

# Seeing and making culture: representing the poor essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



What is your perception of the poor and less fortunate in society? Would you say that you have a low perception of them or do you regard them in the highest? Would you do your social duty to reach out to the poor and impoverished to assist them, or help assist, in establishing programs that would aid in leading them to a brighter future? These are the questions that I ask of myself as I read, " Seeing and Making Culture: Representing the Poor," by bell hooks. My paper examines the perception that pop culture, society, and media have of the poor, as well as, the expectations and responsibilities of society to ensure a response to their needs. In " Seeing and Making Culture: Representing the Poor," bell hooks argues that the poor are portrayed as lacking integrity and dignity, and is convinced that TV shows and films send out a message that people cannot feel good about themselves if they are poor.

She postulates that the low self-esteem of the less fortunate would be restored if society as a whole changed how they share their resources and wealth; restoring a value system that has disappeared. hooks contends that it basically boils down to the fact that society and the government have the responsibility to intervene in changing the way that everyone looks at poverty, and should provide opportunities for the poor to meet and help each other. I agree with hooks; while this was the perception back in 1994 when her book was published, it is very sad to see that the same observations made by hooks of how the poor or impoverished are portrayed in media and society today remain the same.

For the most part, our culture has evolved in that we are more willing to help those less fortunate and our communities have provided and created programs that nurture the poor. Most of us are honest, hardworking, good people; who feel compelled to help those with less than we have, and according to a study of public attitudes toward federal anti-poverty efforts conducted by Half in Ten and the Center for American Progress, “ more than 2, 000 adults are more supportive of the War on Poverty than in the past and are very strong supporters of renewed efforts to fight poverty” (“ Moving The War On Poverty Forward”). But there are still Americans out there who continue to turn a blind eye and regard the poor as being lazy and good for nothing.

I also have to agree with hooks in that it is ultimately society’s responsibility to be a part of transforming this perception into one of empathy and responsiveness, and believe just as hooks states, “ the sharing of privilege; the assertion of one’s power to change the world so that the poor would have their needs met, would have access to resources, and would have justice and beauty in their lives” (hooks, 196). We, as a society, are responsible for the election of officials who will ensure that programs are continuously put into place that help the needy, and that community based programs are offered to educate and assist those in poverty to higher achievements and skills enabling them to find work, thus empowering them to strive towards creating a better life.

### Perception of the Poor

Originally, I had planned to disagree with hooks on how our culture and

society perceives the poor and impoverished, but after completing my research to complete this paper; I discovered that it has not changed very much over the last 20 years. “ Poverty in America is an enormous problem, and 15 percent of Americans, or 46. 5 million people, lived below the poverty line in 2012. The poor are increasingly isolated across America. Between 1970 and 2009 the proportion of poor families living in poor neighborhoods more than doubled, from 8 to 18 percent, and the trend shows no signs of abatement” (Florida). The reason for this trend is due, in part, to the fact that the poor in America are still seen as invisible because society does not want see or hear that poor people still exist in our country. We, as a people, are uncomfortable with the fact that poverty remains prevalent in our nation; and in our quest of not holding ourselves accountable, we turn a blind eye on the issue. I am actually quite taken aback and surprised at my own unintentional ignorance on the subject.

We walk around looking at life through rose colored glasses; meaning that we do not see, or do not choose to see, what is truly going on around us on a daily basis. I am just as guilty as others in keeping this stereotype alive. I find myself reaching for my cellphone when being approached by a homeless person asking for a hand out, pretending to be too busy with my conversation rather than pay attention to them. After all, they are just begging for money or food, right? I, like the majority of middle and upper class individuals, have always had the perception that if they are poor and asking for money or food, then why should I help them? Why don't they get off of their lazy butts and do something about it.

I never stopped to think of their circumstances, and I never try to put myself in their shoes in order to understand fully the struggles they face. I wake up in the morning, get ready for work, grab a Starbucks coffee, rush off in my Lexus and arrive to work; complaining about how bad the traffic was on the way into the office or boasting about the wonderful weekend of food and drink we had with family and friends. I do not stop to think, as I drive past that bum holding a sign in his arms; asking for a handout, that this poor individual does not have the luxury of waking up and driving off in their car to a job, let alone afford a cup of coffee.

I am only thinking about myself and have been conditioned by society that the poor are beneath me. Just as hooks states in her book, " Society is telling them that poverty and nihilism are one and the same. If they cannot escape poverty, then they have no choice but to drown in the image of a life that is valueless" (hooks, 198), we have been taught by society to believe that poverty and nihilism are synonymous, but this is not true. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, I believe it takes a nation to resolve the issue of poverty. Our society needs to dig deep to reignite the morals that generations in the past taught us; sharing our resources, whether monetarily or charitably, through understanding, kindness and generosity to those less fortunate.

We all have to be ready to share liberally and recognize the fact that there are those who struggle and deserve attention paid to their struggles. By helping others who have not, we keep our humanity intact and maintain our ability to empathize and show compassion towards others. Our culture is

based on working together and helping our neighbors. We need to stop considering the poor invisible and instead take personal steps to keep our communities thriving via good will towards others, and lending a helping hand. The poor, just as our environment, are our responsibility, and the sharing of resources is crucial to bringing an individual from poverty to a more sustainable way of life. We must all work together as hooks suggests, “to change the face of poverty so that it becomes, once again, a site for the formation of values, dignity and integrity, as any other class position in this society; we would need to intervene in existing systems of representation” (hooks, 200). Responsibility of Society and Media

According to hooks, “Television shows and films bring the message home that no one can truly feel good about themselves if they are poor” (hooks, 197). I find this to be true. Just as hooks refers to the 1975 to 1985 TV sitcom, *The Jeffersons*, using humor to “masks the longing to change their lot, the desire to move on up” (hooks, 197); some sitcoms of today utilize the same strategy. Take, for instance, *Two Broke Girls*, a sitcom based on two young girls; who waitress at a greasy diner and have high hopes of launching a successful cupcake business if they could only raise the cash. Just as in *The Jeffersons*, this 2013 sitcom uses humor to masks their desire to climb out of what they feel is poverty. hooks presumes that not only the media has a responsibility for changing the face of poverty in the minds of Americans, but also working politically can assist in the redistribution of wealth and resources.

According to the Director of the Poverty and Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress, Melissa Boteach, “ personal responsibility, mixed with public and private initiatives to lift people up is a key strategy in fighting poverty. Opportunities need to be created for people to succeed. It is not only personal responsibility, but it is also the government’s job to create pathways to opportunity” (Ketchum). President Lyndon Johnson took the first step in resolving the issue of the poor by waging a war on poverty fifty years ago; creating the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. He warned, “ The war on poverty is not fought on any single, simple battlefield and it will not be won in a generation. There are too many enemies: lack of jobs, bad housing, poor schools, lack of skills, discrimination; each intensifies the other” (Bookbinder). It was President Johnson and his administration who believed that “ poverty was best addressed through the creation of economic opportunity, rather than by simply raising incomes. The war was focused on education, job training and community development” (The War on Poverty).

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was only successful for a short time period with poverty rates dropping to their lowest levels from 17. 3% in 1964 to 11. 1% in 1973 but has fluctuated since 1973. Almost ten years after its induction the program was dismantled by President Nixon, thus “ causing the agency’s programs to be transferred to other government agencies creating deregulation, growing criticism of the welfare state along with an ideological shift to conservatism thus culminating in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996; which in the words of President Clinton, ended welfare as we know it”, (The War on Poverty). But,

public opinion has changed and society wants to see lawmakers invest in the economy, education and healthcare.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established so many programs that still make a difference and are available to the less fortunate of today, i. e. “ VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America), Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Head Start, Community Health Centers, Family Planning, Legal Services, Summer Youth Programs, Senior Centers and more” (Economic Opportunity Act (1964)). In my opinion, our government has shown a lack of response to the poor and continues to blame personal failing for the problem. Our communities would welcome our government’s investment of an anti-poverty agenda, and our lawmakers should all gather up the courage to fight for this. The Center for American Progress has created a campaign whose mission is to reduce poverty by 50% over the next 10 years.

This group plans on bringing together three organizations with the “ experience, knowledge and resources to make that goal a reality” (Half in Ten Anti-Poverty Campaign Internship); teaming up to change society’s perception of the poor as well as asking the federal, state and local government to create policies “ that promote decent work, provide opportunity for all, ensure economic security, and help Americans build wealth over their lifetimes” (Half in Ten Anti-Poverty Campaign Internship). It will take programs of these types to make a difference and we can no longer lie awaiting for the government to change their own perceptions. Not only is it our duty as fellow Americans to point out to the lawmakers that all of the cuts to discretionary spending have already thinned out America’s safety



net, but we are accountable for electing the right people into office who are willing to see there is a need for change and who will put policies and actions into place to try and remedy the issue.

It is sad that in the year 2014 many societies, and the government, still marginalize certain individuals. What gives us the right to alienate anyone possessing less than us? Instead of society ignoring the poor; we should be embracing and acknowledging their struggles. " Western democracies operate through much discrimination of gender and race/ethnicity and in the main; they marginalize indigenous and poor people, low income workers, gay people and disabled people. In reality, the gendered, race and class-divided state is in the process of treating poor women and their children as targets of regressive reform policy rather than as any part or constituency involved in progressive policy formulation" (Tyson Darling). Our perception of the poor and impoverished must be reexamined, and since some believe that the word poor is synonymous with nihilism; we should eliminate the adjective altogether.

In everyday life, the word poor should be replaced with needy, the helpless and homeless because, after all, poor exudes such a negative connotation in describing fellow Americans who share the communities and cities we reside in. Surely we can find it in our hearts and minds to share the knowledge and resources that we have available to us, as much as possible, as well as, elect suitable leaders to drive the cause. On a small level, society must take the first step in finding a resolution to the problem by bringing our communities together to reach out to the less fortunate; offering more services and

resources; then ultimately work to elect the right people into office with the same frame of mind towards helping and leading the less fortunate to a higher level of self-esteem, thus impacting the way they are portrayed in media and pop culture. It is going to take all of us on an individual basis, as well as the leaders of this nation, to realize that a drastic change is required in, not only the perception of those less fortunate, but in our efforts to diminish the level of poverty in this world. Through community service, charity, educational and literacy programs we can change the face of poverty as a nation.

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