But neither LaQuan, O.G., nor I had funds outside of an occasional five or ten dollars.

After becoming homeless, Boss Man became separated from his roommate and his car. From that point on, he relied on walking or TRAX, but not the bus. He had no UTA pass and was not willing to spend what little money he had on riding the bus. Instead, he would illegally use the train, which operates on the honor system, instead of the bus where payment is required before exiting.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

From the summer to early winter 2002, the Originals were in full swing. The social network consisted of a scattered membership of twenty at its peak. Although from different racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds, each were connected by their low economic status and their palatable addictions. Palatable addictions were those unwritten borders of drug use and personality type. Inclusive drugs were alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, opium, and psychedelic mushrooms. Exclusive drugs were heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine. Inclusive behaviors were honesty, forthrightness, and sharing of windfall (if a member had more money than the others). Exclusive behaviors were limited mostly to any type of taking from the group windfall without contribution. Resources were pooled by the group at the benefit to all. These boundary conditions worked with different degrees of success and were enforced by O.G. as the Originals spent nearly all their time at his house.

As long as these conditions were met, members got along. But soon after Boss Man's descent into homelessness, there was a move to eject him from the group. Once an economic hardship was experienced by the member of the group, emotional support was offered; but when others could offer any monetary help and that person became a burden, he was ejected. During the final steps in the authoring of this paper, LaQuan was ejected. He had been mooching on everybody, and when I moved I had to keep my new address a secret for fear of losing my possessions should he break in. Knowing him long enough, his descent into homelessness and abject poverty (no money, no employment, no resources, no friends) and considering his penchant for thievery, he was separated from the network.

The group was patriarchal in structure headed by O.G., the oldest and most respected member of the group. O.G. means "original gangster," a reverent term for older black males. Since the Originals were anchored to O.G.'s house, the parameters of behavior were stipulated by him. This quality imbued the group with attributes which could be different in another group in another place.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS NOT ADDRESSED

My research brought up additional questions and concerns about the data. Adaptations to circumstance were particularly inherent in Boss Man's shift from being housed to becoming homeless. I would have liked to explore the adaptation and creativity in method of survival techniques. Not being able to cook in a dwelling, he found sales at Burger King within reach of either walking or by the train. Soon thereafter he ate at the homeless shelter. Then he applied for food stamps which he used a means of negotiating for a place to stay for a night or two, or in exchange for cash—usually at a percentage. For example, he would sell \$35 worth of food for \$15. I would like to address the economic descent but yet the survival rate of the group is 100%.

There is also an increase of a belief in ESP and parapsychological phenomena as drug and alcohol use increased with depression. I have been told numerous times by Boss Man of the spirits living in my old apartment where he still has the key to. There is also an adherence to mythology—Homer's Odyssey—exhibited by the individuals without their knowledge.

Additionally, what are the emotional and psychological impacts of poverty on the individual? I didn't have much of a chance to explore this issue in this short format, but my data suggests a strong emotional and psychological impact in poverty. I noted strong adaptation of behavior to environment, simple survival being the driving force. I saw humanity for what it was, a collection of hunters and gatherers, even in a narrow definition of the term.

One more item: I started this research with an investigation of poverty beginning with LaQuan but expanded to a contrast of racial characteristics, social standing, class, economic utility, and homelessness. Not having room for LaQuan's data, I still find it an interesting research question of behavior of individuals as they descend from a civilized, protected social group to nothing.

CONCLUSION

The data suggest a fit into Wright's categories, but upon deeper introspection they do not. Although in this project there is an interplay of individual attributes and social systems within individual behavior, I did not find and data to support genetic or racial inferiority (the members largely ignored race, even more generally when arguments ensued). I did not find support for ravages of social change (although I found support for economic change), and lastly I did not find influence of class exploitation on poverty social networks. Those in the group had periods of sporadic employment and blaming the local circumstances on "the man" were few. This is

not to suggest that class exploitation does not affect the group. Instead, between each member it was irrelevant.

Humans construct social groups for purely beneficial reasons. Relationships are more based on what can be earned in trade (beer, marijuana) than of the less-tangible “worth” of the person. The individuals dealt solely with tangible things but remained aware of the events taking place in the larger world. They had political opinions and ideas of social change. They were the most informed individuals about what poverty was and how it could be made more utilitarian. Class, educational, or economic differences were ignored. Racial differences were only revealed while one or the other was drunk and having a disagreement with another.

It seems to me that people are more equal than they tend to believe. My research suggests an equality across racial, class, social, political, and economic boundaries is largely evident in complex human social groups. Group behaviors are an amalgam of individual behaviors based on a set of simple social rules. Those individual behaviors are consistent with changes in environment and survival mechanisms. Poverty is not a “state of being”, but a consequence of environmental adaptations and lifestyle choices in pursuing those behaviors.