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Discussion of Jennifer Sherman's Work

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Welcome, you are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research Conference Podcast. I'm Lisa Pruitt, Center Faculty Affiliate and the organizer of our no 2014 Poverty in Place Conference. This conference brought together scholars from across the social sciences to present and discuss new work on how space and place inflect various dimensions of poverty.

In this presentation, Sheryl Ann Simpson discusses Jennifer Sherman's work on social isolation and barriers to social and civic life for those living in poverty in a small city in Washington State. Simpson is an assistant professor of Human Ecology at UC Davis.

>> So, Good Morning Everyone. And almost good afternoon.

We're getting there, we're getting there. So, first I just want to say thanks so much for the organizers of this really great conference. I'm just kinda excited to get to hang out for the next day and half and listen to some really interesting papers on this topic. And thanks specifically to Jennifer for I think a really interesting and important paper in this context.

This is sort of the exact opposite of the last discussant presenter relationship in that I am meeting Jennifer for the very first time. But I hope that we can also have like a robust dialog as well.

>> But maybe not as quite as-

>> Yeah, maybe not quite as robust, we'll see.

>> But I think it is a really interesting and important paper because I think it's really at the core of what we're kind of trying to grapple with here, right, which is this question of poverty and place. And particularly in thinking about these things in sort of a relational framework, right, really trying to think about how poverty and place.

Influence and impact each other, and also sort of produce and reproduce each other. So really thinking about this in this question of how these two things work together. And I, now I'm thinking about it. Originally I was gonna sort of do my comments in, sort of, things I've learnt, lingering questions, and trying to make the move.

The connections to this broader study of poverty. But, I think you answered a lot of my lingering questions in your presentation that, maybe I still had from the paper. So, we'll see how this actually turns out. So, first of all, just in terms of things that I learnt.

So, another really interesting theme of this conference is sort of this interdisciplinarity, right? We've got economists commenting on political scientists, we've got engineers commenting on planners. And so, as sort of a social planner slash urban geographer, it's really exciting to delve into a sociology paper and to really delve into the way that you've done this wonderful way of returning to the discussion of social isolation and exclusion in social capital.

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And really sort of laying it out in a really informative way. And particularly in terms of reminding us of the material aspects of social capital and social network. And so that's both in terms of the notion of sort of this link between social capital and resources, economic opportunities, wages, welfare and wealth.

And also in terms of thinking of resources that are more bodily level. So even thinking about things like health questions. But it's also thinking in terms of social capital In social capital and social networks, in terms of the material context. Right? The people are living and working in.

So, in terms of thinking about, the ways in which people sort of, are or are not, do or do not navigate through space and interact in plays. And so all of the sort of ways that you talk about, for example, transportation, right? Is a really good example of this.

Of really thinking about the ways that these social networks influence the ways that people were actually able to move, right? In terms of where they wanted to go, when they wanted to go there, who was available to help them move in that way. And I think that also thinking about the themes that emerge, right?

You talk about the cultural and social barriers, but you also talk about, again, these sort of mobility issues. And so, it's a really interesting way to think about poverty, and a really interesting way to look at social networks because we talk about sort of these networks and these interactions, but we also get to learn about connections to questions of migration.

To health and recovery and even to shift in the landscape in terms of both social welfare and urbanization. And so thinking about two of those shifts in landscapes I also learned I think from the setting of a paper. And in some ways it is a completely self interested, it's sort of a self declared urbanist who's starting to start a rural project.

It's really exciting to have that kind of rural perspective. But I think it's also just sort of important in sort of a broader sense, right? And we've kind of already seen that a little bit in the paper that we picked up on in terms of this question of definitions, right?

What is urban, what's rural, what's suburban? And there's lots of different ways to kind of tease this out. And I think one thing that you're doing that's really important that you highlight at the end is this idea of looking at low density. This sort of combination of low density and poverty.

So, both looking at poverty and low density places, but also trying to think about these sort of mixed income places, right? Where poverty is of a low density. And so, I think, that's really important, right, in terms of the analysis of the barriers that you're really talking about.

Because as we've seen in a couple of the other papers, right, this idea of sort of the importance of low densifying poverty right? It's something that's really become quite important in a lot of urban policy, and a lot of these sort of large federally funded programs have really been predicated on this idea of dispersal, right?

And this idea of mixing in. And I think that you're sort of highlighting some of the really important barriers that actually come along to evaluating or thinking about the success of these programs, right?

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That it's not just about the sort of physical mixing in, but it's really about understanding those social networks, understanding those barriers that might come to them.

And particularly in terms of sort of the disconnect that were social and cultural between the middle class and low income residents. And so in some ways that was going to be my question. But I think that you really responded to it quite well in the presentation. Which is this question of how do we resolve these sort of different factors, right?

How do we resolve the cultural aspect with the social aspect with the material and spatial aspect? And I think that you started to talk about this a little bit more in the presentation. And really thinking about how and if, sort of thinking about future research questions. Thinking about how and if we understand this relationship between what you identified, right?

Of sort of the judgement of poverty, right? That's both external and internalized. So how do we understand that relationship and how do we understand when the external matters more when the internal matters more and all sorts of what's the relationship between them, right? How is that internal sort of like shame in judgement reproduce through the external and how do we sort of break that relationship?

And so in some ways I was going to be my question, right? I think in the paper you land a little bit more on the sort of, the characteristics of the residents living in poverty, right? And sort of, in terms of their resistance or shame, or their powerlessness or distrust.

And so I was happy to hear in the presentation that you're kind of focusing more on this, complicating it, and complicating the aspects of it. And I know one sort of quote, or one quote out of the paper that really struck me was you talk about a couple that's talking about this question of whether or not they're gonna go to their family for help, and whether or not that sort of seems like an option to them.

And you just put it in a really lovely way, right? Where you talk about the idea that they quote, expressed a similar reluctance to turn to their families in times of need. Referring the anonymity of public aid to the shame of asking for help from people they knew well.

And so I think that that's a really interesting and important question, right? Is this question of how much of this is about people's agencies and people's unwillingness or lack of desire to sort of engage with folks and how much of it is about the options just not being available.

And when I was sort of scribbling down my notes to myself, the word that I wrote was this word, it's a Danish word. Which gets literally translated into mixing, right? But it actually has a sort of other part to it, right? Which is not just about mixing, but it's also that sort of idea of feeling a part of but also that idea of being willing to interfere and to make claims.

And again, there's this really conversational aspect to this word, right? Where it's not just about people putting themselves out there, but it's also about there being people willing to have the conversations. Institutions that are able to accept the need that they have that are willing and able to sort of make that possible.

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And you sort of talk about that lack of that possibility in terms, for example, of people being disappointed in their church relationships, right? There's a lot of really interesting conversations about people reaching out to church congregations but not having, the church congregations not being able to or willing to make the help available that people needed.

So, again, this idea of this idea of both reaching out but also having that conversational partner there or that institutional partner there is really interesting and important. And I think that this for me is sort of where part of where the sort of connection to a larger questions around poverty research really comes in.

And in part I think it's really about the importance of the comparative in some ways, so again a self declared urbanist as we talk about these questions of definition between urban and rural and suburban. There's all these different ways to define it, right? And we've heard some of them already, right?

We talk about housing, we talk about density. We talk a little bit about people, immigration and people kind of hinted at it, but I think it's a really important thing to actually sort of say out loud, right? That a lot of times when we talk about this, we're sort of moved to urban problems.

We're also talking about urban people, right? So there's also this race and place element that also comes into it, right? And so really thinking about this shift in terms of suburban populations and rural populations from maybe sort of the perception of or in actuality of predominantly white populations into a more mixed race population.

So there's always sort of different ways to think about and define these sort of different kinds of spaces. And sort of like a self declared urbanist, my default is really to take the idea of the urban seriously or the urban everywhere quite seriously. And so really my default is to kind of almost always examine any places in urban place and sort of focus on the influence of sort of the rhythms and norms and conditions of economic, social and political metro polls on these other places.

So when I think of the suburban, I think about it through a lens of gentrification and through white flight. Right? When I think of the rural, I think of a sort of peri-urban spaces. Right? I think about sort of the role of urbanization in terms of land use, in terms of political economy, sort of urban land use and sort of political economy patterns moving into rural or green fields or even wilderness places.

What's really interesting for me about this paper, is that you've taken a decidedly rural viewpoint. And you're really looking at this small city as what I was sort of thinking of as a pariah rural place, but what you described as a post-agrarian place. And I think that's a really important viewpoint cuz it lets us do and think in sort of really different ways than we might do if we were taking sort of an urban standpoint or a suburban standpoint on this question.

And so, for example when you talk about transportation, just to give a quick example, this sort of focus on distance that you start off with is really interesting, if it is in some ways a very rural perspective on how we think about how we move through space. And thinking specifically about social networks, it's interesting because in a lot of ways your starting point is really about sort of an expectation or desire.

The types of community places that used to be or were imagined to used to be in rural places, right? And so you talk, there's a really great part where you say, quote, one client, a recent immigrant from a

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small town in Idaho who waxed nostalgic for her hometown food bank, which she described as kinder and friendlier and end quote.

And so again, right, it's this starting point of an expectation of community, it's a starting point of an expectation not being met rather than maybe an expectation that these places are going to be very sterile, or they're going to be institutionalized. And so to on the flip side of that, right?

There's sort of the other side of actual or imagined tight-knit communities is the types of exclusions that we expect. And so this really interesting starting point of sort of the expectation that there's sort of an expectation of exclusion. And there's sort of an expectation that we see kind of play out in terms of how we're not people who are willing to reach out for support, whether they expect that the support will be there.

And also some of that reticence, right, that expectation that you're not supposed to reach out for these kinds of supports. And so I think it's, again sort of I think it's really interesting and important to take this perspective as we think about sort of these urban interventions as we think about how we might disperse poverty.

But I think it's also important in and of itself. It's also important because I think it also makes us think about other kinds of comparisons, right? So other kinds of comparisons across space and in other places. To try and understand how these relationships that you're really highlighting between the material both are to economic and physically and bodily the social, cultural and the political, which is a sort of bit in the background in this paper, work together in other contexts.

And so in part, sort of coming back again to this question of race in place which so far has sort of only simmered on the surface, but also in terms of thinking about sort of the US focus of a lot of the work that we're hearing today. And so thinking about particularly, right?

Really thinking about this question of sort of those anonymous and public services, right? That some of your informants talked about. So what difference does it make if those anonymous and public services are more available or more robust? How does that shift the character of social networks? And how does that shift the role of social networks, right?

If those are in place, is it okay that you don't have family that you need to go to? If those are in place, does that mean that those family relationships can take on a different character? If those are in place, does it free people up to to mix, to interfere in different ways than they would have been able to in the past?

And so, I'm actually gonna leave off there. And just say thanks again for a really exciting paper.

>> Yeah.

>> I'm Anne Stevens, the director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis. And I want to thank you for listening. The Center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States.

Our mission is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on domestic poverty, to disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Core funding comes from the US

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