

Oscar lewis concept of culture of poverty

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It's the theory developed by Oscar Lewis (an anthropologist) in 1959. Lewis developed his theory from his experience of Mexico. The culture of poverty is a specific syndrome that grows up in some situations. It requires an economic setting of cash economy, a high rate of unemployment and under employment, low wages and people with low skills. In the absence of voluntary or state support and stable family, the low-income population tends to develop the culture of poverty against the dominant ideology of accumulation of the middle class. The poor realize that they have a marginal position within a highly stratified and individualistic capitalistic society, which does not offer them any prospect for upward mobility.

In order to survive the poor have to develop their own institutions and agencies because the larger society tends to ignore and bypass them. Thus the poor come to embody a common set of values, norms and pattern of behaviour, which is different from the general culture as such. In short the poor have a way of life - a specific subculture. Lewis found 70 traits that underlay this subculture. He classified these traits into four types: 1) Relationships between the subculture and the larger society: People either disengage or maintain distance from the larger society. They do not belong to labour unions or political parties, go to banks or hospitals or enjoy leisure facilities of the city. They have a high mistrust of the dominant institutions of society.

2) Nature of the slum community: The slum community is characterized by poor housing and overcrowding and a minimum of organizational structure beyond the space of family. These institutions grow up mainly to meet their minimum needs. The slum economy is inward looking. It is embedded in

<https://assignbuster.com/oscar-lewis-concept-of-culture-of-poverty/>

pawning of personal goods, informal credit and use of second hand goods. 3) Nature of the family: bilateral kinship system, unstable marriage, matrifocal family. 4) Attitudes, values and personality of the individual: The individual has ' a strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority'; a weak ego tuned to the gratification in the present and a strong preoccupation with masculinity. Once the subculture is formed it tends to be perpetuated.

It is transmitted from one generation to another through socialization. The theory of culture of poverty has been greatly misunderstood and misused. Lewis saw it as an extreme form of adaptation that the poor are forced to make under certain circumstances and in certain places. The poor rejects the dominant culture and its institutions because they do not serve them. Their own subculture grows out of despair and protest. The theory has been found particularly influential in the study of the underclass. In 1962 Gunnar Myrdal (1962) coined the term underclass to identify the Americans who were at the bottom of labour market-unemployed or underemployed and were thus excluded from the mainstream of social life.

In recent years the underclass has become an increasingly important island of humanity in the West living off welfare or crime. Charles Murray (1984), a New Right theorist has argued that welfare dependency has led to the breakdown of the nuclear family and formation of a counter culture that encourages dependency and criminality.