

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287404924>

World development report 2015: mind, society, and behavior, by the World Bank Group

Article in *Revue canadienne d'études du développement = Canadian journal of development studies* · October 2015

DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2015.1102719

CITATIONS

0

READS

761

1 author:



Ben White

Erasmus University Rotterdam

104 PUBLICATIONS 4,819 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Development, crisis and social change: social history of a Javanese village [View project](#)



Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) [View project](#)



World development report 2015: mind, society, and behavior, by the World Bank Group

Ben White

To cite this article: Ben White (2015) World development report 2015: mind, society, and behavior, by the World Bank Group, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, 36:4, 581-584, DOI: [10.1080/02255189.2015.1102719](https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.1102719)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.1102719>



Published online: 16 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 71



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

- Barrett, C., and M. Carter. 2010. "The Power and Pitfalls of Experiments in Development Economics: Some Non-random Reflections." *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 32 (4): 515–548.
- Deaton, A. 2010. "Instruments, Randomization, and Learning about Development." *Journal of Economic Literature* 48: 424–455.
- Lewis, O. 1968. "The Culture of Poverty." In *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, edited by D. Moynihan, 187–200. New York: Basic Books.
- Mani, A., S. Mullainathan, J. Shafir, and J. Zhao. 2013. "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function." *Science* 341: 976–980.
- Mosse, D. 2006. "Collective Action, Common Property, and Social Capital in South India: an Anthropological Commentary." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 54 (3): 695–724.
- Shaffer, P. 2011. "Against Excessive Rhetoric in Impact Assessment: Overstating the Case for Randomised Controlled Experiments." *Journal of Development Studies* 47 (11): 1619–1635.
- Shaffer, P. 2013a. "Ten Years of "Q-Squared": Implications for Understanding and Explaining Poverty." *World Development* 45: 269–285.
- Shaffer, P. 2013b. *Q-Squared. Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches in Poverty Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paul Shaffer

Department of International Development Studies, Trent University

Email: paulshaffer@trentu.ca

© 2015, Paul Shaffer

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.1102718>

World development report 2015: mind, society, and behavior, by the World Bank Group, Washington, World Bank, 2015, xvii + 215 pp., ISBN 978-1-46-480344-4 (hardback) / ISBN 978-1-46-480342-0 (paperback) / e-ISBN 978-1-46-480343-7 (e-book), <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2015>

Now it's official: poverty and development are in the mind

the problems that afflict the *World Development Reports* have deep causes that will not soon go away. (Deaton 2009, 105)

Some years ago, Keith Griffin described the World Bank as "an institution that no longer serves a useful purpose". With its original 1944 mandate (to promote private foreign investment, primarily by financing infrastructure projects) made redundant as post-World War II global capital markets recovered, and its later emphasis on lending for general development also overtaken by the growth of FDI, by the turn of the century the Bank had been "forced to re-invent itself yet again", this time as a Knowledge Bank, "that is, as a producer and depository of wisdom" (Griffin 2003, 803–804).

The most prominent public expressions of the Bank's evolving "wisdom" are the annual World Development Reports (WDR). The flagships of its Research Department, their preparation each year occupies about one-tenth of all the Bank's research staff, drawing on its most senior researchers. Reviewing 30 years of WDRs (for the Bank) in 2008, Yusuf and co-authors thought it

worth asking whether the Bank's research funds and some of its elite human capital are being used most fruitfully, and whether the distilling of the received wisdom on development and the careful teasing out of policies have actually codified and simplified the task of development. (Yusuf 2009, 48)

Reading the new report *Mind, Society, and Behavior*, I was transported back to my time as a graduate student in anthropology in New York. In various courses and seminars we debated the causes of mass poverty, most of all in an exciting new joint anthropology-economics course on "Economy and Society in Developing Countries" in spring 1971. There were lively exchanges

between proponents of the “mentalities and attitudes” and the “structures and relationships” approaches to the explanation of persistent mass poverty and interventions to combat poverty. We read a large amount of literature that claimed rural poverty was basically rooted in peasants’ “cognitive models” (Foster 1965) and the lack in those models of “achievement motivation” (MacClelland 1961, 1963). But we also read studies from another camp, which held that poverty was a matter of the unequal and exploitative relationships between rich and poor, both global (Frank 1967) and local (Wolf 1966). Since the first, slim (68-page) WDR on *Prospects for Growth and Alleviation of Poverty* (World Bank 1978), successive reports have shown little interest in, or understanding of, the second of these camps. WDR 2015 dumps us squarely back in the first.

Mind, Society, and Behavior claims to open a window on “a new set of development approaches based on a fuller consideration of psychological and social influences” on human behaviour. The intellectual underpinning of the report is the idea, first, that in making decisions, people think “automatically” (not deliberately), “socially” (influenced by social context) and with society-specific “mental models”, and second, that these types of thinking really “matter for development”. This framework, it is claimed, provides “entry points for policy and new tools that practitioners can draw on in their efforts to reduce poverty and increase shared prosperity” (3–4). A new twist is that these ways of thinking are now seen to be relevant, not only for the poor, but for everyone, including World Bank staff and development professionals generally. Part 3 of the report devotes 20 pages to “improving the work of development professionals”, explaining how biases in their mental models can be overcome by such practices as “dogfooding” and “red teaming”. But the core of the report focuses on how the new insights can be used to improve the mental models, and in turn the decision-making, of the poor (in chapters 4 through 9, which are devoted respectively to poverty, early childhood development, household finance, productivity, health and climate change). Because mental models are “somewhat malleable”, if we adjust the information provided to the poor and the format in which it is provided, we can counter the “cognitive tax” on the poor, change their mental models and induce them to “frame” problems, opportunities and risks in more positive ways; to invoke more positive identities, raise their aspirations, improve worker motivation and the investment decisions of farmers; and thus to break the cycle of poverty. Attention to psychological and social factors involved in poor people’s decision-making thus offers “‘low-hanging fruit’ – that is, policies with relatively large gains at relatively low cost” (20).

Allowing for the explosion of new literature (and new jargon) in recent decades, what in these ideas is really new and different from the “cognitive barriers to development” literature that was fed to us 50 years ago?

In a 1965 lead article in *American Anthropologist*, George Foster argued that “a peasant’s cognitive orientation, and the forms of behaviour that stem therefrom, are intimately related to the problems of economic growth in developing countries” (Foster 1965, 307). This cognitive orientation (aka mental model) gave peasants – and people “in most or all socio-economic levels in newly developing countries” – an “image of limited good”: the belief that life is a dreary struggle, that very few people can achieve success, and when they do so it is at the expense of others, trapping them in lives of mutual suspicion and conservatism where individual progress is seen as “the supreme threat to community stability”. Foster’s ideas on the conservative “common cognitive orientation” of the poor were derived from his experience in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico, site of a development project of the Centre for Regional Cooperation for Adult Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (CREFAL), which had tried to persuade villagers to adopt new production techniques in five sectors: pottery; textiles; furniture and embroidery for the tourist market; and chicken ranching. All five schemes failed. The new (CREFAL-designed) pottery

kilns overfired, burnt the pots and finally collapsed, leaving the “innovating” potters with large debts; the new textiles and furniture piled up unsold and unable to compete with products of neighboring villages; and the chickens died in a cold winter. While Foster attributed the failure of the project to peasant conservatism rooted in a cognitive orientation that prevented them from taking advantage of the new opportunities, my anthropology teacher Marvin Harris observed “if anything, these desperately poor people of Tzintzuntzan were less suspicious and conservative than they should have been” (Harris 1975, 471). Meanwhile, Tzintzuntzan’s “conservative” peasantry showed no lack of energy and creativity when encountering real economic opportunities: 50 per cent of the village’s men had succeeded in bribing, cajoling and scheming to get a chance to work across the border in the USA, many of them having made the crossing 10 times or more, and this migration by 1960 provided more than half of all village income (Foster 1965, 277; Harris 1975, 471).

Foster also gave an approving nod to psychologist David McClelland’s theory of “the need for achievement” (*n Achievement*) as a necessary precursor to economic growth, “a change in the minds of men which produces economic growth rather than being produced by it” (McClelland 1963, 81; see also McClelland 1961). “*n Achievement* is rare in traditional peasant societies ... because the villager who feels the need for Achievement, and does something about it, is violating the basic, un verbalized rules of the society of which he is a member” (Foster 1965, 309). All this made Foster

believe most strongly that the primary task in development is ... to try to change the peasant’s view of his social and economic universe, away from an Image of Limited Good toward that of expanding opportunity in an open system, *so that he can feel safe* in displaying initiative. (Foster 1965, 310; emphasis in original)

These are the kind of ideas which inspired many other scholars and practitioners of the 1960s to believe in the need to stimulate ideational change in the poor, rather than trying to change the concrete conditions of “who owns what, does what, who gets what, what do they do with it, and what do they do to each other”¹ which guide political–economy approaches. For anthropologist Manning Nash, it was not agrarian reforms but an entrepreneurial spirit that was needed to transform Burma’s “get along” farmers into “get going” farmers (Nash 1965). Practitioner Art Mosher (President of the Agricultural Development Council), whose 1966 book *Getting Agriculture Moving* was distributed free of charge in English and many other languages all over non-communist Asia, argued for the need to teach peasants “to want more for themselves, to abandon collective habits, and to get on with the ‘business’ of farming”, and for “educational programmes for women and youth clubs to create more demand for store-bought goods. The ‘affection of husbands and fathers for their families’ will make them responsive to these desires and drive them to work harder” (Cleaver 1972, 179; Mosher 1966, 108–109).

One wonders what is still to come in the Bank’s evolving wisdom and its armoury of anti-poverty strategies. Will wellness coaching for the world’s poor be next?

Note

1. The first four questions are from Bernstein (2010, 22); the fifth is added in White et al. (2012, 621).

References

- Bernstein, H. 2010. *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change. Agrarian Change and Peasant Studies Series*. Halifax: Fernwood Press.

- Cleaver, Harry. 1972. "The Contradictions of the Green Revolution." *American Economic Review* 62 (2): 177–186.
- Deaton, Angus. 2009. "The World Development Report at Thirty: A Birthday Tribute or a Funeral Elegy?" In *Development Economics through the Decades: A Critical Look at 30 Years of the World Development Report*, by Yusuf Shahid, Angus Deaton, Kemal Dervis, William Easterly, Takatoshi Ito, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, 105–114. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Foster, George M. 1965. "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good." *American Anthropologist* 67 (2): 293–315.
- Frank, Andre G. 1967. *Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Griffin, Keith. 2003. "Economic Globalization and Institutions of Global Governance." *Development and Change* 34 (5): 789–808.
- Harris, Marvin. 1975. *Culture, People, Nature*. 2nd ed. New York: Thomas Crowell.
- McClelland, David C. 1961. *The Achieving Society*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand Co.
- McClelland, David C. 1963. "The Achievement Motive in Economic Growth." In *Industrialization and Society*, edited by B. F. Hoselitz and W. E. Moore, 74–76. The Hague: Mouton/UNESCO.
- Mosher, Arthur T. 1966. *Getting Agriculture Moving: Essentials for Development and Modernization*. New York: Praeger and The Agricultural Development Council.
- Nash, Manning. 1965. *The Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Contemporary Burma*. New York: Wiley.
- White, B., S. M. Borrás Jr., R. Hall, I. Scoones, and W. Wolford. 2012. "The New Enclosures: Critical Perspectives on Corporate Land Deals." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (3–4): 619–647.
- Wolf, Eric. 1966. *Peasants. Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- World Bank. 1978. *World Development Report 1978: Prospects for Growth and Alleviation of Poverty*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Yusuf, Shahid. 2009. "Development Economics Through the Decades." In *Development Economics through the Decades: A Critical Look at 30 Years of the World Development Report*, by Yusuf Shahid, Angus Deaton, Kemal Dervis, William Easterly, Takatoshi Ito, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, 1–104. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Ben White

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University of Rotterdam

Email: white@iss.nl

© 2015, Ben White

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.1102719>