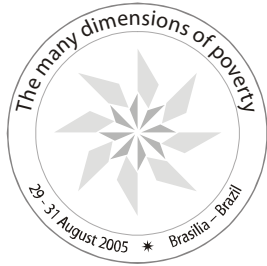


International Conference

# The many dimensions of poverty

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## Poverty counts: living with poverty and poverty measures

*Conference paper*

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## Poverty counts: living with poverty and poverty measures(\*)

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Poverty counts—measures of poverty levels and numbers of people who live above and below them—are designed to help us understand how poverty counts—how it affects people’s lives and the conditions they live in. Anthropologists have contributed to the study of poverty in a variety of ways, although usually as a corollary of ethnographic research, rather than a primary focus of inquiry. In part, this is a result of anthropology’s long tradition of studying remote, exotic social groups and/or localized contexts which are often seen as peripheral, marginalized or disadvantaged relative to larger or more powerful societies. (See, e.g., Ferguson, 1999) As a discipline, anthropology aspires to holism—inquiry into “the study of man” in its entirety—and like participants in this conference, views human experience as multidimensional. Most would agree that poverty or “relative deprivation is ... a multi-dimensional concept, embracing ‘all the spheres of life.’” (Lister, 2004:22) Within the sub-field of social-cultural anthropology, to which this paper is limited, most researchers seek to develop an integrated understanding of economic, political, social and cultural practices and relationships within in a particular social, spatial and/or cognitive locality, which may or may not be culturally or territorially bounded.<sup>1</sup>

For the student of poverty, ethnographic inquiry is potentially relevant both for questions of method—what to count, what (and what not) to measure and how—and for professional and popular debates about how poverty occurs, whom it affects, and what ought to be done about it. Ironically, given subsequent critiques of anthropology as a “colonial science” (Hymes, 1972; Asad, 1973; Stocking, 1984), one of the first groups of anthropologists to study modes of livelihood as a potential social problem were British anthropologists working in Africa who began, in the 1930s, to investigate questions of agricultural production, nutrition and food security among Britain’s African “subjects” in order to assess the need for policy intervention. First published in 1939, Audrey Richards’ classic study, *Land, labour and diet in Northern Rhodesia*, was designed “to show what anthropologists could contribute to the study of nutrition in African society, by an analysis of the social and economic factors affecting the intake of food in a particular tribe....” (Richards, 1939:vii. See also Moore & Vaughan, 1994:1-10 and passim) Begun in the late 1930s, anthropological research on food and nutrition both reflected and helped to promote officials’ growing concern with government responsibility for social welfare that, recent scholarship has suggested, helped bring an end to colonial rule itself. As the cost and complexity of extending the welfare state to

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<sup>1</sup> Contributions from biological anthropologists, who have provided important evidence and analyses of physiological dimensions and effects of economic and social deprivation, are beyond the scope of this paper.

the colonies became increasingly clear to officials in London and Paris, as well as Lagos and Nairobi, colonial regimes began to dismantle their African empire, leaving to their “successors the task of leading the transformation of a continent they themselves could not control...” (Cooper, 1996:472) Before they withdrew, however, colonial regimes had sponsored a growing body of quantitative as well as ethnographic inquiries, ranging from farming surveys and household budget studies to national income accounts,<sup>2</sup> all of which bore the imprint of anthropological methods and models of the time.

Since the end of the colonial era, anthropological contributions to development studies and policy debates have been increasingly critical of “the development enterprise” in general, and what some have called “the hegemony of the measurable” in particular. (Lister, 2004:38) James Ferguson’s widely-cited critique of development research and policy in Lesotho as an “an anti-politics machine” disguising its own political agenda under a rubric of “technical assistance,” or Peter Uvin’s self-critical reflections on the complicity of “the development enterprise” in the Rwandan genocide are just two, Africa-focused examples. (Ferguson, 1994; Uvin, 1998) Anthropologists have been particularly critical of numerical representations of complex social phenomena, arguing that quantitative analysis depicts poverty and development, for example, as “technical” problems amenable to mechanistic “solutions,” and evades or covers up the political agendas of those who design poverty interventions and those who create the conditions they address. (Mitchell, 1991, 2002. See also Escobar, 1995; Cooper & Packard, 1997; Gledhill, 2001) Others point out that the production of aggregate data is a complex and contentious political process in its own right, incisively described by a former official of the IMF: “The managing director makes the big decisions, and the staff then puts together the numbers to justify them.” (quoted in Wade, 2004:584. See also Harper, 2004)

While agreeing that many of these points are well-taken, the present paper stops well short of the view that quantitative methods are so inherently flawed as to be worse than useless, or that numbers should be dropped entirely from the lexicon of poverty studies. Compiling and examining quantitative indices can be a fruitful way of posing questions for further inquiry and reflection, not least because if honestly labeled and read, numbers help to clarify the limits of our knowledge. In addition, quantification provides a powerful tool of aggregation that allows analysts to discern social “forests” among the profusion of “trees” produced by close-grained ethnographic research, and discuss their significance for social analysis and policy design. In the following pages, I discuss measurement and ethnographic observation as both complementary and conflicting modes of representing social reality that, together, provide insights into multidimensional aspects of poverty that neither method yields alone. To illustrate, I will focus on a few themes—time and temporality, institutions, and social relationships—using examples from ethnographic writings on Africa to suggest ways in which ethnographic inquiry can qualify or expand understandings of poverty based on quantitative analysis.

### **Time and temporality: contexts, methods, resources**

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Haswell, 1963; Galletti, et al., 1956; Deane, 1953.

In discussion time and temporality, I do not intend to rehearse familiar debates about measurements of trends and fluctuations, but rather to comment briefly on time and temporality as perspectives—ways of experiencing and understanding social and material conditions and processes—that shape both social practices, and analysts’ interpretations of them.<sup>3</sup> Since Meyer Fortes introduced the question of multiple temporalities into anthropological notions of social structure, anthropologists have paid increasing attention to “the problem of time...as an inescapable dimension of all aspects of social experience and practice.” (Munn, 1992:93. Fortes, 1949, 1970; compare Faubion, 1993) The following examples illustrate some of the ways in which ethnographic studies of temporality may enhance our readings of some common poverty measures.

In the everyday pursuit of livelihood and a chance to get ahead, time figures as both a resource and a constraint. For people who live in or close to poverty, without access to productive assets such as land, capital and/or marketable skills, often their principal resource is their own time. Poorly endowed with access to affordable infrastructure—water, electricity, transportation, health care, education—as well as private resources, they spend long hours on basic domestic chores, in addition to income generating activities that bring little in return. Faced with multiple demands on their own time, people who live with poverty are constrained in their ability to manage the burdens of deprivation by the rhythms, schedules and contingencies of both natural and man-made forces, from weather to markets and bureaucracies, that they can neither escape nor control.

Converging periodicities of seasonal and/or institutional routines present everyday dilemmas of time allocation and management that place a premium on people’s own time and energy, limiting their ability to secure a livelihood, and leaving them vulnerable to anticipated as well as unforeseen events. During peak labor periods in the farming calendar, children may go hungry even if their mothers have not run short of foodstuffs, because the women are too tired to cook. (Richards, 1939:104-5; Haswell, 1975:99ff) A Gambian scheme to help rural women augment meager household incomes by planting dry season vegetable gardens nearly foundered on conjugal struggles over the time women spent watering their gardens, rather than preparing food and baths for their husbands and husbands’ guests. (Schroeder, 2002; compare Carney, 1988; Carney & Watts, 1990) In the late 1970s, motor mechanics were hard pressed to keep up with booming demand in newly oil-rich Nigeria because time spent on necessary tasks such as buying spare parts and visiting “regular customers” took them away from their shops, where unpaid apprentices accomplished little in the master’s absence. (Berry, 1985:153ff)

In recent years, as HIV/AIDS has claimed more and more young adult victims, most drastically in southern and parts of eastern Africa, survivors, many of whom are children, confront additional burdens of caring for the sick and providing for siblings, grandchildren, and neighbors left helpless by the incapacity and death of their former caretakers. Often poor to begin with, many of these caretakers are entirely dependent on

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<sup>3</sup> Fortes, 1975. Fabian, 1983, which castigates anthropology’s “allochronic” epistemology as an imperialist project, is a classic example of autocritical anthropological writings of the 1980s.

their own time to negotiate the daily burdens of living with multiple burdens of poverty, illness and death.

With limited options for earning income, many also find that returns to their efforts are highly unpredictable. In rainfed agriculture, the predominant form of small-scale farming across much of Africa, crop yields depend crucially on the timing of inputs and cultivation practices to coincide with variations in rainfall, temperature and pest attack, and the rhythms of plant growth and maturation. For resource poor farmers, the unpredictability of environmental factors can become unmanageable when someone falls ill—either the farmer herself, one or more of her livestock, or a relative or neighbor who might have helped with farm work, but needs care instead. (Haugerud, 1988: 170-71) Such hazards are compounded by fluctuations in market conditions, especially for poor farmers who cannot afford to store crops until markets recover from post-harvest lows, or petty traders who walk miles to carry a few things to market, only to return at the end of the day with goods unsold and proceeds too meager to provide an evening meal for the family. For those with little in reserve, an unlucky turn of events may make farming itself impossible. As a Russian peasant put it 80 years ago, when questioned for an official survey, “Today I am a middle peasant, tomorrow I become a poor peasant. If the horse dies, I’ll have to hire myself out.” (quoted in Shanin, 1972:114-5)

The burdens of self-reliance and the unpredictability of circumstance affect not only levels of income and vulnerability, but practices of personal and social management as well. In a richly detailed study of rural women’s reproductive practices in Gambia, anthropologist Caroline Bledsoe found that, faced with a daily regimen of unremitting toil and uncertain food supplies, women were more concerned with the physical wear and tear of pregnancy and childbirth, than with the total number of their offspring. A woman needs time, they explained, to establish the health of her infant and regain her own health and strength after the birth of one child before she incurs the physical costs of another. Without the strength to do physically demanding labor for long hours every day, she won’t be able to provide for the children she already has. Those who used Western contraceptives—a small but significant proportion of her sample—viewed contraception “as a technique to ensure the production of *more* living children than they would have achieved in its absence,” rather than a device for limiting total fertility. (Bledsoe, 2002:137)

Gambian women’s reproductive goals are multidimensional—centered on balancing their own and their families’ desires for many children against the need to maintain bodily health and strength in order to provide for them in the face of enduring poverty and constant uncertainty about the next day’s demands. Questions about “desired lifetime fertility,” the index favored by demographers as a predictor of reproductive practice, were likely to be met with noncommittal piety: “it’s up to God.” (Ibid: 140ff) Indeed, Bledsoe argues, Gambians do not “measure” reproductive potential in terms of linear temporality, dividing the time between menarche and menopause by the average length of a birth interval, as westerners do. Each woman, they believe, is born with a divine “endowment”—a certain “number of potential fetuses that God has bestowed upon” her, which she “is expected to spend on behalf of her husband and his

family...Once this endowment is finished, reproduction is finished, regardless of her age.” (Ibid: 165) Since the number of her fetuses is unknown until they are finished, a woman’s reproductive “budgeting” is aimed not at achieving a target number of live births, but at managing her own health and that of her babies to achieve as many live births as possible out of her potential total.<sup>4</sup> Reproduction and the closely related phenomenon of aging are not “bound to a time clock” as westerners assume, but “a God-given endowment that must be realized within a life course of contingent physical tolls.” (Ibid: 211-2)

Studies such as Bledsoe’s, which elucidate basic differences in understandings of social temporality, can be equally illuminating for the analysis of economic indicators in different social contexts. Struggling with prolonged economic stagnation or decline and widening inequality, many Africans have grown pessimistic about prospects for their children to get ahead, but this does not mean they don’t think about the future, or continue to frame current options in terms of past experience. Comparing budget data for Ghanaian households in the 1950s and the late 1980s, Guyer points out some striking continuities in patterns of household expenditure during the intervening decades of dramatic change in Ghana’s economic and political fortunes.<sup>5</sup> Budget data collected in the 1950s, she notes, which appeared to contravene “Engels’ Law” that, as household income rises, the proportion spent on food tends to fall, were dismissed at the time as unexplained “puzzles,” and similar evidence from the Ghana Living Standards Survey of 1987-88 “evoked hardly any commentary.” (Guyer, 2004:132)

Yet the consistency of this contrast between household budget data for Ghana and those collected in many other settings is striking. Using data from the second GLSS for 1991-92, Guyer found that expenditures on food remained roughly constant as income rose across demographic categories as well—single vs multi-person households, for example, and households headed by women as well as by men.<sup>6</sup> Reading these results against the ethnographic literature on the Akan, and her own and others’ studies of Yoruba communities in Nigeria, Guyer suggests that many West Africans organize income generation and use towards anticipated “career paths” rather than immediate household needs, adapting specific activities to current exigencies but maintaining a sense of purpose and direction shaped by past experience. (Ibid: 147ff) In these and other West African contexts, respect for “tradition” can be a source of resilience rather than inflexibility. As they struggled with prolonged hardship and shrinking opportunities in the stagnant economy of the 1990s, Clark writes, Asantes “struggled hard to fulfill their

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<sup>4</sup> Gambian men are also concerned about their children’s health and will accept a wife’s sexual abstinence or even contraceptive use until the health of the last-born child is established. If she uses contraceptives past the point of weaning, however, her husband is likely to conclude that “she is trying to end her marriage to him...by limiting fertility...[and] must be saving [her remaining fetuses] for someone else.” Bledsoe, 2002:207.

<sup>5</sup> In the GLSS, “household” was based on co-residence and shared meals—“eating from the same pot.” Recognizing the porosity of household boundaries, enumerators interviewed as many individual members of each household as were available at the time of the interview.

<sup>6</sup> To eliminate bias due to ethnographic variations, Guyer limited her analysis to data from the predominantly Akan-speaking regions of Ghana.



still vigorous commitment to lineage connections,” drawing strength from their pride in “the very latest tradition.” (Clark, 1999:81-82)

Bringing temporal perspectives to bear on economic activities and conditions also helps to elucidate patterns of activity and income use that might otherwise be dismissed or even condemned as wasteful, irrational or unproductive. Two classic examples in the anthropological literature on Africa are visiting and social payments—activities that contribute little or nothing to current income or productivity, but may play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining social relationships which, in turn, shape access to resources and opportunities over time. Yoruba auto mechanics whom I interviewed in 1978/79 during the height of the Nigerian oil boom, described outlays on food, shelter, clothing, etc., for their wives, children, apprentices and other dependents as “expenses.” Profit, or what remained out of earnings from the shop after these “expenses” were covered, belonged to the mechanic, to be used “for myself.” Asked to elaborate, mechanics explained that spending “for myself” meant reinvesting in the business. (Berry, 1985:153) Others have commented on the prevalence of social payments—bridewealth, funerary donations, gifts to friends, newborn infants and their parents—in African societies of the past, and their continuing importance in the present. Often classified by economists and statisticians as unproductive interpersonal “transfers” of goods and money, such transactions have been shown by others to play a key role in establishing a person’s social identity and standing, and creating and nurturing ties of kinship, affinity and alliance that shape resource access and management, with potentially significant consequences for income levels and economic security.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1970s, patterns of income use among Yoruba mechanics paralleled those of farmers and farmers’ children, many of whom had left farming to pursue careers in school teaching, trade, auto repair, or the civil service. Normally classified as consumption, their expenditures on food, clothing, shelter, etc., began to look more like investments when viewed through a wider social and temporal lens. Like their fathers who, as youths, had worked on *their* fathers’ farms without pay, in return for future help in establishing farms of their own, traders, mechanics, school teachers and others supported dependents and contributed to collective projects in order to secure their own futures as respected senior members of family and community networks. Consanguinity and common heritage were points of entry into potentially productive relationships, rather than guarantees of entitlement. (Berry, 1985, 1993; also Barber, 1991; Bledsoe, 1990; Guyer, 1997) People may be born into certain relationships, but unless they nurture and maintain them, they will lose their vitality, becoming “kinship” only in name.

As the economic upheavals of the 1970s gave way to persistent economic stagnation and decline in the 1980s and 90s, occupations such as school teaching and motor repair no longer offered likely pathways to even modest improvements in living standards and security. Overwhelmingly, West Africans now say that one must go “abroad” to find economic opportunity and advance. Some observers have concluded that increasing numbers of young people are trapped in a kind of socio-economic

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<sup>7</sup> The literature is too large to cite, but see, e.g., Comaroff & Roberts, 1980; Berry, 1993; Peters, 1994; Guyer, ed., 1995; Cooper, 1997.

childhood—unable to advance along culturally sanctioned career tracks by becoming economically self-supporting and, hence, able to marry, provide for their own children and care for younger siblings or parents, as needed. As the capacity of family and other social networks to provide security and opportunity has dwindled, some argue that the strength of family relations has eroded too. “The pressures that erode lineage families also erode household relations. ... Youth begin to fend for themselves at an early age” and “different interests within the household begin to exert their own interests,” leading to “struggles between elders and youth and men and women.” (Amanor, 2001:118. Compare Sharp & Spiegel, 1985)

Others point out that, while declining opportunities for economic independence and accumulation do erode people’s capacity to assist others, at the same time they increase the importance of social networks as potential, albeit shrinking, safety nets. In the mid-1990s, Clark writes, “[t]he Asante [were] not degenerating into irresponsible individualism but struggling hard to fulfil their still vigorous commitment to lineage connections...” (Clark, 1999:81), and Amanor notes a “discourse [that] builds upon the solidarity of relations between grandmothers, mothers and daughters in farming and the transmission of women’s farm property” to argue “that women should have equal access to family property as men in their own right.” (Ibid:118. Compare Cooper, 1997; Brydon & Legge, 1996) In conversation, people certainly dwell on the “decline” of family obligations and mutual assistance in contemporary life, but anxiety does not always correspond to practice. What is striking is ordinary Africans’ increasing reliance on the global economy and a corresponding integration of global inequalities in income and wealth *within* families and communities. In one peri-urban “village” near Kumasi, overrun by suburban sprawl between 1993 and 2002, I found that most of the new houses had been built with money sent by Ghanaians from Europe or North America, and were occupied by poorer relatives of the owners as well as, or instead of, rent-paying tenants.<sup>8</sup>

Bringing close ethnographic observations to bear on measurements of income, expenditures and assets for larger populations enhances and clarifies our view of the multidimensionality of poverty, and the experience of living with it on a daily basis. Understanding how people experience and interpret the daily routines, “normal” contingencies, crises, and long term changes that lie behind numerical indices of income and wealth helps to explain how poverty spreads, deepens and persists, and recognize that efforts to reduce or alleviate poverty are necessarily attempting to “hit a moving target.” (Maxwell, 1986, 2004) This, in turn, takes us back to questions of method.

### **Institutions in motion: household, marriage, family**

Most measurements of poverty use households as their basic unit of analysis. Recent publications by UNDP and other organizations acknowledge that the complex dynamics of household composition in many African societies complicate efforts to

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<sup>8</sup>In 2002, I conducted a follow-up study of this village, which I had first studied in 1993.



measure levels and incidences of poverty, but many challenges remain.<sup>9</sup> Constructing a sociologically meaningful definition of the household is a challenge in any context, but nowhere more so than in African societies where one residential structure may house dozens of people who relate to one another in many different ways, and individuals move in and out of them continually, living their everyday lives, so to speak, in motion. Accustomed to conventions of domestic stability in Europe, where all but the wealthy were believed to reside in stable, nuclear or slightly extended family households, readily accessible to enumerators and standardized classifications, colonial officials complained endlessly about the difficulties of governing African “subjects,” who seemed never to stay in one place long enough to be counted, instructed or taxed. The case of Baule villagers in Ivory Coast, who fended off French control for 25 years after “conquest” by scattering to spatially dispersed kin and affines before soldiers could arrive to punish them for failing to meet the tax collector’s demands, was unusual only in the degree of the villagers’ tenacity, and the extreme severity of the measures that were ultimately used to “pacify” them. (Weiskel, 1975)

After independence, African governments faced similar challenges as they attempted to exercise effective authority over the mobile, diverse, often divided populations within their borders. Children often grow up in a series of different domestic locations, learning new skills and building relationships with kin, teachers, friends, even strangers who help prepare them for adulthood and may serve as future patrons. (Bledsoe, 1990; Berry, 1985; and many others) In southern Ghana, many spouses live in different houses, sending children to carry meals and messages between them, visiting each other when circumstances permit, but traveling separately to trade, work, or visit distant relatives, sometimes for extended periods of time. Repeating my own census of a village in southwestern Nigeria in 1978, after an interval of seven years, I found that the total population (ca 550) had not changed, but that 60% of the individuals who were living there in 1971 had moved away, their places taken not by strangers, but by other members of their extended families. The independence and mobility that characterize residential arrangements in these and many other African contexts apply to economic activities as well. Siblings, parents and children, even husbands and wives manage their incomes and expenditures separately, and assets are often individually owned, even when they are combined in the process of production. Goheen’s ethnography, *Men own the fields, women own the crops* (1996) refers to one small polity in southwestern Cameroon, but the title is emblematic of practices that confound efforts to count “households” assets or construct meaningful measurements of their income.

Such examples suggest that, in societies where domestic arrangements are varied, dynamic and complex, policy-makers would be better served by data that measure poverty for individuals rather than imagined standardized “households.” The cost and logistics of collecting individual data are high, especially in societies without reliable censuses or adequate administrative infrastructure, but policies that ignore social realities

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<sup>9</sup>Awareness of the importance of disaggregating the household for purposes of policy design for use in African contexts owes much to the work of Guyer, 1981; Guyer & Peters, 1984; Moock, ed., 1986, and others, in the 1980s.

can be costly too.<sup>10</sup> Citing data that show a lower incidence of poverty among married couples than among single adults with children in the US, the present federal administration promotes marriage as a strategy for poverty alleviation. Among poor unmarried women, however, employment is viewed as a precondition rather than a corollary of marriage since, in their experience, economic security leads to stable marriages, rather than the other way around. (Edin & Kefalas, 2004, forthcoming) Evidence from West Africa tends to support their position. Recent studies report increasing numbers of men and women who postpone marriage or avoid it altogether, explaining that they do not marry because they cannot afford to. (Clark, 1999; Brydon, 1987) Declining marriage rates do not necessarily portend weakened or diminished family relations (see, e.g., Brydon, 1987), but they reflect declining opportunities for both personal and collective economic advance that have accompanied the spread of poverty, and the increasing difficulty people have in rising out of it in the current era of market liberalization

In sum, numbers are powerful tools of aggregation, but limited in their ability to represent multiple and contradictory dimensions of living with poverty, or address the challenges of designing and carrying out effective policy interventions. Ethnographic observations are hard to add up, but expand understanding in ways that numbers do not. Nowhere is this more apparent than when we turn from individuals' experiences of living with poverty, to the way their experiences are produced through interactions with other people.

### **From assets to investment: social relationships as “property” and process**

As people form and sustain social relationships through daily, periodic or occasional interactions with others, so do they live with poverty. Living with poverty is not a state of being, but a social process in which people's fortunes are made and lost through interactions with others, as well as through changes in circumstance and capacity. In recognizing that the precariousness of impoverishment and people's chances of improvement depend on their assets as well as their current income, it is important also to recognize that assets can and do change over time—not only because people gain and lose access to them, but also because the value of the assets themselves can appreciate, alter or decline even if the terms of access to them do not change.<sup>11</sup>

In developing multidimensional approaches to measuring poverty, recent studies also acknowledge that access to income-generating opportunities and/or ability to make productive use of them may be enhanced by the assistance of other people, as well as by access to markets and purchasing power. “[S]ocial groups play an important role in protecting the needs of poor people and mediating against risk,” declares a recent World Bank report, adding that “[s]ocial institutions refer to the kinship systems, local organizations, and networks of the poor and can be usefully discussed as different forms

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<sup>10</sup> World Bank statisticians acknowledged as much when they signed on to the Millenium Development Goals. World Bank, 2001. *World Development Report 2000/2001: attacking poverty*. Washington, DC.

<sup>11</sup> In documenting the multidimensionality of global poverty, the World Bank counts assets, but does not discuss processes of acquiring them, or alterations in their value over time.

or dimensions of social capital.” (World Bank, 2000/01:128) Equating social networks and institutions to “social capital” conceptualizes them as things—stocks of objects, ideas and/or interpersonal connections that may increase a person’s capacity to produce or earn income. (Bourdieu, 1987; Dasgupta, 2000; Foley & Edwards, 1999; Manski, 2000) Building on Bourdieu’s pioneering work in sociology, economists have drawn attention to the potential “profitability” of interpersonal connections, and it has become commonplace to list “social capital” among the assets that may contribute to economic development and poverty alleviation. (World Bank, 2000/01)

In this vein, it is interesting to note that there is an implicit contradiction between the basic concept of “market liberalization,” which postulates that markets function best when they are “competitive”—i.e., unhampered by social obligations and special interests that “distort” market signals and “misallocate” resources—and that of “social capital” which emphasizes the productive potential of social relationships and institutions. This apparent conundrum arises in part from the language of economic analysis, which distinguishes sharply between income—defined as a flow of goods and/or purchasing power at a particular moment of time—and assets or wealth, which have the potential to generate income because they retain their value over long periods of time. This terminology tends to downplay or ignore the malleability of assets themselves. The omission is particularly striking in the case of social relationships, or “non-market” institutions. Unlike markets, for example, which are evaluated according to their “openness” and flexibility, non-market institutions are pictured as stable, unchanging, and/or rooted in a distant or imagined past. People “fail to respond” to opportunities or new ideas, it is said, because they are wedded to (presumably immobile) traditions.

A striking example is provided by a film, “These girls are missing: the gender gap in Africa’s schools” (Robertson & Camerini, 1997), which seeks to dramatize the need to improve levels of educational achievement among African girls. Sponsored, in part, by the World Bank, “These girls...” sends a curiously mixed message about the obstacles to increasing educational opportunities and achievements for girls in Africa. The sound track consists primarily of conversations with adults—older men in a Guinean village who insist that sending girls to school will lead to immoral behavior and undermine traditional authority, and staff and parents at an elite girl’s school in Malawi who dwell on premarital pregnancy as a primary cause of girls leaving school before they have completed their studies.<sup>12</sup> The auditory message of the film is clear: traditional male attitudes towards girls’ sexuality and independence are a major roadblock to African progress.

Visually, however, the film tells a different story. While men talk in the Guinean village, the camera shows girls and women engaged in ceaseless manual labor—fetching water and firewood, pounding grain, sweeping dirt floors, scrubbing clothes, hoeing fields—in an unending effort to keep up with daily household provisioning and care. In the Malawian section of the film, we watch girls bent over their books, or leaving school

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<sup>12</sup> Neither the locations, nor the filmmakers’ reasons for selecting them, are identified in the film—silences that appear to reflect and serve to reinforce common western misperceptions of Africa as one “country” in which everyone is alike.

at the insistence of uncles or fathers to devote themselves to childcare and housework, while we listen to parents and teachers bemoan the weak mores that distract young women from academic pursuits and compromise their futures. In short, while the soundtrack blames cultural intransigence for low rates of academic achievement among African girls, the camera suggests that, without their labor, many African households would not function.<sup>13</sup>

In the policy discourse that prompted “These girls are missing,” social processes such as education, tradition and culture are represented as things—social assets and liabilities that, in principle, add to or subtract from people’s productive capacity in measurable amounts. Such conceptualizations of social process belie the difficulty of measuring the interactive practices through which people generate and sustain them. What units do we use to calculate quantities or degrees of sisterhood or seniority? What numerical or ordinal scale represents the ambivalent dynamics of love, fear, respect, hope, suspicion and betrayal that play out through people’s daily or intermittent encounters, or the dialogics of expectation and (mis)understanding that make and unmake attitudes and relationships? I am not suggesting that these are questions which anthropologists can answer, whereas statisticians cannot. The vividness with which skilled ethnographers bring particular individuals or groups of people to life by weaving together detailed accounts of their words, deeds, performances and interactions testifies to the limitations as well as the strengths of anthropological methods for charting the multiple dimensions of poverty. By chronicling people’s experiences with poverty through detailed accounts of practices, perspectives and patterns of experience in specific times and places, anthropological studies both illuminate dimensions of poverty that are in some sense un-measurable, and demonstrate their own inability to solve the problem of aggregation that is needed to apprehend, and therefore address, poverty as a social rather than an individual problem.

Moving from the logistics of asset measurement to processes of asset formation, we may approach social relationships as microhistories of social interaction that inform, reinforce or revise people’s possibilities and perspectives. In addition to recognizing that expenditures on goods for current consumption can also act as investments in the means of future access and security, as already discussed, fixed assets can be reinterpreted as loci of activity and interaction that enhance people’s sense of possibility and self-worth, as well as material standards of living.

Such an approach opens additional perspectives on some kinds of material as well as intangible assets. A prime example in many African societies is the enormous amount of energy and income that people invest in housing. As early as the 1940s, field studies commented on the physical transformation of rural communities as cocoa farmers in Ghana and southwestern Nigeria, or small-scale coffee and dairy producers in central Kenya replaced mud walls and thatched roofs with cement blocks and corrugated iron. (Beckett, 1944; Fortes, et al., 1948; Hill, 1963; Brokensha, 1966; Okali, 1983; Peel,

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<sup>13</sup> Studies of African household labor patterns show that girls often work longer hours than boys, on both domestic and directly productive tasks, especially in rural areas. See, e.g., Reynolds, 1991; Bonilla-Chacin, 2001.

1983; Berry, 1985 & 1993) In recent years, housing has claimed a larger share of remittances sent home by African emigrants in Europe and North America than any other type of asset. (See, e.g., Osili, 2004)

More than simply a form of rental property, houses accrue multiple social and symbolic meanings. Multiple patterns of use are common: many houses provide sheltered space for commercial, artisanal, educational, religious and/or professional activities as well as residential use, and there is a long history of people using part of their earnings from trade, artisanry, or the sale of agricultural produce to build houses in small towns and villages where there is no rental market, but where they have ancestral or other social ties. Among farmers in Ghana and southwestern Nigeria, building a “storey house” in the farmer’s home town was a lifetime ambition that many were able to realize out of their earnings from cocoa cultivation. (Beckett, 1944; Hill, 1963; Brokensha, 1966; Galletti, et al., 1956; Berry, 1975, 1985 & 2001) Since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, West Africans have also channelled savings from farming, trade, wage employment and other sources into building houses in urban areas. Reinforced by widespread evidence that the value of land and landed property tends to appreciate over time, houses have gained a widespread reputation as physically and financially durable assets, that can be kept as a form of long-term insurance, and transferred to descendants and heirs, creating a legacy that outlives their builders and helps to reproduce family ties from one generation to another. (Berry, 2001, 2002)

Houses also provide spaces where their owners may offer hospitality to kin, neighbors, colleagues and deserving strangers. Stable venue for endless movement and interaction, a house gives concrete testimony to the builder’s commitment to kin and community, enhancing his/her reputation for generosity as well as accomplishment, and strengthening claims on the loyalty and resources of dependents and guests. Houses have also become increasingly important for the personal and financial security and autonomy of African women, who are often left with few resources after divorce or the death of a husband, and whose husbands, children or other kin may prove unable or unwilling to support them. In the predominantly Muslim city of Maradi (Niger), Hausa women make lifelong efforts to acquire “houses of their own.” (Cooper, 1997:82ff) “Property is crucial to women,” Cooper writes “not simply as a material asset, but because it creates, defines, and facilitates social relations.” (Ibid:87) Owning a house positions a woman “as a *mai gida*, someone who is master of a house, like a man,” with authority over potential dependents, from sons and daughters to clients and tenants. (Ibid: 85) Cooper’s findings for Maradi have been corroborated for other African societies. Owning property, especially landed property such as housing, places African women “in a position to form social relationships in the wider community that are politically significant...legitimat[ing their] entry into the public domain.” (Barnes, 1990:275)<sup>14</sup>

In a related analysis, Paul Lubeck suggests that the gentrification of northern Nigerian cities, where affluent elites used wealth from Nigeria’s oil boom to build walled villas in the 1970s and 80s, led to declining access to food and shelter for itinerant Koranic students who for decades had escaped seasonal hunger in the rural areas to

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<sup>14</sup> For additional citations, see Cooper, 1997:86n31,



follow their teachers to the cities, where they lived on alms and slept in the open reception rooms at the entrance to the houses of the devout. The resulting experience of disruption and exclusion contributed directly, Lubeck argues, to a series of millenarian protests against “modern” life styles and affluence in which followers of the charismatic Mai ‘Tatsine seized public latrines and market spaces in cities across northern Nigeria, in defiant repudiation of the privatization of urban space. The ensuing brutal repression by Nigeria’s armed forces left hundreds of people dead, and many more gravely wounded. (Lubeck, 1985)

Lubeck’s argument came to mind during a recent survey of occupants in a periurban neighborhood of Kumasi, where a Muslim informant who was visiting from the Netherlands, where he had lived for over ten years working as a postman, lashed out in anger at my questions about his recently built house. Invited to expand on the reasons for his distress, he cited commentators on Dutch TV who show images of houses built by expatriate Ghanaians in their home countries to suggest that the immigrants were exploiting the resources and hospitality of their hosts by squandering the generous wages paid by European employers on “luxuries,” rather than investing them to expand productive capacity in their impoverished countries. Such experiences help to explain why, despite assurances from property rights enthusiasts that issuing titles for land and houses would promote economic development by providing a source of collateral for loans, Africans are often reluctant to wager their land and houses against the vagaries of the uncertain and unstable economies in which they live. (Berry, 1993, 2001) Houses are simply too valuable to risk losing them to foreclosure—in part, because their value exceeds what the market measures.

The significance of a house as both a means and a sign of self-realization and social recognition points to the importance of personal (and collective) reputation in general as source of social influence and economic return. The possibility of converting other people’s regard to more tangible forms of wealth exists in most societies as both a powerful and a notoriously fickle source of prosperity and destitution. The political and economic dynamics of reputation in an African setting are vividly portrayed, for example, in Jonathon Glassman’s study of a popular uprising in 1888 in Pangani, a town on the east African coast, where profits from the expanding caravan trade in ivory and slaves gave rise to lavish public displays of consumption and wealth, and intense competition over prestigious “Swahili” status through. (Glassman, 1995) The social fungibility of mercantile wealth that Glassman describes for the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century has not disappeared at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Spurred, in part, by international donors’ search for African “partners” to help implement policies of market liberalization and political restructuring, “traditional authorities” have been making a comeback across the continent.

This is clearly the case in Ghana, where traditional authorities are looking for ways to commute ancient prerogatives to marketable assets. In my conversation with an Asante chief in 2002, he described his efforts to attract a Korean firm who were looking for a place to build a small factory to manufacture and distribute inexpensive jewelry in Ghana. At the time of independence, chiefs lost most of the authority they had exercised under colonial rule, but their continued jurisdiction over land has been reaffirmed in each

of Ghana's four post-independence constitutions. If the deal went forward, the chief explained, he planned to offer a site for the factory in exchange for part ownership of the firm. The idea of converting traditional authority to equity capital in an industrial enterprise had been suggested to him during a recent tour of South Africa, where he and several other West African chiefs traveled, courtesy of the World Bank, to exchange ideas with their counterparts in the former apartheid-designated "homelands" about how to turn traditional prerogatives to political and economic advantage in contemporary times.

### **Living with poverty measures: implications for policy**

To conclude this discussion, I illustrate briefly how the kinds of anthropological studies I have cited bring additional perspectives to bear on common strategies for poverty alleviation. The above-cited film on girls' education in Africa illustrates the potential value of direct observation for qualifying explanations of poverty that are derived from quantitative analysis—in this case, the correlation between levels of per capita income and national average rates of school enrolment by girls. (Odaga, 1995) The following examples illustrate further possibilities for going behind standard measurements of poverty levels and beyond some of the policy conclusions drawn from them, by bringing in anthropological accounts of temporality and social interaction.

*Improving agricultural productivity.* If scarcity of one's own time is a significant constraint on people's ability to gain income, time allocation becomes a crucial skill for managing livelihood struggles. Otherwise well-intentioned efforts to provide public assistance, or raise poor people's incomes by developing "appropriate" technologies, often overlook this point. For example, most of the money spent by CGIAR<sup>15</sup> on plant breeding and genetic modification designed to spread the benefits of the "Green Revolution" to low income farmers, measured the success of experimental outcomes in terms of increased yield—a methodological convention that assumed land was the principal constraint on poor farmers' ability to produce. For a long time, scientists working to develop new agricultural technologies adapted to African agro-ecological conditions measured the results of their experiments in terms of biomass per hectare, overlooking the possibility that many poor farmers stood to gain more from crops that took less time to mature—thus freeing farmers' time for other pressing activities *and* reducing their need to store or find money to buy food for daily consumption during the hungry season—than from those that squeezed more from a given plot of land once a year, but left the farmer with a choice between post-harvest sales when prices were low, or watch stored supplies dwindle from mildew, pests, rodents and the threat of fire. (Collinson & Haugerud, 1990)

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<sup>15</sup> The Consultative Group of Institutes for Agricultural Research, a world-wide network of agricultural research institutes launched by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations in the 1960s and '70s, carried out research on plant breeding, insect and pest ecology, animal science, and other branches of agricultural and environmental science, in order to develop new technologies for raising agricultural productivity in low income economies. Particular efforts were made to adapt potential improvements to different local agro-ecologies.

*Accessing government resources.* While many African governments are themselves chronically starved of resources for public services and investments, for their impoverished citizens, the state remains a key source of both economic and logistical support. As Villalon demonstrates in his study of everyday practices of state power in a rural town in Senegal, the Senegalese state has compensated for its lack of distributable resources by extending bureaucratic practices into every aspect of social life.

To an extent far greater than many of its neighbors on the continent, the state in Senegal has been able to both regulate societal activities and prescribe the degree of access to its own resources. This relative hegemony ... creates for the state a realm of services which become essential, but which only it can provide.... In a situation of severe scarcity the Senegalese state thus manages to maintain its appeal in large part by its monopoly over the satisfaction of needs which would not themselves exist without the state. (Villalon, 1995:102-3)

While Villalon emphasizes the exceptional degree of bureaucratic self-reproduction that operates in Senegal, the process he describes is not unusual. Like the miniscule child support grants offered by the South African government to caretakers of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS (Baim-Lance, 2004), the proliferation of administrative functions in Senegal places demands on citizens' time and effort that fall most heavily on those who are most in need of whatever meager resources they can find to stave off complete destitution. (Compare Juul & Lund, eds., 2002)

*Family planning for poor people:* In the above-cited study of reproductive practices in rural Gambia, Bledsoe found that women "were using high-technology contraceptives to construct through careful cultural strategies... what demographic analyses term 'natural fertility' ...," effectively "subvert[ing] the intentions of family planning programs." (Bledsoe, 2002:325) Such anomalous results call, she argues, not for replacing statistics with ethnography, but rather for closer integration of methods and theories from demographic, social and medical sciences in the description and analysis of human reproductive behavior in different social contexts. Such collaborative efforts can also elucidate counterintuitive policy responses, like the case of Gambian women who use contraceptives to increase their fertility, and rethink policy options.

## **Conclusion**

Framing poverty and policy debates in terms of social context and process may not extend the scope for measuring multidimensionality, but it underscores the undeniable dynamics of the social outcomes we seek to understand, including the role of poverty as a cause, as well as an effect, of apparently disabling or wasteful practices, such as keeping girls home from school, or investing in houses rather than farms or factories. By drawing attention to temporalities, social interactions, and the conceptual and practical implications of anthropological methods for poverty analysis and poverty design, this paper seeks to stimulate further reflection and debate about these challenging issues.

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