

Locus of control and culture of poverty.

An appraisal of Lawrence M. Mead's ideas in 'Culture and Poverty'

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Abstract

Lawrence M. Mead presented an interesting argument as to why poverty exists in the United States. He problematizes the culture of the poor of which ethnic minorities over-represent. By referring to the geographic regions from which these ethnic minorities came from, he globalised the question of poverty in the US. This invites a global policy debate rather than a US-centric policy debate. Indeed, Mead so freely made references to Africa and the African culture severally throughout his commentary. It is against this backdrop that I show that Mead was right to a large extent on the question of inner-driven individualised orientation. However, he overestimates its influence and misreads what culture is. He presented the culture of poverty as the antecedent of poverty. It was concluded that manipulating both internal drive (internal locus of control) and the structure of society is a more effective way to tackle poverty.

Keywords: locus of control; culture of poverty; personality; poverty.

Poverty is a phenomenon that has received public attention both at the level of public debate and public policy. Poverty can be and has been weaponized for political victory, public policy reforms, violence and stereotyping. Many attempts have been made in different geographic regions of the world to tackle with, recording varying degrees of success and failures. No single solution to poverty has been found given that in the midst of plenty people still lack (Mead, 2020). Thus, the debate about where poverty comes from continues unabated. In this commentary, I argue that, to a large extent, Mead was right that inner-driven individualised orientation may have something to do with poverty. Nonetheless, he overestimates its influence. Again, Mead misreads what culture is and presents it as a fossilised worldview that has no antecedent or origin; it is as if culture came into being without a cause. Similarly, he presented the culture of poverty as the antecedent of poverty. I rather show that culture of poverty is a consequence of and the sustaining force of a vicious cycle of poverty. I come into this public policy debate as a critical African psychologist whose geographic region of origin has been called out in a poverty policy debate in the United States. Mead's article was published on July 21, 2020. An editorial note referring to concerns raised about the article was published on the journal's website on July 29, 2020. The journal was subsequently retracted by the publisher and Editor-in-Chief on July 31, 2020.

In spite of its retraction, I still think that an appraisal of Mead's ideas in the paper is necessary as it may incidentally reflect views held by other like-minded scholars, policy makers, and politicians. This is because the retraction does not prevent other forms of expression of those ideas. In fact, those ideas can still be used in policy circles. Again, 10 days (from July 21 to 31, 2020) are long enough for a lot of people to have read, digested, and internalised his views. This implies that a commentary is still needed. In a nutshell, I contend that culture of poverty is a consequence of and the sustaining force of a vicious cycle of poverty.

Agreeing with Lawrence M. Mead

Mead's idea of inner-driven, moralistic orientation is roughly equivalent to what we call internal locus of control in psychology. Locus of control relates to the extent to which individuals attribute success or failures to inner dispositions (internal locus of control) or to situational factors including luck and powerful others such as God (external locus of control) (Rotter, 1966). Subsequently, two forms of locus of control have been identified (Rotter, 1966; Wang et al., 2010), namely: internal locus of control and external locus of control. Generally, individuals with internal locus of control attribute their life outcomes to their own efforts and actions. Such persons tend to blame themselves rather than situations or others for their failures. As a result, they see a link between their actions and consequences. They tend to think that their efforts matter as far as their life outcomes are concerned. Owing to this, they take responsibility for their actions.

On the other hand, individuals with external locus of control tend to hold the belief that there is no link between their own actions and life outcomes. In some sense, persons with an external locus of control tend to think the environment, circumstances, a higher being (God or gods or evil forces), and very powerful people determine or control their destiny. Such mind-set results in people taking less responsibility for their actions. They tend to think that their actions will not change the circumstances of their lives. In many ways, they will easily give up even when their actions can change something in their lives. They are quick to blame everyone else but themselves for their failures.

What is generally understood from prospective cohort studies in developmental psychology and the social sciences is that positive self-perceptions and self-awareness (including locus of control) established in early childhood influence adult self-perceptions (Orth, 2018) as well as adult socioeconomic outcomes (including income, having a top job, wealth, and education) (Goodma et al., 2015). Evidence derived from outside developmental psychology also collaborates the locus of control-socioeconomic outcomes associations; locus of control influences attributions of poverty while accounting for differences in education, income levels, parental

investment, job search behaviour, health, and financial behaviour (Caliendo et al., 2010; Heaven, 1989; Nasser & Abouchdid, 2006; Ross, 2018).

Again, there is also evidence that parental self-perception and family environment influence self-perceptions children develop and children's self-perceptions influence their career aspirations (Bandura et al., 2001). In effect, locus of control forms during early childhood and persists throughout the life course of an individual and that the immediate family environment (including poverty and parental locus of control) influences the development of a child's locus of control. Thus, there is no doubt that there is intergeneration transmission of such self-perceptions from parents to children (Oppong, 2014; Ross, 2018). However, Ross shows that the locus of control has ancestral roots such that ancestral control over subsistence (dependence on agriculture for subsistence and more variable inter-annual rainfall) results in external locus of control (Ross, 2018). This further suggests that locus of control correlates with learned helplessness – the belief that one's actions will not matter even in situations when one's actions can change life outcomes (Oppong, 2014).

Cross-cultural differences in locus of control appear to exist (Hizing, 2015; Medinnus et al., 1983; Ross, 2018; Stocks et al., 2012). However, the evidence is still inconclusive (Furnham and Henry, 1980; Hui, 1982). What we know is that once the participants are sufficiently matched with respect to age, sex, education, occupation, homogeneity, living conditions, language competence and other relevant demographic characteristics, the cross-cultural differences disappear (Furnham & Henry, 1980). Others have also argued that the cross-cultural differences in locus of control are more due to the influence of life circumstances and parental antecedents on locus of control (Medinnus et al., 1983) and methodological flaws in the measurement of locus of control (Hui, 1982). In some cases, rather unexpected results were documented. For instance, Stocks and colleagues found that Southern Africans had higher levels of internal locus of control in comparison to Chinese participants (Stocks et al., 2012). This further complicates the nature of the cross-cultural differences in locus of control.

In a qualitative study in Ghana about the meaning of successful life and its pathways, many attributed success to divine blessings as opposed to personal strivings, implying an external locus of control (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). However, when one examines the participant characteristics, they appear not to be largely individuals with higher income. What we can, therefore, say is that locus of control is generally associated with socioeconomic status more than culture. Rich people everywhere tend to have high internal locus of control, whether they reside in Africa or the United States. Thus, Mead is right insofar as he links locus of control to poverty but it becomes problematic when he assumes that locus of control is an attribute of culture. Locus of control is not an attribute of culture but personality.

Disagreeing with Lawrence M. Mead

In Mead's analysis, culture is problematized as the antecedent of poverty. This then begs the question what culture itself is. Spencer-Oatey (2008, p.3) conceptualizes culture as "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour." Kluckhohn and Kelly (1945, p.97) defined culture as "all those historically created designs for living, explicit, implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men". Furthermore, culture is (1) a descriptive not an evaluative concept, (2) not homogenous, and (3) not uniformly distributed among members of a group (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

These ways of conceptualizing culture implies that culture does not exist as a phenomenon without cause. It evolves as solutions to circumstances. To this extent, the culture of poverty as described by Mead exists but it cannot be said to exist as a cause. In this regard, the survivalist mind-set Mead evokes to explain work ethic exists as a response to circumstances. If we accept that persons living in poverty globally tend to have higher external locus of control, then it is safe to think of inner-driven, moralistic orientation as a phenomenon associated with successful life outcomes. It is problematic to view internal locus of control as associated with a cultural or social group. It is also safe to say that the fact that poverty is higher in one social group can be attributed partly to high external locus of control. However, one cannot leapfrog to conclude about the nature of the culture on this basis. In psychology, we at least understand behaviour to be the product of personal characteristics and the environment. However, the current evidence is that locus of control is a response to situation (Bandura et al., 2001; Medinnus et al., 1983; Orth, 2018). Campos and colleagues demonstrated, in their World Bank-financed randomised controlled trial in Togo, that teaching personal initiative (an orientation associated with internal locus of control) can result in improved profitability. This shows locus of control is modifiable (Campos et al., 2017).

Mead also contends that African migrants to the US have a challenge dealing with the responsibility that comes with freedom. He ignores the fact that many of the African migrants were located in lower socioeconomic status in their countries of origin and are substantially different from Africans of higher socioeconomic status. Wealthy Africans hardly relocate to the US as migrant workers but only visit for tourism and business or relocate their children for education. This is similar to equating wealthy African Americans to poor African Americans. In this regard, it is better to speak in terms of sub-culture associated with poverty.

We also need to be reminded that locus of control does not offer protection in every situation. Though Ng-Knight and Schoon (2017) have demonstrated that though internal locus of control may make up for background disadvantage or socioeconomic adversity among the youth with respect to avoiding unemployment, internal locus of control is not effective for offering long-term protection against economic inactivity. Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), Ng-Knight and Schoon (2017), showed that internal locus of control cannot help the youth avoid unemployment or being out of education or training for more than six (6) months. It is important to note that as much as internal locus of control is desirable, it has its limits, particularly in situations where the effects of socioeconomic adversity are overpowering. Thus, the social capital that comes with higher socioeconomic status still offers some advantages and privileges that internal locus of control cannot compensate for. In sum, simultaneous changes to both a person's locus of control and structural changes are needed to improve the socioeconomic outcomes of persons who are currently under the constraints of social exclusion.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I addressed the key question of locus of control (sense of personal control) and culture which Mead employed and deployed to account for the disproportionate representation of poverty in the ethnic minority groups in the US. Many commentators regarded Mead's commentary as not only racist but called for its retraction. Indeed, this paper was retracted on July 31, 2020. However, as a scholar, I still believe that it is worth interrogating his ideas, opinions and policy preferences.

At this material moment, there is sufficient evidence to believe that locus of control evolves early in life and that familial influence is implicated. Locus of control established in early childhood persists throughout one's life and it influences the individual's socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood. In particular, locus of control has been found to account for differences in educational attainment, income levels, parental investment, job search behaviour, health status, and financial behaviour. It has equally been shown that internal locus of control is associated with taking more responsibility for work outcomes (Fitzgerald & Clark, 2013; Wang et al., 2010). However, locus of control is an enduring response to circumstances in the immediate or distant past which has been passed on from generation to generation.

Indeed, distinguishable behavioural patterns can be observed between persons living in poverty and those living in affluence. Thus, at this point, there is no benefit to denying the existence of 'culture of poverty'. It rather needs to be seen for what it is: the consequences of living in poverty. In other words, the culture of poverty evolves as a coping mechanism and establishes itself as a guide for behaviour. Culture of poverty

breeds external locus of control; this external locus of control sustains the culture of poverty through its influence on efforts and actions by the poor. The poor are not poor because of their culture but because their ways of coping with their circumstances continue to keep them poor.

If we have evidence that locus of control is modifiable (Campos et al., 2017; McCarty & Ramlakhan, 2018; Van Elk & Lodder, 2018; United States Army Military Personnel Center, 1979), we should indeed develop interventions that target it. Such interventions such as the one implemented in Togo by Compos and colleagues will not change the way members of a social group live (their culture). They will rather change the personality of some members. Hofstede (1991/1994) has identified three levels of uniqueness in human mental programming, namely: personality (both inherited and learned but specific to individuals), culture (learned and specific to a group or subgroup), and human nature (inherited and universal). Targeting locus of control is about targeting personality rather than culture. Thus, attributing poverty to locus of control is not in itself sufficient reason to implicate culture as well. The two constructs (culture and locus of control) are at different levels of human mental programming.

In the final analysis, public policy focused on eradicating poverty should also target modifying locus of control as it is possible to do so. Mead and I reach the same conclusion about the role of locus of control and the need to target it in planning poverty reduction strategies. We differ in our views about cross-cultural variations in locus of control. Current evidence suggests that it is more associated with circumstances of life (poverty) than with ways of living in social groups. If it so happens that in the US, most persons living in poverty are minorities, it does not mean that all the members of the ethnic minorities (and their geographic regions of origin) are characterised by high external locus of control. If that is the case, then the rich in Africa should equally have high external locus of control. Thus, the rich people everywhere demonstrate the same mind-set, which is high internal locus of control. We must, therefore, take culture out of the discussion and focus on what we can modify. However, we must note that, in some situations, systemic or structural changes are more effective than relying solely on individual's locus of control. Perhaps, manipulating both locus of control and structures (policies, processes, procedures, and practices) will be the most effective way to get persons living in poverty out of poverty.

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