Understanding Society – Innovative thinking about social agency and structure in a global world Sunday, July 1, 2012 “Thinking poverty in the inner city” This article is from a post regarding Alford Young’s book “The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances.” Young is chair of the department of sociology at the University of Michigan. He is a talented and productive sociologist whose research concerns the experience of young African-American men.

I find the question of how other people think to be one of the most interesting angles we can raise about the social world. By “thinking” I mean breaking down the world of experience into useful categories, reasoning about cause and effect among these items, and organizing one’s activities around how he/she understands the world. What are the mental frameworks through which people conceptualize and organize their daily social experiences? This is pertinent to the notion of an actor-centered sociology, and it is resonant as well with the social-ethnographic research done by people like Erving Goffman.

This set of questions is particularly important across the lines of division that separate us in modern US society. The question of how poor Appalachian women think about America, or young black inner city men do, or how white suburban teenagers think about their futures, are all deeply interesting questions. And I fully expect that there are interesting and profound differences across and within the mental frameworks of these various groups.

A sociologist who breaks new ground on this kind of question is Alford Young, a sociologist at the University of Michigan. His work falls within the field of “cultural sociology”, and he works on issues of race and poverty in urban America. His recent book The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances is a brilliant effort to get inside the mental frameworks of poor young black men in Chicago. As he points out, most of American society has a pretty simple theory of the consciousness of inner city young men, and it fears what it sees. Violence, drugs, and disaffection are the main correlates. And Young demonstrates that these ideas are wrong in a number of important ways. “Rather, this work aims to show that research that focuses on these men’s anger and hostility hinders a more complex exploration of how they take stock of themselves and the world in which they live.” (8)

Young’s book builds a case on the basis of twenty-six interviews he conducted in 1993 and 1994 in the West side of Chicago. Young emphasizes the value of conversation: What stayed with me over the years, especially as I went to the University of Chicago for graduate studies, was that a great deal could be learned about other people from extended conversations about mundane, everyday matters. (preface) This is, obviously, a work of qualitative research. It is based on interviews with a relatively small number of individuals.

Young’s research hypothesis is that these individuals, while not statistically representative, can shed a great deal of light on the lived experience of young black men in their circumstances and the ways in which these individuals come to think about those circumstances. Young wants to probe the worldviews of these young men; and he also wants to develop some theories about how they acquired these worldviews. What were the factors -- structural, cultural, familial -- that led to these fairly different bundles of assumptions, frameworks, and beliefs about how society works? And he is particularly interested in probing how these young men conceptualize stratification, inequality, racism, and discrimination. If there is one major surprise in the book, it is the fact that for many of Young’s respondents, these topics are not important and not much thought about.

Young argues at length that the mentalities he discovers through these conversations defy stereotypes. He rejects the idea of a "lower-class sub-culture" with a distinctive set of ideas about consumption and favors instead the idea that there are significant and interesting variations within the population of young black urban men. “Thus, it is important to pay attention to what people articulate as their own understanding of how social processes work and how they as individuals might negotiate the complex social terrain, rather than simply looking at their actions.... In order to advance this type of understanding, this study seeks to elucidate these men’s worldviews about a particular range of issues and concerns related to socioeconomic mobility”. (10)

One thing that is particularly interesting that emerges from Young's analysis is the fact that these men turn out to have fairly different ideas about their own possibilities for mobility and a better life. And Young finds that these differences correspond to the extent of experience the individual has had outside the neighborhood. “The degree of exposure that the men have had to the world beyond the Near West Side emerges as key to understanding the differences in the breadth and depth of their worldviews. Such exposure might have come about for some through a few months of work in a downtown fast food restaurant, for others, through incarceration in a penal institution. Whatever the circumstances, such exposure provided opportunities for these men to interact across racial and class lines. Overall, interaction with other worlds led to the acquisition of a more profound understanding of the inequalities in social power and influence, and how these forces can affect individual lives. Quite often it led to intimate encounters with racism.” (14)

In addition to the inherent ethnographic importance of better understanding of this segment of our society, Young believes that this kind of inquiry can shed light on important social mechanisms that influence mentality. He singles out social isolation and poverty concentration. “Social isolation refers to the lack of contact or sustained interaction with individuals or institutions that represent mainstream society.... Poverty concentration refers to the social outcomes resulting from large numbers of impoverished people living in great proximity to each other.... The introduction of the concepts of social isolation and poverty concentration created an analytical space for including and assessing the effects of an enduring lack of social and geographic connection between the urban poor and other, more affluent people.” (31-32)

This connects to Young's other recurring theme, the idea of the importance of social capital and social networks for the formation of one's cognitive frameworks and for the horizon of opportunity that presents itself. “Cultural capital is the knowledge of how to function or operate in specific social settings in order to mobilize, generate responses from, or affect others such as social elites. Finally, social capital has a twofold definition. On one hand, social capital depends on the degree to which an individual is embedded in social networks that can bring about the rewards and benefits that enhance his or her life. In this way, social capital is seen as a precursor to the acquisition of other forms of capital (money, information, social standing, etc.). On the other hand, social capital has been identified as the package of norms and sanctions maintained by groups so that positive or desired outcomes occur for all members, especially those that no single member could achieve on his or her own.” (59)
The extracts from interviews that Young provides -- on home life, school, work, life in the streets, and other topics -- are superb, and you feel like you've had a rare opportunity yourself to talk with these young men. "There are many surprises in Young's findings; for example, the less contact residents of the Henry Horner Homes had with the rest of Chicago, the less concerned they seemed to be about racial discrimination and injustice. Here is an exchange with Barry: When I asked him "Do you think you are treated fairly in society?" he paused for a moment and then said, "I guess so. I guess I'm treated fairly, I guess." I waited to see what else he might say, but nothing was forthcoming. After some gentle prodding Barry told me that he "just didn't know no white people," and that was why it was so hard for him to say more in this part of our discussion." (113)

Here is how Young understands Barry's responses about race: Barry's life history involved extreme social isolation not only from labor markets and other institutions relevant to upward mobility, but also from some of the most mobile and connected people in his own neighborhood, such as gang members, college-bound athletes and other students, and other individuals who maintained social ties beyond neighborhood boundaries. Barry’s lack of social ties denied him much-needed experience with people in different positions along the social hierarchy of American life. Barry’s social world included few people other than the low-income residents of the Near West Side. These are the same people he went to school with, sold drugs to, and lived amongst. The scantiness of Barry's social networks paralleled the narrowness of his views on mobility and opportunity. (115)

Barry was highly isolated, but Devin was not. And here is how Devin answers similar questions:

Devin amplified his earlier remarks by making the following point about black-white relations in America: I think they [white people] look at me as the, not my people, but to the racists, they look at me like the enemy. They feel that we all blacks is out to get them. Which I believe like this here, I'm is out to get them. . . . Yes,. . . . Because they getting too much money. We fight for, we fought for the United States, not them. We went to war. We got to stand up for our rights. We not getting treated right. We're not even getting equal rights. Having lived lives that involved either the most interpersonal conflict or the most intimacy with people of high social status and wealth, it is not surprising that Ted, Casey, Peter, and Devin had the most conflict-oriented worldviews about stratification and inequality in American life. (131)

How does this research help with the practical challenges of moving forward in a more just way? Young addresses this question too: “If a better day is to come for poor black men, then researchers and other parties who are sensitive to their plight must commit themselves to a new perspective on these men. In order for their lives to truly improve, increased employment and job-training opportunities need to be brought into their lives. These men certainly would benefit from an expanded and more secure labor market, but, as we have seen, there is much more that must occur for them to improve their lives. As the men's testimonies about work make clear, however, increased employment opportunities alone will not deliver them from socioeconomic disadvantage. Information about municipal labor market opportunities, including the options and possibilities in the modern urban world of work and the means and mechanisms for accessing better employment, are as important as the jobs themselves. Of course, this is the utopian vision of change. The current public view of these men is perhaps best conveyed by the “three-strikes and you’re out” rationale of recent governmental initiatives on crime and delinquency, increased incarceration rates for nonviolent offenders, and other law enforcement initiatives that have resulted in the removal of many low-income black men from the public landscape. This approach goes hand in hand with the public reaction to notions of the underclass, which centers on control and containment of an apparently troubling constituency. (202)

Economic development is of course needed in our cities. But Young makes a crucial point that I would paraphrase in different terms. The extreme residential segregation that most American cities contain is itself a major obstacle to social mobility -- not only in terms of economic opportunities, but in the very fabric of how different groups understand the social world around them. Segregation is epistemic as well as economic.