BAY AREA SOCIAL SERVICES CONSORTIUM

Understanding Poverty
From
Multiple Social Science Perspectives

A Learning Resource for Staff Development
In Social Service Agencies

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Introduction

This BASSC learning resource has its origins in both historical and contemporary attempts to address the complex social problem of poverty in the U.S. It grew out of a doctoral seminar and therefore most of the authors are current or former doctoral students at the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. The Fall 2005 seminar began in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that blew the roof off of the city of New Orleans and exposed a history of poverty, racism, and corruption. The topic of the seminar was inspired by recent research on the views of staff delivering welfare-to-work services in the counties surrounding the San Francisco Bay Area (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, in press). When asked to prioritize an array of training topics relevant to their practice, the staff members rated “poverty” high on their list.

Poverty is also an important topic in the curriculum for preparing future social workers. However, it is not always clear how and where this topic is addressed. Because of its complexity, it can be addressed throughout the curriculum (e.g. policy, practice, theory, research, diversity and/or specialization courses) or nowhere in the curriculum (i.e. “everybody’s business becomes nobody’s business”).

The challenge of addressing poverty from a multi-disciplinary point of view grew out of several perspectives. Historically, it is interesting to note that poverty surfaces in the public consciousness every several decades; for example, urban poverty at the turn of the 20th century related to immigration and industrialization, urban and rural poverty in the 1930s related to the stock market crash and the depression, response of the civil rights to poverty and discrimination in the 1960s (including the War on Poverty), the economic boom of the 1990s and welfare reform, and the 21st century focus on global poverty.

In addition to the historical ebb and flow of public interest in poverty, the shift in federal government research funding to the brain sciences over the past several decades has resulted in increased attention to the brain development of the young child and the impact of nutrition and nurturance on child development. Poverty is a major underlying theme in the development of children and youth, including the impact of poverty and substance abuse on the unborn child. For youth growing up in poverty environments, limited work and skill development opportunities are also seen as key factors in finding explanations for youth violence and drug dealing.

Given that poverty is a factor throughout the life course, its impact on adults can be seen in the high unemployment rates in poverty neighborhoods (with devastating impact on communities of color) and the hidden poverty in rural America and retirement communities. It is still a surprise to the American public that welfare reform did not reduce poverty but rather reduced caseloads, encouraging the poor to enter and advance
in the job market or double-up in cramped housing as a way to survive day-to-day in the underground economy (see Hastings, Taylor, & Austin, 2006; Chow, Johnson, & Austin, 2006; Austin, Lemon, & Leer, 2006; Austin & Lemon, 2006).

The increased specialization of our various social science disciplines (the source of much of our applied theory in the social work profession) is another factor impacting our understanding of poverty. While we benefit from this specialization when students take undergraduate courses on the Sociology of Poverty and Inequality, it is not clear how many of our students enter our undergraduate or graduate programs with such an in-depth exposure to a major social problem. For that matter, there appears to be very little attention in our teaching of human behavior and the social environment to the significant role that social problems (e.g. poverty, disability, crime and delinquency, or discrimination) play when applying theories of human behavior and social environment to practice (see Mulroy & Austin, 2004; Taylor, Mulroy, & Austin, 2004; Taylor, Austin, & Mulroy, 2004). Without a foundation of understanding about major social problems, theories of human behavior and the social environment can become disconnected from the contexts of practice. While current theories about human behavior and the social environment may provide an understanding of client populations at various stages of development over time, they are often unrelated to major social problems.

It is clear from this review of social sciences perspectives of poverty reflected in this BASSC publication that there is a growing need to integrate knowledge about poverty as a social problem. For some social sciences, like economics and political science, poverty perspectives continue to emerge in their scholarly literature. This is also true, but to a lesser extent, with respect to psychology, anthropology, and sociology. The growing need to synthesize and integrate is reflected in the challenge that faculty face when seeking to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of poverty so that social science theory can inform practice and policy.

This learning resource is designed to address some of these issues. Part I begins with a review of the leading textbooks on human behavior and the social environment used in graduate social work education programs. The purpose of this first article is to assess the degree to which the major social problem of poverty is featured in discussions of the social environment. The findings are not encouraging. Part I also features the different perspectives of poverty utilized by the major social science disciplines. Each one of literature reviews was designed to identify the major themes of each discipline’s approach to poverty. They are relatively brief reviews. To address their limitations, more space and expertise would be required to capture the nuanced perspectives of each discipline. However, the reviews provide faculty and students with a valuable foundation for increasing their multi-disciplinary understanding of poverty. The literature reviews relate to Economics, Sociology, Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology, and an inter-disciplinary view of global poverty.

Part II focuses on theory integration and practitioner perceptions of poverty. The first article in this section features theories related to social capital and the multi-disciplinary effects of poverty on neighborhoods and networking. The second article represents one of
the few empirical attempts to document the views of poverty held by social work students as they entered and exited graduate social work programs. And finally, the third article is a teaching case on the culture of poverty which captures some of the experiences of a public social service agency as it sought to address the issue of poverty in a staff training program following the implementation of welfare reform.

The purpose of compiling this BASSC learning resource is to re-ignite the discussion and debate about the impact of poverty on a wide variety of human service agency clients. It features a complex social problem from the perspective of our major social science disciplines. Another purpose is to continue the search for ways to demonstrate how theories can inform practice. We hope that we have helped to jump-start the dialogue and training curriculum development needed in our social service agencies.

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References


Theories of Poverty:
Findings from Textbooks on Human Behavior and the Social Environment

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Abstract

Social work is distinguished from other helping professions and social science disciplines by its primary concern with poverty. It is unclear, however, how well social work students understand various theories of poverty or how this understanding informs their practice with those who live in poverty. This article attempts to begin answering this question through an analysis of poverty content in fourteen frequently assigned textbooks in Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HB&SE) courses. The four criteria for assessment include: 1) the context in which poverty is discussed, 2) the extent to which the theme of poverty is diffused throughout the textbook, 3) the extent to which poverty is viewed in terms of the interaction between human behavior and the social environment, and 4) the extent to which poverty is described as a universal condition. In general, the fourteen textbooks devote little space to poverty content and fail to address these four criteria. The analysis concludes with recommendations to help social work educators incorporate more poverty content in their HB&SE curriculum.
Introduction

One of the most prevalent and pervasive social problems in the United States is poverty. In the United States, far too many people live in conditions of poverty or near poverty; in 2002, an estimated 12.1% of all people in the U.S were considered poor (Rank, 2005). Given the significance of this condition and the commitment of the social work profession to seek its eradication, to what extent is the description and analysis of poverty a key component of social work education? How are students of social work educated about the theories of poverty in order to understand its causes and ultimately advocate for social policies related to the social, economic, and political systems? In particular, how well do social work students understand the impact of poverty on human behavior and how does this understanding inform their practice with those who live in poverty? Some of the answers to these questions can be found, in part, by assessing the most frequently used textbooks in required courses on human behavior and the social environment.

As required by the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), accredited undergraduate and graduate programs include at least one foundation course on Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HB&SE) in their core curriculum. In order to assess the extent to which the impact of poverty on human behavior and its role in the social environment is addressed in foundation courses, the most frequently assigned HB&SE textbooks were analyzed. Given the strong influence of psychology and sociology on the construction of HB&SE content in social work education, this analysis begins with a discussion of how these two major social science disciplines create explanatory theories of poverty. Following this overview, the analysis proceeds with a description of the content on poverty found in the most frequently required HB&SE textbooks. The analysis concludes with the identification of key
issues for social work educators and recommendations for incorporating poverty content in their HB&SE courses.

**Human Behavior or the Social Environment?**

While both psychology and sociology appear to be moving towards a view of poverty that includes an integration of human behavior and social environment, this has not always been the case. Traditionally, psychological theories focus more on the individual and their behavior, while sociological theories of poverty emphasize the role of the social environment.

In the introduction to *Poverty and Psychology: From Global Perspective to Local Practice* (2003), Carr and Sloan note that research by psychologists in the second half of the twentieth century identified the source of poverty primarily in the individual and, therefore, developed interventions that focused on changing human behavior rather than the social environment. For example, they describe how McClelland proposed that those living in poverty suffered from a deficit of Need for Achievement (NACH), a character trait that motivates the successful person to strive for success. Similarly, in the 1980s many psychologists explained the circumstances of those at the bottom of the economic ladder in terms of attribution theory, which posits that those who accomplish the least in life often blame their failures on themselves. These two examples tend to support interventions designed to change the behavior of the individual in order to escape from poverty with little or no regard for the impact of the social environment.

According to Carr and Sloan, perspectives that emphasize the negative personal characteristics of those living in poverty have been replaced in recent years by those that recognize the positive aspects of human behavior (e.g. coping with stress and managing risk with resilience) and the situational context in which this behavior occurs. Psychological theories of poverty that include resilience and the capacity to overcome one’s environment are now gaining
prominence within the field of psychology. However, the individual continues to serve as the major unit of study and intervention.

A more sociological view of poverty is reflected in Rank’s (2005) book *One Nation, Underprivileged* (2005), which argues that the root cause of poverty lies not within individual failings, but within the structural failings of American society. He contends there is an implicit assumption in the American ethic of individualism and its emphasis on self-sufficiency; namely, that the rich are hard-working and deserve their rewards while the poor are impoverished because of personal inadequacies. In contrast, Rank provides evidence that poverty is caused by inadequacies of economic and political structures to provide sufficient opportunities for all Americans, thereby perpetuating poverty. In particular, Rank proposes the economic failing of the United States lies in its inability to provide suitable employment for all Americans. As long as the labor market is structured to perpetuate a ‘natural unemployment rate’, a certain percentage of workers will always be unemployed and others forced to accept low-wage work that keeps them near the federal definition of poverty. In addition, he points to the lack of social supports and inadequate safety nets to assist low-wage earners and those living in poverty. He notes that political decisions restrict social policies from effectively addressing poverty rates in the United States. Welfare programs have historically failed to raise families out of poverty, and recent budget cuts for welfare programs and tighter restrictions on eligibility create further difficulties for poor families. Rank calls for a rejection of the old poverty paradigm of blaming the victim and replacing it with a new paradigm that seeks explanations and solutions in social institutions.

These two examples of the psychological and the sociological perspective on poverty have much to contribute to one’s understanding of HB&SE. Carr and Sloan suggest that human
behavior both contributes to and results from poverty, providing some theoretical support for the strengths perspective found in the practice curriculum of social work programs. Rank argues that efforts to modify the individual will fail without a complete restructuring of the social environment, based on a recognition of the universality of poverty and its impact on everyone in the United States. In addition, the pervasiveness of poverty can lead to higher taxes related to funding health and education services, increases in crime, and the potential deterioration in the American values of liberty, equality, and justice. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to incorporate the various approaches taken by others social science disciplines to explain poverty but they are described elsewhere in this volume.

While the goal of the HB&SE curriculum is to present the two perspectives human behavior and the social environment, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the two, it is also beyond the scope of this analysis to assess the progress being made to implement this goal. Instead, the focus is to determine how poverty is presented and explained in the major HB&SE textbooks currently in use. An assessment of fourteen HB&SE textbooks provides the major findings for this analysis.

**Method of Analysis**

Based on a review of graduate-level social work textbooks on human behavior and the social environment conducted by Taylor, Austin and Mulroy (2004), fourteen textbooks (Note 1) were selected for this analysis of poverty content. In their study, they reviewed and clustered the textbooks into three categories: 1) life cycle textbooks, 2) systems theory textbooks and 3) theory textbooks. The six “life cycle” textbooks featured the developmental stages of individuals across the life span, the five “systems” textbooks focused primarily on the various systems situated in
the social environment (e.g. individuals, families, groups, organizations, or communities), and the three “theory” textbooks emphasized such theories as structural functionalism, conflict, and empowerment.

For this analysis of poverty content, the content of each textbook was examined and this examination included the table of contents, preface, index and individual sections that featured a discussion on poverty. As part of this review, other poverty-related concepts were identified, (e.g. social class, inequality, social exclusion, homelessness, and unemployment). The following criteria were used to assess each textbook’s treatment of poverty after tabulating the total number of pages in which poverty appears (and then converted into a percentage of the entire textbook):

1. The context in which poverty and related concepts are described (such as a specific chapter or section devoted to poverty)
2. The extent to which the concept of poverty (e.g. causes and impact) is diffused and applied throughout the text
3. The extent to which poverty is explained in terms of the interaction between human behavior and the social environment
4. The extent to which poverty is described as a universal condition rather than a social aberration.

While the focus of this analysis is on HB&SE textbooks, it is apparent that the topic of poverty emerges in other areas of the social work curriculum. One of these areas is social policy, and these courses frequently include poverty in the context of describing and analyzing social policies and programs designed to address poverty. As a result, a similar content analysis was conducted on the five most frequently updated editions of social welfare policy textbooks (Note 2). These textbooks devote, on average, a larger percentage of pages to poverty and poverty-related issues than their HB&SE counterparts, ranging from 4.8% to 24.1% of the text. Most of these social policy textbooks limit their discussion of poverty to the history and requirements of means-tested public assistance programs, particularly Temporary Assistance to Needy Families,
and do not discuss theories that explain the causes of poverty or its potential impacts. While the criteria for assessing the HB&SE textbooks do not directly apply to the social policy textbooks, there was one notable exception. In their social policy textbook, Karger and Stoesz (2002) allocate two chapters to the structural influences on poverty and various intervention strategies. Other social policy textbooks treat poverty as one of many examples of a social problem to be assessed using policy analysis frameworks. For example, Popple and Leighninger (2004) devote the first six chapters of their textbook to developing a policy-based framework and apply this model to poverty in chapter seven. However, with the exception of Karger and Stoesz (2002) these social policy textbooks provide only minimal information about the causes and impacts of poverty found in the multiple social science theories of poverty. This small sample of frequently edited/updated social policy textbooks provides further evidence that the theories of poverty are minimally addressed in the major textbooks utilized in the social policy area of the curriculum, where one might expect more attention and analysis.

There are a number of limitations to our analysis. First, it relies upon the HB&SE textbooks identified in a national study on textbooks that had been utilized in 2002 (Taylor, Austin and Mulroy, 2004) rather than gathering more recent data to see if other HB&SE textbooks have been more frequently adopted. Secondly, an in-depth review of all pages in each HB&SE textbook was not conducted, possibly missing important information that was not noted in either the table of contents or the index. Finally, the three co-authors of this analysis divided the responsibility for analyzing one cluster of the three types of textbooks with minimal attention to inter-rater reliability; one co-author reviewed life cycle textbooks, another reviewed systems textbooks, and another reviewed theory textbooks. Given these limitations, it is clear that further study of the poverty content in HB&SE textbooks is needed.
Findings

Life Cycle Textbooks

The total percentage of pages that included poverty and poverty-related terms in the six life cycle textbooks range from 1.8% to 5.4% of the text. In some cases, poverty is not even listed in the index. Taylor et al. (2004) identified a life cycle textbook as one in which the majority of the content emphasizes the developmental stages of individuals and/or families across the life span.

The context for describing poverty in the six life cycle textbooks can be illustrated in three different ways: 1) integrated throughout the text, 2) combined with other risks or barriers to healthy development, or 3) located in a section devoted specifically to poverty. Three of the textbooks (Germain and Bloom, 1999; Saleebey, 2001; Urdang, 2002) describe poverty, unemployment, or homelessness in many different chapters, without any discernible pattern. For example, Germain and Bloom, offer a brief critique of potentially disempowering language used by human service staff working with poor people. They include this content in a chapter focused on birth and infancy, and then later mention the impacts of homelessness in a chapter on childhood. Other textbooks focus on risks for healthy development (Ashford, LeCroy, & Lortie, 2001; Hutchison, 2003) by discussing poverty in sections with titles such as ‘Social Hazards’ and ‘Risks’ related to various stages of the life cycle. While Hutchison only includes poverty as an important risk factor up to and including middle childhood, Ashford et al. briefly explore the impact of poverty at every stage of the life cycle. Finally, the textbook that develops a specific nine-page section on poverty entitled “Poverty: Impacts of Social and Economic Forces” focuses primarily on social systems and middle adulthood (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman, 2004). In this section, Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) provide information about measuring poverty, the
causes of poverty, the impacts of poverty, and a discussion of competing theories of poverty (e.g., culture of poverty, functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionist theory).

The second criteria used to assess the HB&SE textbooks featured the extent to which poverty is addressed throughout the text. While the life cycle textbooks make an attempt to explain some of the causes of poverty, they do not address the impact of poverty across the life span. Two of the textbooks emphasize the structural causes of poverty. Saleebey (2001) criticizes the inadequacy of the U.S. welfare system and the public’s reluctance to help those truly in need, while Urdang (2001) considers the economic and political factors that can lead to poverty. These two textbooks, as well as Hutchison (2003), generally restrict their discussion of the impact of poverty on childhood (e.g., underfunded public schools in poor neighborhoods) as well as developmental delays, poor health and mental health. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman highlight the psychological impact of poverty related to the internalized scorn of society and the acceptance of their inferior social status. Only Ashford et al (2001) briefly identify the risk factors associated with poverty from birth to death.

With respect to the third criteria related to explaining poverty in terms of the interaction between human behavior and the social environment, the majority of the textbooks note that aspects of the social environment lead to poverty which, in turn, impacts human behavior. Only Urdang (2001) and Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) attempt to characterize this interaction as reciprocal. Urdang (2001) views “economic factors are one of the most compelling aspects of life affecting (and being affected by) human behavior” (p. 127), noting that economic forces are the result of human behaviors by those in positions of power. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) view the behaviors of citizens and practitioners as critical for changing the environmental factors
that impact on the poor, rather than focusing on the behaviors of those attempting to cope or escape from poverty.

The fourth and final criteria for assessing HB&SE textbooks relates to the universality of poverty. Four of the life cycle textbooks view those living in poverty as a distinct population, living a life that the majority of Americans do not witness or understand. Urdang contends that, while poverty is an aberration, anyone can experience periods of unemployment and endure its subsequent stresses. Only Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman explicitly promote the idea of the universality of poverty, maintaining “that the majority of Americans will encounter poverty firsthand during adulthood” (p. 436).

None of the six life cycle textbooks adequately address the four criteria used to assess these textbooks. Poverty receives a minimal amount of attention in all of these textbooks and when attention is given, there is little emphasis on the theories of poverty that explain the causes and impacts of poverty.

**Systems Textbooks**

Five widely-adopted HBSE systems textbooks were included in this analysis. The total percentage of pages in which poverty is discussed in each of the textbooks ranges from 2% to 12%. A systems textbook is defined by Taylor et al (2004) as one that focuses primarily on the social environment, including chapters on individuals, families, groups, organizations, or communities.

Poverty is described in these systems textbooks using a variety of contexts. Schriver (2004) focuses on poverty in specific chapters related to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, family units, and individuals where demographic factors provide the context. Longres (2000) discusses poverty in the context of culture and ethnicity, featuring the experiences of minority
families living in poverty. Pillari and Newsome (1998) describe poverty in the context of other structural problems (e.g., homelessness, unemployment, and oppression) but not as a specific social problem that impacts human behavior. Hutchinson (2003) characterizes poverty in terms of social inequality that pervades different social systems, but gives little attention to the similarities and differences between poverty and social inequality. While Kirst-Ashman (2000) devotes several introductory pages to the topics of oppression and social and economic justice, there is no other discussion of poverty elsewhere in the textbook.

In terms of the second criteria related to the diffusion of poverty content throughout the text, the number of pages allocated to the development of poverty in relation to other topics is very low. Schriver focuses on the impacts of poverty on the behaviors of certain populations but does not address theories that explain the causes of poverty. While Longres describes poverty from a family perspective, there is also little attention to the causes of poverty. Pillari and Newsome give a description of families living in poverty by contrasting them with those in social classes but do not explain the impact of poverty on these poor families or the role that groups, organizations, and communities play in addressing poverty. Although inequality is the main focus of Hutchinson’s book, it is not clear how poverty relates to the different systems presented in the textbook. Finally, Kirst-Ashman does not discuss poverty in the text, and there is no explication of its causes or potential impacts.

The third criterion for assessment involves the reciprocal relationship between human behavior and the social environment. Schriver argues that poverty is a result of the failure of systems in the social environment that can affect human behaviors and other systems. He explains as follows:

One critical consequence of the omission of concern for social environmental processes is failure to consider the impact of poverty and oppressions on
development. Traditional perspectives often fail to question how individual
developmental experiences and outcomes might be very different for persons
living in poverty and/or faced with oppression from the larger environment
because of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability than for
financially well-off persons not faced with oppression (Schriver, 2004, pg. 169).

There is no evidence that the other four systems textbooks define the causes and impacts of
poverty in terms of the interaction between human behavior and the social environment.

With respect to the fourth and final criteria for assessment regarding the universality of
poverty, only Schriver clearly presents poverty as being a universal condition that requires
efforts to reduce it. It is not possible to assess the other systems textbooks with respect to
universality because of the insufficient attention given to poverty throughout the textbooks.

Systems theory focuses on the complex and interdependent relationships between people
and their environment, and yet poverty, which could potentially impact these various
relationships, generally receives very little attention in the five systems textbooks. The
proportion of each text dedicated to the topic of poverty is minimal and therefore most of the
systems textbooks do not meet the four criteria used for assessment.

Theory Textbooks

The three theory textbooks were also assessed using the four criteria noted in the
Methods section. The total number of pages describing poverty and theories of causation and
impact range from .2% to 7.9%. A theory textbook is defined by Taylor et al (2004) as one that
emphasizes multiple theoretical perspectives in the field of social work, including
psychodynamic theory, systems theory, and cognitive behavioral theory.

The theory textbooks discuss poverty within a variety of contexts, but none of the theory
textbooks include a chapter or section devoted entirely to poverty. Bloom & Klein (1997)
mention the poverty-related terms such as ‘class’ and ‘social stratification’ in two of their
‘Debates’ sections, but the word poverty could not be found in the text. Greene (1999) makes brief reference to poverty as a result of institutionalized oppression. The other textbook (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998) allots more space to poverty and poverty-related terms, primarily related to the theoretical framework of structural-functionalism and devotes a major section of a chapter to explanations of inequality using conflict theory.

In terms of the extent to which the concept of poverty is diffused and applied throughout the textbook, none of the theory textbooks provide a description of the causes and impacts of poverty. Robbins, Chatterjee and Canda include poverty in a broader discussion of systems theory but only from the perspective of its role in maintaining a particular social system. None of the other theories identified in this textbook make any reference to the causes, conditions or impact of poverty. A range of theories are also offered by Greene, with poverty only mentioned as a form of institutionalized oppression within the context of the ecological perspective. Similarly, Bloom and Klein do not address poverty and its related concepts in any of the three sections in which they debate the philosophical, theoretical and empirical issues related to HB&SE.

None of the theory textbooks utilized the concept of poverty to explain the interaction between human behavior and the social environment and none of them made reference to poverty as a universal experience. The authors of the three theory textbooks do not appear to perceive poverty as an important subject for HB&SE courses that would utilize their textbooks. Similar to the findings described above for the life cycle and systems textbooks, the theory textbooks do little to address the four criteria used in this analysis.
Interpretation

Based on the preceding assessment, the fourteen most frequently assigned HB&SE textbooks do not reflect an understanding of poverty that draws upon theories developed in an array of social science disciplines. Content devoted to poverty and its related terms comprise a very small percentage of the total pages in each text, often only briefly mentioned in one or two sentences. Generally, the textbook authors devote very little space to a discussion of poverty and appear to miss many opportunities to fully incorporate theories of poverty within their respective frameworks. For example, the life cycle textbooks generally do not describe the impact of poverty across the life span, the systems textbooks do not link poverty to the various systems that comprise the social environment, and the theory textbooks do not reflect much interest in the theories of poverty found in other social science disciplines. With the exception of two life cycle textbooks and one systems textbook, poverty is not addressed in terms of the reciprocal relationship between human behavior and the social environment. The majority of HB&SE textbooks locate the causes of poverty solely within the social environment. Finally, only one life cycle textbook and one systems textbook regard poverty as a universal condition.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the poverty content of fourteen of the most frequently adopted human behavior and the social environment textbooks. Six life cycle textbooks, five systems textbooks, and three theory textbooks were assessed using criteria developed, in part, from psychological and sociological perspectives on poverty. These criteria included: 1) the context in which poverty is discussed, 2) the extent to which the theme of poverty is diffused throughout the textbook, 3) the extent to which poverty is viewed in terms of the interaction between human
behavior and the social environment, and 4) the extent to which poverty is described as a universal condition.

This analysis raises a number of issues regarding the treatment of poverty in human behavior and social environment textbooks. Beyond a call for an expansion of poverty content, the question of how to improve HB&SE textbooks is not a simple one. In an effort to foster dialogue and debate on the ways to enrich the HB&SE curriculum with more content on poverty, the following questions are designed to stimulate student and faculty discussion:

To what extent are the theories of poverty related primarily to an understanding of the social environment or human behavior? Clearly the concepts noted in this analysis related to psychology and sociology help to frame debate on this question. However, the micro perspectives of psychology and the macro perspectives of sociology also need to be informed by concepts found in political science, economics, and anthropology with regard to the mezzo perspectives of group behavior.

If most HB&SE textbooks focus predominantly on human behavior and this orientation matches the vast majority of faculty who teach HB&SE from a psychosocial perspective, to what extent is this orientation an issue that emerges from the limited attention given to poverty in the discipline of psychology? CSWE accreditation standards calling for HB&SE courses to feature the reciprocal interaction between human behavior and the social environment suggest that faculty educated in the psychological tradition may need to reach out to faculty educated in the other social science fields in order to enhance their course content and related readings.

If one of the functions of HB&SE is to synthesize relevant social science research and theories, how reflective is HB&SE content of current research, especially related to poverty? Both psychology and sociology are moving towards an integration of human behavior and the
social environment, yet this trend is not reflected in the fourteen textbooks reviewed in this analysis. In addition, social science disciplines other than psychology and sociology seem under-utilized in the HB&SE curriculum.

Which of the following seems most important: 1) understanding the impact of poverty at every stage of the life course (e.g. childhood, adulthood, aging), or 2) understanding the reciprocal nature of poverty in terms of how it impacts behavior (as a force in the social environment) and how human behavior influences the social environment of poverty? While it is apparent that poverty has a different impact a child than on an older adult, the life cycle textbooks do not acknowledge this phenomenon and the systems theory textbooks do not adequately address the reciprocal relationships.

If poverty is a central concept in the history and identity of the social work profession, how should it be linked to the major fields of practice (child welfare, mental health, health, aging, corrections, etc)? The fourteen textbooks in this analysis consistently ignore major fields of practice, suggesting that the behavior of a child in a child welfare environment is similar to the behavior of a child in a health care environment, thereby ignoring the differences in behaviors as well as the differences in the social environment of service delivery.

If one of the functions of HB&SE is to inform practice (i.e. provide concepts and frameworks that assist practitioners in making assessments at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels), how well are the theories of poverty understood in order to assess clients? The case is currently being made throughout the CSWE standards about the importance of a variety of demographic factors in assessing the needs of clients (ethnicity, race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, spirituality, etc.). It is not clear that the causes and impacts of poverty are receiving similar attention in the client assessment process. Therefore, the challenge facing educators and
researchers is to find ways to integrate the multiple social science theories of poverty into a broader conceptualization of human behavior and the social environment.

In conclusion, social work is distinguished from other helping professions by its unique focus on poverty and poverty-related issues, and this should be reflected in HB&SE textbooks and courses. This analysis serves as a call for dialogue regarding the reframing of HB&SE curriculum content to include more attention to the theories of poverty.
Note 1: HB&SE Textbooks Reviewed

Life Cycle Textbooks


Systems Textbooks


**Theory Textbooks**


Note 2: Social Welfare Policy Texts


References


The Economics of Poverty: Explanatory Theories to Inform Practice

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Abstract

Blank (2003) identifies six perspectives that economists and policymakers use to understand the causes of poverty. They include issues of economic underdevelopment, human capital, contradictions in capitalism, structural causes, characteristics of the poor and the incentive effect of welfare programs. This analysis uses Blank’s framework to identify major economic theories and related recent research (1990-2005) to explain poverty. While each of the six perspectives provides explanations about the nature of poverty, the strongest factor relates to race. The analysis concludes with implications for practice.
Introduction

The first major thinker in economics to discuss poverty was Adam Smith, the 18th century proponent of a wealth-creating capitalism. He defined poverty as the inability to purchase necessities required by nature or custom. Gilbert (1997) notes that Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiment* argues that poverty was a cause of shame, social exclusion and psychic unrest, rather than an economic condition. In *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith observes that economic inequality was part of all societies from the hunting to the herding stage. Commercial societies, on the other hand, would not find poverty problematic, because Smith felt wage earners would not experience actual misery.

Almost all of Smith’s books assume an “economy of greatness,” where the poor obtain all their necessities through wages earned from the rich. However, as pointed out, Smith failed to include cases of injury, illness, or old age, which interrupt poor people’s economic activity. Moreover, his assumption that income would resolve problems relating to poverty does not consider instances where the minimum wage does not provide for the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter (Gilbert, 1997).

In a more recent analysis of poverty, Rank (2004) makes the argument that poverty is a life course event that effects the majority of Americans; for example, 58.5%, or the majority of the nation will experience poverty at least once. The focus of this brief literature review is to identify economic theories that help to explain the existence and persistence of poverty in order to inform practice and research in social welfare. It includes a review recent journal articles and book chapters to see how current economic thinking about poverty in the United States can expand our understanding of the role of social welfare practice and research.
Methods

The literature review focuses on journal articles in economics that were either authored or coauthored by at least one economist and identified in EconLit using such key words as poverty, cause and theory. In addition, online search engines and Wikipedia.org were used in order to identify references to major economic theories as well as those that focused on poverty. Using Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA), which included 17 search engines, such as Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Sociological Abstracts, nearly 200 articles were identified, excluding those that described specific poverty interventions or case studies, in the period of 1990-2005. Blank’s (2003) typology of the causes of poverty was used to select a representative sample of articles.

Literature Review

Blank (2003) introduced six major theoretical approaches that describe the fundamental causes of poverty, especially focusing on the economics of the marketplace (Figure 1). She started with the perspective of economic underdevelopment and the absence of effectively functioning markets. Taking examples from third world poverty, she suggests that poverty can be alleviated through the expansion of markets to poor regions, including regions in the United States experiencing economic stagnation. In her second perspective, she points out the lack of human capital development where individuals are either unprepared or unable to participate in the workforce and could
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#1. MACRO: The economy is underdeveloped or inefficient.

#2. MICRO: Poor people lack skills and abilities.

#3. MACRO: Capitalism causes poverty.

#4. MACRO: Social and political forces cause poverty.

#5. MICRO: Poor people make choices.


Figure 1: Conceptual Map of Theories of the Causes of Poverty (Blank, 2003)
In the third perspective, she notes that the *market is inherently dysfunctional* and thereby creates poverty. In this Marxist viewpoint, a capitalist society makes the cost of labor lower through the threat of unemployment and therefore poverty can be alleviated through regulation of the market. The fourth perspective identifies the *social and political forces* that occur outside the market, such as political favoritism and racism that contribute to poverty.

In her fifth perspective, poverty is attributed to *individual behavioral characteristics and choices*, such as marriage, family size or alcohol and substance abuse. Values about work and education that underlie this perspective suggest that the problem of poverty is within the control of the poor themselves and therefore the policies and programs need to influence those choices through incentives or prohibitions. The sixth and final perspective suggests that poverty is caused by the very efforts to alleviate poverty, referred to as *welfare dependency* or *poverty traps*. Most economists find that welfare provides a guaranteed cash incentive while taxation creates a disincentive to work. Because short-term cash benefits hamper long-term anti-poverty efforts, time-limited aid and work requirements are seen as desirable policies.

The conceptual map illustrated in Figure 1 links Blank’s six poverty perspectives to their theoretical antecedents in the field of economics. Blank clustered the perspectives by major schools of economic thought. The first two perspectives (economic underdevelopment and lack of human capital) are common approaches in *liberal economics* whose primary figure John Maynard Keynes promoted the belief that the market can promote economic development (Jensen, 1998). The second two are *Marxian*
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theories (Capitalism causes poverty) or political economic theories (social and economic forces cause poverty). The last cluster of perspectives (individual behaviors cause poverty and welfare dependency causes poverty) reflects the traditional views of classical economics. The classical economists feel that government intervention to alleviate poverty only rewards the bad behavior of the poor and should be discontinued. The neo-liberal economists focus on social and political forces.

Blank concludes that poverty is not only an economic problem but also a moral issue for the nation. Her framework provides one of the best summaries of the economics of poverty. In order to find evidence to support or refute this framework, this analysis includes a search of the literature to find research in economics and to link the studies to some of the major economic schools of thought. Following a description of these studies, the analysis concludes with a discussion of the ethics of poverty in relationship to economics and recommendations for future practice in the field of social welfare.

Liberal Economics

Blank’s first two perspectives (economic underdevelopment and human capital development) are related primarily to liberal and neo-liberal economics. Jensen (1998) noted the progression in thought from classical to liberal economics with regards to poverty. Specifically, Marshall and Keynes believed that poverty is caused by economic underdevelopment and lack of human capital. Marshall was influenced by the utilitarian views of John Stewart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. With respect to utilitarianism, Marshall is quoted in Jensen (1998, pp 122-123) as saying “an increase by a quarter of they wages of the poorer class adds more to the sum total of happiness than an increase by a quarter
of the incomes of an equal number of any other class.” Moreover, he viewed poverty as a result of institutional neglect of education for the masses. He believed that through education, those who became more efficient would be promoted to a higher class of work, making the unskilled labor scarcer and consequently raising the income of unskilled workers.

Keynes was influenced by Marshall’s social economics of labor. Based on twentieth-century capitalism, he formulated his concept of the class structure that included four types: 1) the investing class, 2) the business class, 3) the elite class of public-spirited superentreprenuers, and 4) the earning class. He argued that the investing class intentionally reduced their funding of entrepreneurial investments which in turn raised unemployment and working class poverty. He concluded that the great depression resulted from the failure of the government in “mitigating the consequences of the collapse of private investment.” Keynes suggested that it was necessary that communal savings, instituted in the form of direct tax, needed to be invested into private enterprises. He called this process a “socialization of investment.” He believed that this process would discourage the investing class from getting interest from savings and encourage them invest in enterprise, thereby raising the employment rate. Some of the limitations of Keynesian theory were seen in the 1970s where high unemployment and continuous inflation, provided evidence that the “socialization of investment” did not always work (Jensen, 1998).
Perspective #1: Underdeveloped Economies Cause Poverty

Policy makers generally believe that economic growth can reduce poverty rates. However, the studies on the relationship between economic growth and poverty rates in the U. S. reveal different trends.

According to Haveman and Schwabish (2000), economic growth and poverty rates showed a negative relationship until 1970s. However, starting from the late 1970s, this relationship between economic growth and the poverty rates became statistically unclear. They take findings from Blank and Blinder (1986) that show that a decrease in unemployment rates was related to the increase of poverty rates after 1982. To examine this changes in the economic growth and poverty relationship since 1990, Haveman and Schwabish (2000) found that since 1993, there exists a positive relationship between unemployment rates and poverty rates as well as a negative relationship between GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth and poverty rates. They found that the reasons for the weak relationship between economic growth and poverty rate from 1973 to 1992 involved the following: (1) the stagnation of average income (e.g., Blank, 1993), (2) the increase of female-headed families (e.g., Gottschalk & Danziger, 1993), (3) decreased job opportunities for low-skilled workers (e.g., Tobin, 1994), and (4) reduced income transfer generosity (e.g., Powers, 1995). However, they predicted that technological changes in workforce, increased work participation of youths and immigrants, and the persistent increase of single mothers and their job participation following the 1996 welfare reform bill may strengthen the relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction. In contrast, Anderson, Halter, and Gryzlak (2004) found in their qualitative study (focus
groups) of welfare-to-work participants that low wages and job instability frequently made those who left the welfare rolls (leavers) return to welfare, which suggest that the current relationship between economic growth and poverty rate reduction may be different from that from 1993 though 1998.

While Haveman and Schwabish (2000) and other researchers found that the relationship between economic growth and poverty rate broke down during 1980s, the research findings of Freeman (2003) show that there was strong relationship between the two during the 1980s. He adopts claims of Cutler and Katz (1991) that there was extraordinary dispersion in regional growth rates during the 1980s, which led to the breakdown of the relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction. The research findings of Freeman (2003) demonstrated that regional poverty rates, rather than national poverty rates, are more responsive to regional difference in income growth and unemployment rates during 1980s and 1990s, which suggests that an increase in mean income and employment conditions would reduce the poverty rates. However, he accepts the notion that economic growth alone cannot solve poverty issues, saying that even in the best of economic times, there is always poverty.

These articles show that economic growth and poverty can have a relationship depending on the time and place. This provides some empirical support for carefully targeted poverty alleviation polices that promote economic growth.

**Perspective #2: Lack of Skills and Education (Human Capital) Cause Poverty**

Two recent articles evaluate human capital investments and impacts on poverty. First, Karoly (2001) examined the effects of human capital investments among children prior to school entry, school-age children and older youth, and adults. She reviewed
research findings that training and education raise the human capital and help children escape poverty. In terms of human capital investment on children younger than five, she examined outcomes from nine early intervention programs and evaluated their impacts on children versus their cost-effectiveness.

The findings showed that although early IQ gains faded out as children grew, later benefits appeared in increased school attainment, decreased crime and delinquency rates, and economic success. Regarding investment in school-age children and older youth, Karoly (2001) compared the types of interventions, such as improvement of school quality and access, dropout preventions, school-to-work transition programs, youth employment and training program, and their effectiveness. In terms of investment in adults, she reviewed evaluation literature on training programs for welfare participants and disadvantaged adults, such as California’s Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) and other training programs under Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).

Although human capital investment among school-age children, older youth, and adults were effective, Karoly’s meta-analytical findings showed that early childhood interventions were more cost-effective than adolescent interventions or adult interventions. Karoly looked at the net present value to society of program costs versus future costs in remedial education, welfare payments or criminal justice costs. For example, early intervention programs returned three or four dollars for each dollar invested, while youth intervention programs failed to return even the original investment. Karoly argues in her conclusion that human capital investment should be implemented at earlier ages in combination with traditional social welfare programs in order to reduce poverty rates.
However, the research of Corcoran and Adams (1997) showed that there may be other factors that have bigger impacts on poverty than human capital development. Corcoran and Adams (1997) examined competing explanations for the intergenerational transmission of poverty: parents’ lack of economic resources, parents’ lack of noneconomic resources (e.g., family structure and education level), welfare dependency, and structural/environmental factors noted by Wilson (1987) in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson rejected the welfare dependency thesis and argued that racism and inner city disinvestment caused poverty. Corcoran and Adams’ sample included 565 black men, 773 white men, 735 black women, and 825 white women aged twenty-five to thirty-five years in 1988.

Their research findings showed that parents who were poor was related to less schooling of their children, ultimately leading to adult poverty when the children became adults. However, they pointed out that even controlling for the schooling of children, the effects of parental poverty decreased only slightly, which means that there may be other more powerful mechanisms than schooling.

These two articles show that human capital interventions are important if done in early childhood, but other factors such as race have a stronger relationship to poverty.

*Political Economy: Structure and Society*

The next two perspectives bridge the gap between economics and related social science disciplines by addressing the structural and societal causes of poverty. With respect to the structural view of the economy, Blank describes how Marx viewed capitalists as those who rent the labor of workers and then aggregate some of the value created by the workers to create additional capital. As a result, poverty related to the
unemployment caused by the need of capitalists to have surplus labor that can artificially lower wages. This contradiction is central to the inherent dysfunction of the market and only the state, when influenced by the working class, can regulate the improvement of working conditions and promote higher wages (Blank, 2003). After Marx, other thinkers like Wilson (1987) applied the theories of class conflict to race. And in Europe, poverty is seen as part of a panoply of indicators of social exclusion (Social Protection Committee, 2001). The political economy approach to poverty is primarily interdisciplinary, based on the fact that many of the social factors that cause exclusion are not economic.

*Perspective #3: Capitalism or Market Dysfunction Causes Poverty*

Setting a minimum wage is common policy response to the inherent dysfunction of the market and such policies are designed to reduce poverty. Hout (1997) noted that former welfare recipients enter low-wage job markets, thereby increasing competition for jobs which can lowered wages and ultimately increase poverty. He showed that the real value of minimum wage fell, which led to increased inequality from 1983 to 1993, and that the minimum wage affects hourly younger or older workers more so than prime-age full-time workers.

While Hout was optimistic about the benefit of increasing the minimum wage, Neumark and Wascher (2002) were less enthusiastic with respect to the weakness of previous studies on the employment effects of minimum wages. They found that those studies used data for all workers rather than minimum wage workers and measured the income gain from all groups even though not all workers are affected by minimum wage increases. In their examination of data from 1986-1995 that compares the impact of minimum wages between “poor” and “non-poor” groups, they found that minimum
wages increased the probability of poor families to escape from poverty by raising the incomes of some low-wage workers in poor families. However, it also increased the probability of previously non-poor families to become poor through disemployment. Therefore, they stressed that because the increase in minimum wage led to income redistribution among low-income families rather than from high- to low-income families, it cannot be confirmed that increasing the minimum wage will result in equitable distribution. In addition, although single mothers comprise a significant portion of poor populations and usually receive lower wages than male workers, Neumark and Wascher (2002) only controlled for the factors related to male workers, such as the prime-age male unemployment rate.

A third study related to market dysfunction relates to the impact of international trade liberalization and technological change on U.S. income inequality (Davis, 1999b). According to Rodrik (1997), the outsourcing of jobs threatens low-skilled workers with job loss to countries with lower labor standards, because safety regulations in the U.S. are expensive to employers. Moreover, as trade liberalization is subject to greater fluctuation of product prices, it causes labor market instability. Using these claims, Davis (1999b) asserts that trade liberalization is not always an efficient policy because income inequality constitutes a cost of trade liberalization. For example, while skilled workers have secure jobs that are not challenged by “fair” competition, unskilled workers are less likely to accumulate wealth and human capital, thereby imposing an institutional equity costs on society. Therefore, he claims that the relationship between increasing wage inequality and internationalization of the economy needs further examination.
Based on these three studies, it is apparent that capitalism contributes to poverty, but also some evidence suggests that efforts to control the market such as setting a minimum wage or liberalizing trade may also increase poverty.

**Perspective #4: Social and Political Forces Cause Poverty**

In examining the structural issues related to poverty, Galster (1991) suggests that the relationships between urban poverty among African-Americans and poverty related factors (e.g. family structure, spatial mismatch, economic structure, inner-city education, social isolation, and labor discrimination) can yield more powerful explanations when housing discrimination is included. To reveal unidirectional or bi-directional relationships among these factors, he adopted simultaneous-equation models and used the data from the fifty-nine largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in 1980. Galster (1991) notes that intra-racial segregation (in addition to inter-racial segregation) increases poverty rates, such as the out-migration of middle-class African-Americans and historically persistent racism, the decline of manufacturing in the inner-city, and the exacerbated living condition of the inner-city (Wilson, 1987).

Galster’s findings suggest that the location of housing is strongly related to school quality, which influenced poverty rates by discouraging academic achievement and school attainment. The impact of school quality was bigger than the rates of female-headed families, believed to be one of the biggest contributors of poverty among African American populations. Additionally, the results show that discrimination in both owner and rental housing led to intra-race, inter-race, and inter-class residential segregation in the metropolitan areas that were included in the data (Glaster, 1991). Additional evidence is found in the research of Kling, Liebman, and Katz (2000) who noted that
children of families who used vouchers to move to low-poverty neighborhoods displayed lower levels of behavioral problems as well as higher levels of school performance than children who did not leave poor neighborhoods (Rosenbaum, 1995).

In related research, Elliot and Sims (2001) examined the impact of racial and poverty concentration in urban neighborhoods on job seeking activities of minority populations. They explained that previous research findings show that black and Latinos displayed different patterns in job seeking. For example, Latinos are more likely to acquire jobs through family, friends, and other personal contacts (e.g., Falcon, 1995), while blacks are more likely to use formal channels, such as classified ads. They attribute the racial difference to the fact that (1) Latinos’ limited English proficiency and immigrant status make Latinos utilize personal networks (e.g., Aponte, 1996) and (2) employers disfavor black workers (e.g., Wilson, 1996). Furthermore, Elliot and Sims examined the “neighborhood effects” claims of Wilson (1996) regarding disadvantaged neighborhoods, labor market detachment and joblessness, to see if they exert different effects on blacks than Latinos. They found that the neighborhoods with extreme racial and poverty concentration reduced the difference between the outcomes of job search strategies used by African Americans and Latinos. Nevertheless, racial differences were found in racially segregated and disadvantaged neighborhood. For example, while barrio residents used insider referrals, such as family and neighbors, ghetto residents were more likely to use non-neighborhood and organizational outsiders.

The third study related to social and economic forces concluded that poverty can be alleviated by economic growth, but is also related to social factors, especially race (Hoover, Formby, and Kim, 2004). Economic growth did not necessarily lead to the
reduction of poverty in the 1990s, despite optimism regarding policies aimed at increasing economic well-being. In the 1980s, economic expansion led to a decreased poverty rate but stagnant low wages made poverty during this period more intractable. While economic growth alone is not sufficient to alleviate poverty, it is important to note that “the non-white population has been significantly affected by dramatic increase in the number of households which are headed by females” (Hoover, Formby, & Kim, 2004). In short, those who support pro-growth policies to reduce poverty need to be aware of subgroups that will be left out.

In this cluster of political and economic perspectives, race is the strongest predictor of poverty. Accordingly, anti-discrimination law and carefully targeted economic development strategies are needed to reduce poverty.

Classical Economics

Persky (2004) reviewed the evolution of classical economics from Mill to more contemporary thinkers and noted that Mill was against legislating minimum wages or providing general wage subsidies because he thought that the “gains of equality cannot outweigh the high cost they would impose in efficiency loss” (p. 927). Instead, he expected the cooperative movement to establish equality, self-respect, and common feeling in the working population and thereby reduce poverty through the intrinsic motivation of worker self-management. As a result, poverty reduction would not require massive redistribution or national ownership.

To early neoclassical economists, eradication of poverty was one of their central goals. They thought that “the transference of income from a relatively rich man to a relatively poor man must increase the aggregate sum of satisfaction,” as it makes possible
for more intense wants to be satisfied at the expense of less intense wants (Persky, 2004). However, like the classical economists, they noted that full equality would cause low productivity, diminishing social welfare. Instead of confronting “disharmony” between equality and social welfare, they invented ways to avoid the disharmony, such as direct transfers in the form of wage subsidies, for example, which would raise the productivity of labor. In addition, with the influence of globalization, they feared that capital would leave the country because of the social cost of equality and that there would be influx of immigrants to the developed countries because of the high minimum wage.

Perskey goes on to discuss the new welfare economists, such as Robbins, who disagreed with the classical or neoclassical economists who thought that equality could be measured. The welfare economists saw equality as a non-economic goal that was not relevant to the valuing of costs and benefits of a particular policy. This disinterest in equality became known as the Kaldor-Hicks criterion, which stated that “public policy was justified if it produced gains in excess of losses so that it was possible for winners from the policy to compensate losers, even if compensation did not actually occur.” (Perskey, 2004, p. 934). Their cost-benefit analysis approach made them pursue efficiency gains with less emphasis on equality. Instead, the welfare economists focused on other issues, such as technology improvement and international trade, for example, as “true economic objectives.” Although most economists endorse this new welfare viewpoint, there are some economists who still claim that equality can be measured as an economic objective.

While the historical views emanating from classical economics regarding the changes between economic thoughts and attitudes toward poverty are helpful, they do not
address how these views influenced public or economic policies, especially public policies that specifically targeted eradication of poverty and their effectiveness in achieving the goal of equality (Persky, 2004).

*Perspective #5: Welfare Programs Cause Poverty*

In exploring welfare dependency theory, Kasarda and Ting (1996) see welfare participation as a trap that keeps people in poverty. Poor people make a rational choice and realize that a combination of benefits will produce a higher wage than those provided by most employers in the typical urban neighborhood. While they note the work of Murray (who coined the phrase “welfare trap”) and Danziger who argues that the incentive effect of welfare is small, they focus primarily on two theories: namely, skills mismatch and spatial mismatch. Skill mismatch theory claims that inner cities are producing high skilled jobs that low income, primarily black residents cannot obtain. Spatial mismatch theory predicts that low skilled jobs moved out to the suburbs or beyond and it creates a commuting or relocation disincentive. Their findings support both the skills and spatial mismatch theory as well as the welfare trap hypothesis.

Kasarda and Ting view the poor as intelligent human beings who are capable of making the rational choice of seeking/accepting public assistance, but argue that public policy should direct this valuable intelligence into the labor market in the following ways: 1) decentralize affordable housing and improve transit options, 2) cut welfare benefits and increase wages through tax incentives, and 3) train social service staff to assist welfare recipients in moving from welfare to work. Although Kasarda and Ting suggest that welfare can lead to joblessness and persistent poverty, they also acknowledge the need for economic development and and the need to address the
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structural problems of racial discrimination in hiring and housing. Their policy recommendations are designed to benefit the poor indirectly by subsidizing private industry in real estate development, manufacturing and the service sector.

One of the classic articles written by a welfare economist (cited in almost 400 subsequent articles) is Moffitt’s (1992) review of the literature related to the 270% increase in Aid to Dependent Families with Children (AFDC) cases from 1965-1985. Economists had looked mostly at work incentive effects of short-term assistance, but there was a growing literature at long-term welfare dependency and a related but limited literature on intergenerational transmission. According to economic theory, welfare programs create a guaranteed income that can create an incentive to avoid work while at the same time impose an equivalent tax on workers, which can also create a disincentive to work. While there was empirical evidence for this theory, it was difficult to find agreement on the size of the disincentive. Danziger et. al. (1981) estimated that the receipt of AFDC could discourage work for a range of 10 to 50% of recipients. Moffitt cautioned that female heads of households would generally not work full time anyway and that the additional hours lost would not raise the family out of poverty at minimum wage. Accordingly, welfare dependency would not alone cause poverty.

With regard to intergenerational transmission of poverty, Moffitt argued that it was difficult to establish a causal link of welfare to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In essence, although studies show that welfare has a substantial impact on labor supply, Moffitt maintains that there is no clear causal link between poverty and labor supply because labor supply does not tend to change with changes in benefit levels and
the participation in the labor force of female welfare recipients is consistent with non-recipients and married women.

While there is some consensus on the nature of welfare dependency, there is considerable disagreement about the scope of the incentive effect and whether or not a specific benefit level would have a detrimental effect on labor force participation at any given time or place. Also, economists usually agree that other factors cause poverty but continue to pursue research on the nature of welfare dependency.

*Perspective #6: Behaviors, Choices and Attitudes Put People in Poverty*

In Blank’s sixth and final perspective, we move into the emerging field of behavioral economics. For example, one theory of the intergenerational transmission of poverty suggests that families create a “culture of poverty” in order to cope with low economic means. These attitudes and choices have been measured using educational attainment and family structure. Gottschalk and Danziger (1993) explore the relationships between family size, structure and income as they affect the increase in child poverty between 1968 and 1986. They found that: 1) the changes in family size, structure and income offset each other to produce a small increase in poverty (e.g. the increase in female-headed households that, in turn, increased poverty was offset by a decrease in family size and increase in women’s income because of education), and 2) increased income inequality and poor economic growth also contributed to increased child poverty. In essence, family structure impacts poverty, but there are competing and offsetting cultural and economic factors that also influence poverty.

In a related study, Biosjoly, Harris and Duncan (1998) address the behavior of persons in poverty by looking at intergenerational transmission to see if there is a
correlation between demographic characteristics and the events associated with first entry into welfare. By including all family members (not just heads of household and spouses) Biosjoly et. al. found a greater prevalence of work-related events (out-of-wedlock births, lack of work experience) and that no one factor occurs with more than one third of cases examined. They could not explain the increase in caseloads in the late 1980s and early 1990s and predicted that young unmarried women without sufficient education will have difficulty exiting welfare in a timely manner.

The research of Biosjoly et. al. tells us that each family on welfare has a complicated story that involves both events and demographics. However, the length of time on welfare can be predicted in terms of being unmarried with children and not attaining education. This lends some support to the argument that personal choices can lead to poverty, but one would have to prove that a substantial portion of poor women actually chose to have more children and not finish school. There is increased attention being given to involving other disciplines beyond behavior economics in order to expand our understanding of the role of behavior, choices, and attitudes leading to poverty (Corcoran, 1995; Mayer & Lopoo, 2001).

And finally, Edwards, Plotnick and Kalwitter (2001) focus on the attitudes of those exiting welfare by looking at attitudes of those who enter and exit welfare after the age of 15. Their research includes such dimensions as: self-esteem, locus of control, attitudes towards school, attitudes about welfare, and attitudes about women’s employment in relationship to family background, urban residences and scores on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test. While their findings are mixed, they found that positive attitudes about education appear to outweigh family background effects, self-esteem is
generally not related to welfare use, attitudes about accepting low wage work is positively correlated with job-seeking behaviors, and the strongest relationships were found between adolescent poverty and being Africa American. While there is some evidence that attitudes about education and work may influence the “choice” of going on welfare, current research continues to make the case for external structural or environmental factors as the major contributors to poverty.

Conclusion

Which of Blank’s six perspectives best explains the nature of poverty? Who is right: the classical, the liberal or the structural thinkers? In short, all theories apply but some are more robust than others. Although economic stagnation causes poverty, economic growth does not lift everyone out of poverty equally. Human capital is important, but not all human capital investments are cost effective. The market may be dysfunctional, but regulating the market can add to the dysfunction. Race, gender and geography have the strongest effects on poverty. Welfare is a trap, but may only be episodic for many and the only alternative for the few. Attitudes and choices about education and willingness to work matter, but choices to get married probably do not if only because choices about marriage are shared across incomes.

In order to preface recommendations for social work practice, social policy and research, we return to the ethics of poverty and social justice. In the introduction to a volume devoted to issues of economic justice, Scaperlanda (1999) explains debates between orthodox economists and heterodox economists regarding the prevalence of poverty, adequate wages, and the impacts of the globalization of production. According to Scaperlanda (1999), orthodox economists (i.e., neoclassical economists) believe that
markets deliver “what is deserved to every participant in the economic process (p. 419),” which precludes a discussion of income distribution. Meanwhile, heterodox economists accept that market processes are not perfect but also emphasize the issues of income distribution.

Scaperlanda (1999) sees two types of economic justice: *commutative justice,* which asks whether exchanges are fair and *distributive justice,* which asks if there is a fair distribution of resources, benefits and burdens of society. There are two things needed to consider in the definition of distributive economic justice. First, no definition is value free, the definition of economic justice is likely to reflect the attitudes of dominant groups. Therefore, he suggests that the oppressed must organize to challenge the dominant group to maximize the interest of economic justice for all. The second consideration is that contest between policy makers, ethnic groups, or other groups is unavoidable, because legitimate institutions of society reflect the dominant norms and would not undertake the trial, error, or correction process of integrating notions of economic justice because it does not serve the interests of those in power (Scaperlanda, 1999). In short, Rank asks us to be mindful of the self-interest of anti-poverty policies. Blank asks economists to be compassionate. Scaperlanda advises those who do not believe that welfare causes poverty need to organize for distributive justice policies.

*Implications for Applying Theory and Research to Practice*

The most salient practice implications that can be derived from this analysis of the economics of poverty include the following:
1) the causes of poverty are complex and careful assessment is needed to determine the most appropriate intervention for a family at risk.

2) those on public assistance need an array of support services to move into the workforce.

3) programs for adolescents (and teen mothers) need to focus less on self-esteem or locus of control and more on positive attitudes regarding work and education.

4) well targeted welfare-to-work programs show promise when they include job training and childcare.

5) high quality early childhood programs provide good evidence for long-term social benefits.

6) there is a need to be conscious of the impact of race, gender and geography on clients ability to find work (some populations may need intensive job referrals, transportation, housing relocation assistance, or language assistance.

7) it is unclear if marriage, in and of itself, would raise a family out of poverty.

8) there is a clear need to help poor families organize in order to advocate for constructive anti-poverty policies.

9) since regional economic growth is related to regional poverty rates in connection with spatial mismatch of jobs and skills, area-based economic development strategies integrated with human capital development programs are needed to benefit poor families (e.g., indirect
wage subsidies through tax credits, loans or grants to employers to enable them pay above poverty wages, and local government policies on living wages).

10) since geography is a predictor of poverty, more residential mobility voucher programs are needed to reduce the poverty rates among inner-city minority population by helping them relocate, utilize job referrals, participate in job training, maximize child care supports and benefit from the enforcement of existing fair housing laws.
References


Sociological Theories of Poverty in Urban America

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Abstract

Since the 1950s, American sociologists have developed a substantial literature on poverty in urban American communities. This literature review examines some of these sociological theories of poverty and identifies four major explanations of urban poverty: social stratification, (including segregation and racism); lack of access to social capital; cultural and value norms; and social policies. The literature review concludes with a conceptual framework that focuses on multiple relationships that link theory to practice related to the reduction of poverty in inner-city communities.
Sociological Theories of Poverty in Urban America

INTRODUCTION

The problem of concentrated poverty in inner-city neighborhoods is increasing and since 1970, the number of poor inner-city neighborhoods has also grown (Polikoff, 2004). Although inner-city poverty and problems are often associated with large urban areas in the Northeast, inner city communities across the country suffer from the same combination of dense habitation, racial segregation, chronic joblessness, and intransigent poverty (Thompson, 2005). In the predominately African-American Bayview Hunter’s Point neighborhood of San Francisco, a decrepit plumbing system spills sewage into nearby streets, while gun violence is reported almost every day of the year (Thompson, 2005). The abysmal conditions in these communities are a startling contrast from the image of the United States as the most affluent country in the world (Rank, 2004).

In order to effectively design and implement interventions, it is important to acquire a multi-level understanding of how these communities became poor and how related social problems impact future generations. The sociological study of urban poverty offers a relevant conceptual framework for understanding the behavior of the poor as well as the social environment that impacts the poor.

Since the 1950s, American sociology has focused attention on how poverty and related social problems have evolved in inner-city communities. Sociological studies of poverty focus on interactions between social forces, cultural groups, structural systems (e.g. governments), and the values, beliefs, and aspirations of individuals. Sociology is highly interdisciplinary and incorporates concepts from other social sciences including economics, political science,
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Sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Sociologists seek to expand our understanding of how societies control, influence, and define human behavior. The discipline has maintained a continuous interest in theories of poverty, with a significant focus on understanding the meanings and causes of poverty among inner-city residents.

METHODS

The methodology for this literature review included a keyword search looking for various forms of the word “poverty” using the Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, Social Science Citation Index, and Google Scholar databases. After a collection of recent articles was accumulated, reference lists were examined in order to uncover seminal texts and theoretical explanations. Similar keyword searches were also conducted on a university database (University of California, Berkeley Libraries) in order to scan recent issues of several journals focusing on sociological theory using several criteria. First, the search focused on theories of urban poverty, including those related to African-Americans. Second, an emphasis was given to finding influential works that have shaped sociological debate on urban poverty. While this review includes literature that half a century, it remains far from comprehensive. Each of the studies described in this review define poverty in a slightly different way. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature refers to poverty as a dearth of financial resources.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The authors represented in this review provide four primary explanations of inner-city poverty as illustrated in Figure 1. First, the most widely cited of these theories are the structural stratification theories, which view poverty as the result of social isolation stemming from socioeconomic trends (Wilson, 1987; Harrington, 1962; Holzer, 1999; Kain, 1968; Jencks, 1992). A sub-set of the social stratification literature has also identified the effects of residential
segregation of African-Americans in inner-cities as well as continuing racism as sources of persistent poverty in these communities (Massey et al., 1994; Gould, 1999; Harrington, 1962; Jencks, 1992). Second, other sociologists have built upon the ideas of social isolation and segregation in order to examine how the lack of access to human and social capital explains intergenerational poverty (Loury, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Rankin, 2000). A third group of sociologists has focused on how a continued lack of access to resources alters behaviors, social norms, and aspirations of inner-city inhabitants (Rodman, 1963; Gould, 1999; Wilson, 1987; Harrington, 1962; Jenks, 1992; Murray, 1984). Finally, a fourth group has investigated the role of social polices designed to address urban poverty and its deleterious effects (Murray, 1984; Piven & Cloward, 1993). While some authors span several of these areas by developing multi-level theories of poverty (Wilson, 1987; Jencks, 1992; Harrington, 1962), others focus on mid-range theory related to one particular aspect of inner-city poverty (Loury, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Massey, 1994). Both approaches increase our understanding of those living in urban poverty neighborhoods.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Social Stratification or Social Classes

Theoretical explanations of poverty include many variables as the causal agents of economic deprivation, such as individual characteristics, neighborhood effects and larger social systems. Social stratification theories seek to explain how society and its various systems (e.g. economy and government) push some Americans into poverty and not others. These theories are often multi-level, examining how these structural effects interact with communities and the poor to compound the problems associated with poverty.

One of the seminal contributions to the sociology of poverty was Michael Harrington’s
The Other America (1962), which became a catalyst for both scholarly investigation and governmental policies designed to address poverty (Wilson, 1987; Rank, 2004). While Harrington himself is not a sociologist and The Other America was designed for a general audience, the work introduces many theoretical hypotheses that influenced subsequent studies. Specifically, Harrington noted how increasing racial segregation in inner-cities neighborhoods, a result of structural and cultural racism in US society, contributed to the unfortunate passage of poverty from generation to generation among African-Americans in these communities. While Harrington viewed social forces to be the primary cause of poverty, he also described how decades of low-income status impacted poor neighborhoods and individuals. Harrington observed that the inner-city poor develop a lack of aspirations and hopes for the future, a mindset that is not due to individual shortcomings but rather the predictable consequences of disorganized and destitute communities. These low aspirations can become difficult to overcome. For example, Harrington argued that access to education and social resources would do little to aid achievement without fundamental adjustments of these aspirations. Describing poverty as “a way of life” (pg. 17), Harrington saw low-income status as a defining characteristic of lives and a predictor of the future. Although his work presented little empirical evidence, it provided a framework for future analyses of inner-city poverty.

The phenomenon of racial segregation in inner-city neighborhoods, described by Harrington, has been widely investigated as both a cause and consequence of urban poverty. Focusing on the high density of African-Americans in urban Chicago and Detroit, Kain (1968) used multi-linear analyses to link housing segregation to low levels of African-American employment. Kain theorized that the expansion of metropolitan areas following WWII decreased the employment opportunities of inner-city African-Americans, who were confined in
racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods due to discriminatory housing practices. The growth of suburbs and the movement of manufacturing business out of inner-city neighborhoods left urban African-Americans with few economic opportunities and exacerbated poverty. Kain’s ideas, which came to be identified as the *spatial mismatch theory*, presented a multi-level theoretical representation of how socially-sanctioned racism (housing segregation) can be compounded by structural economic forces (the development of urban sprawl and the exit of industries). The result is an isolated inner-city population with chronic joblessness. Although Kain is an economist, his analysis of geographic trends and neighborhood effects has influenced both economics and sociology (Jencks, 1992; Holzer, 1999).

In a more recent investigation of the spatial mismatch theory, Holzer (1991), another economist building upon sociological findings, reviews the current status of empirical investigation of Kain’s ideas. Although Kain’s original study failed to elaborate on the difficulties that inner-city African-Americans experience in obtaining employment opportunities, Holzer reviews how other scholars have identified transportation issues, racial bias, and time factors as specific barriers to employment in suburban areas. Holzer concludes that while studies have varied, inner-city blacks continue to have fewer job opportunities than those who live in suburbs, and that the movement of blacks out of inner-city neighborhoods continues to be limited by financial constraints. Unlike several other theories discussed in this review, the spatial mismatch theory attributes the causes of poverty primarily to social oppression and structural forces. The theory does not address how the behaviors or social norms of the inner-city poor might adapt to or exacerbate poverty, and views poverty as the result of historical factors. Therefore, increased economic opportunities, especially in low or semi-skilled industries, and located near inner-city neighborhoods were seen as ways of alleviating urban poverty.
While the spatial mismatch theory focuses on racial segregation and decreased employment, it fails to examine how the confinement of the poor to inner-city neighborhoods results in many other social effects, including increased levels of crime, violence, and other social problems. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (1987) examines the relationships between chronic joblessness, the out-migration of middle-class blacks, and single parenthood to the creation of an “underclass” cut off from opportunity and influence. Wilson argues that the “underclass” phenomena of increased crime, illegal behavior, and single parenthood are a consequence of social systems; while they represent cultural norms and values, these traits stem from inner-city social isolation, not an internalized “culture of poverty”. In a view that differs slightly from Harrington’s, Wilson contends that measures to address poverty should focus on social systems, not necessarily social norms and values.

Wilson argues that multiple problems existing in inner-city African-American neighborhoods are the compounded effects of poverty. While not directly citing Kain, Wilson draws upon the spatial mismatch hypothesis, describing the movement of blue-collar industry from inner-cities to suburban areas. A consequence of this effect was the out-migration of working and middle-class blacks from inner-city neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in a destabilization of community resources and support such as churches, schools and other organizations. Another result and aggravator of poverty is the rising incidence of single female-headed households, which are more likely to be poor due to lack of dual incomes and are often dependent upon marginal welfare benefits. Wilson relates this trend to chronic unemployment among African-American men; since there are few men with financial stability and resources available, African-American women delay or avoid marriage. Finally, Wilson argues that while poverty disproportionally affects inner-city minorities, the eradication of social
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racism will not adequately alleviate the problems in these neighborhoods because he attributes inner-city minority poverty primarily to economic and structural systems and processes.

Although Harrington and Wilson viewed social problems as fundamentally interrelated with poverty, leading to the transfer of low-income status from one generation to another in inner-city neighborhoods, Jencks (1992) argues for a completely different understanding of the idea of a social “underclass”. Examining a variety of different social issues such as joblessness, crime, violence, single-parenthood, and out-of-wedlock births, Jencks finds that the historical trends between the 1970s and 1990 reflect considerable variance among these problems, with some getting worse, others improving, and several remaining constant. Consequently, Jencks contends that these issues cannot be viewed as simple causes and effects of inner-city neighborhood poverty, but must be assessed independently of one another. Jencks believes that when a society becomes more affluent, all of its members require more resources due to changing expectations and technology. Therefore, poverty will continue as long as there is dramatic inequality between the rich and the poor; when more wealth is created, the needs of the poor become more evident and they are left further behind.

In addition to his own conception of poverty, Jencks critiques many of the primary theorists of the fields. Unlike Kain’s and Wilson’s argument that the labor market of the inner-cities has worsened in comparison to that of the suburbs, Jencks contends that each metropolitan area is in fact one labor market, the entirety of which suffered unemployment during the 1970s and 1980s. He also argues that when unskilled jobs are available, many inner city residents do not want to take them, experiencing unemployment as a result of individual choices instead of primarily structural forces. Similarly, unlike Wilson, Jencks finds that cultural changes, instead of simply economic ones, have led to an increase of single parent families. Jencks sees a social
acceptance of single parenthood among both elites and the lower classes, but acknowledges that this trend impacts the poor differentially.

Jencks’ assertion that the social problems of inner-city neighborhoods should be investigated as trends and issues throughout all of society (rather than be understood as symptoms of an “underclass”) has been influential in subsequent sociological research (Small & Newman, 2001). He presents a controversial perspective on poverty by focusing on fundamental inequalities in income and the role of individual choices among the poor (e.g. the choice to not take an unskilled job in lieu of the more lucrative but highly risky illegal economy) in producing poverty. He notes that an over-reliance on the concept of “ghetto culture” can lead to a tolerance for “selfishness and irresponsibility, especially on the part of males, that is extremely destructive in any community, but especially in poor communities” (pg.22). While he acknowledges the existence of racist hiring practices, Jencks sees part of the problem of inner-city communities as stemming from immoral choices and behaviors.

**Housing Segregation & the Persistence of Racism.** While Wilson focused on the migration of middle-class blacks out of inner-city neighborhoods as a contributing factor to inner-city poverty, Massey, Groos, and Shibuya (1994) argue that racial segregation is more important than class segregation in understanding poor African-American neighborhoods. In their analysis, the authors find that both poor and non-poor blacks are more likely to move to a poor, predominantly black neighborhood than they are to move to a non-poor or predominately white neighborhood. Residential segregation that keeps even non-poor blacks from leaving poor neighborhoods act synergistically to produce high density African-American poverty in urban areas. Consequently, racist practices that lead to and perpetuate residential segregation constrain the ability of African-Americans to leave high poverty neighborhoods for areas with fewer social
problems and increased economic opportunity. Similar to the spatial mismatch theory and unlike Wilson and many other sociologists, Massey et al. focus on economic and structural explanations for concentrated poverty in inner-city black neighborhoods, and do not address the social behaviors or aspirations of poor blacks themselves as potential contributors to poverty.

Another sociological theory of poverty examines how insidious racism dominating US culture limits the ability of poor African-Americans to succeed academically and financially (Gould, 1999). Unlike Wilson, who argues that racism in the past is more influential than current racism on the status of inner city African-Americans, Gould (1999) views modern structural and cultural racism as severely limiting to the economic and social advancement of African-Americans. Gould argues that mainstream organizations operate under cultural values that differ significantly from those of African-Americans. When poor blacks, with less exposure to mainstream social norms, fail to achieve as much as whites, this lack of success is often seen as evidence that blacks are less competent, intelligent, or motivated than whites. Instead, Gould argues that most employers and schools operate as culturally-specific organizations that exclude those outside of the majority culture. Gould contends that unless mainstream organizations became truly “bicicultural” (i.e. adapting to the strengths and beliefs of multiple racial groups), then only whites and racial groups willing to adopt the norms of white culture will be able to achieve wealth. This theory, while explaining why African-Americans may not succeed in school or work situations, does not explain why poor inner-city neighborhoods are also dominated by violence and crime.

Support in the Form of Social Capital

While several sociological theories of poverty focus on how larger societal structures lead to increased poverty in urban areas, theories investigating intergenerational transfer of resources,
social capital, and social networks present a more comprehensive analysis of how poverty is experienced by families and communities. Loury (1981), an economist, is one of the most cited American investigators of social capital as it relates to poverty. Loury’s ideas have been increasingly used and examined by sociologists as one of the first social capital theorists (Portes, 1998). In an investigation of intergenerational transfers of wealth, Loury (1981) found that family poverty significantly constrained social mobility in terms of access to education and other resources. Loury consequently views poverty as a condition handed down between generations, not as a result of inherited intellectual or moral failings, but from income inequality and the lack of a redistributive welfare system. Loury views those with high educational achievement to be beneficiaries of a stratified class system, as opposed to viewing them as the deserving winners of a free-market “meritocracy”.

Sociologists investigating the concept of social capital have extended the idea that the resources of families and communities determine the circumstances of future generations. Unlike Loury, however, Coleman (1988) conceptualizes capital as more than financial and educational resources. As a sociologist, Coleman views behavior in a social frame partially determined by norms, ideals, and interactions with communities and other individuals. To Coleman, social capital encompasses the strength and trust of interpersonal relationships within families and neighborhoods. He argues that while financial capital and educational background or skills (“human capital”) are important for intergenerational transfers, social capital is a fundamental concept missing from most analyses. To Coleman, the likelihood of a child’s success depends upon many social networks and ties within the neighborhood, and inter-family social capital, as well as socioeconomic status. A resulting approach to inner-city poverty would argue that the social problems found in inner-city neighborhoods detrimentally affect social
capital and result in the transfer of poverty between generations (Portes, 1998).

Recently, Wilson’s hypothesis about the social isolation of inner-city African-Americans has been connected to ideas of social networks and social capital in these communities. Rankin and Quane (2000) found that residents living in high poverty neighborhoods have significantly reduced access to positive social capital and social contacts that could assist in bringing them out of poverty. However, contrary to a social capital hypothesis that would suggest that there is less community participation in poor neighborhoods, the authors found that the families in the poorest neighborhoods were more likely to report being socially active. While this finding may suggest one of the main limitations of social capital, it provides a persuasive explanation for how social problems are perpetuated in poor communities but does not fully explain why poverty exists. Families in poor neighborhoods might see a benefit from becoming socially active in promoting community support and action; however, if larger economic and structural forces persist, this action may have minimal effect. Rankin and Quane (2000) found, however, that on an individual level, access to “high-status” individuals can be a beneficial form of social capital; a benefit that is denied those living in extremely poor, segregated neighborhoods.

**Impact of Values on Behavior**

Sociologists often investigate how cultural values and ideals determine social behavior. For example, Rodman (1963) argues that scholars have differed on the centrality of social values; while some have argued that there is one set of American values, others suggest that various social groups hold their own specialized set of ideals. Rodman presents a hybrid model of these two opposing viewpoints that he calls the “lower-class value stretch”. In this conceptualization, members of the lower class share the same aspirations of those of the middle and upper classes (e.g. financial success, marriage, legitimate off-spring, and educational
attainment). However, unlike those born into economic privilege, members of the lower class have expanded the array of values that they find acceptable as a result of financial and social deprivation. Consequently, for the lower classes, illegitimacy, single-parenthood, menial labor, and dropping out of high school are all tolerable, although not ideal, life circumstances. In this sense, the poor have “stretched” their values to accommodate to what appear to be more realistic goals, while still ascribing to the ideals of the middle class. Rodman’s hypothesis focuses on the continuation of poverty through adjusted behaviors, as poor individuals react to their circumstances by adapting a value stretch that allows for socially stigmatized actions. The poor consequently share some middle-class ideals and do not rebel against any values and standards that may be difficult or impossible for them to achieve. As a result, Rodman’s theory can help explain how social values dictate individual behaviors, as lower class group members respond to their socioeconomic circumstances with a diverse and sometimes contradictory array of values (also see Della Fave, 1974). Rodman’s (1963) analysis presents an early explanation of how poverty can be perpetuated among the poor; although his focus does not extend to larger structural determinants or how socially stratified economic classes were originally created.

Many sociologists have furthered examined the idea of how lower class values contribute to the causes of poverty. While Wilson does not accept the “culture of poverty” theory, he describes the existence of alternative social norms and expectations in low-income communities. According to Gould (1999), the “culture of poverty” theory includes low educational and financial aspirations and high tolerance for traditionally deviant behaviors. Wilson essentially agrees that chronic poverty has resulted in a change of “underclass” values, although he argues that these values could be quickly changed to become more like middle-class values with access to appropriate opportunities and resources. Conversely, Gould (1999) emphasizes that lower
aspirations are a rational accommodation to circumstances, while also insisting that inner city
African-Americans share the desired outcomes of success valued in mainstream white American
culture. Similar to the lower-class value stretch hypothesis, the rational accommodation
framework suggests that the inner city poor ascribe to an array of norms and values that include
both mainstream ideals and those values that emerge from adapting to the poverty experience.

The Impact of Social Policies

A significant portion of overall poverty research has concentrated on individual
characteristics of the poor as contributors to their low-income status (Rank, 2004). Murray
(1984) is one of the most vocal and influential proponents of this approach, and sees African-
American urban poverty as the result of social policies that provide “incentives to fail” (e.g.
bestowing benefits upon the poor that eliminate their desire to work). Murray argued that by
providing welfare benefits to members of these communities, government and community
agencies have contributed to the dependency of poor African-Americans. Since these benefits
offer a marginal quality of life, they are found to be desirable in comparison to a job with similar
rewards and limited possibilities for advancement. Murray criticizes authors such as Harrington,
who focused on the American socioeconomic system as the cause of poverty. He argues that the
social welfare system, designed to address poverty, is actually its cause and thereby increases
poverty and social problems. Much of his focus, however, is on the moral failings of African-
Americans, whose unacceptable behavior has been “tolerated” by whites as a result of guilt for
years of racial segregation (Murray, 1984, pg. 223). Murray also discusses the rise of female-
headed African-American females as being related to welfare benefit policies, a trend that
Wilson later attributed to long-term joblessness among African-American men. Although
Murray’s radical approach was highly controversial and received limited attention in the current
sociological literature, his skills as a public speaker and conservative policy analyst helped to generate a wide dissemination of his views (Rank, 2004).

Indeed, liberal analysts have shared Murray’s contention that the welfare system negatively impacts those that it intends to serve. For example, Piven, a political scientist, and Cloward, a sociologist (1993), argue that the rapid movement of many African-Americans from the rural South into Northern cities during the 40s and 50s coincided with an economic recession, resulting in clusters of poverty with rising crime and other social problems. This in turn led to agitation and rebellion in these communities. Piven and Cloward contend that social programs developed to address this unrest had a minimal effect on inner-city poverty and helped create a negative social stereotype of inner-city blacks who refused to work. Piven and Cloward argue that social welfare policies in the United States are designed to ensure the availability of a workforce willing to take low-skilled positions, by increasing welfare benefits during social upheaval and reducing benefits when more low-skilled workers are needed. Neither welfare receipt nor low wage labor allows for significant social mobility, resulting in the transfer of poverty from one generation to another. Unlike Murray, Piven and Cloward focus on government policies and social trends in relation to poverty, and do not discuss the alleged moral shortcomings of the inner-city poor.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & IMPLICATIONS

The sociological theories of poverty presented in this review reflect a variety of factors that cause or contribute to inner-city poverty (e.g. governmental policies, economic and geographic changes, racism, residential segregation, lack of social capital, and cultural values and aspirations). While each of these variables could represent a discrete theory, their explanatory value may be enhanced when understood as a combination of theories acting on
Different system levels. The conceptual map displayed in Figure 2 illustrates how multiple variables, each having their own effect on poverty, can be combined to form a framework for understanding poverty in inner-city neighborhoods. While all of these concepts related to poverty are discussed by Wilson (1987), some of the proposed relationships are conceptualized differently.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

When read from left to right, Figure 2 describes the interconnections between structural and community-level variables. Racism, a structural force inherent in US systems and culture, is seen to result in residential segregation, with African-Americans living apart from whites in inner-city neighborhoods. Residential segregation can, in turn, be seen as impacting the numbers of jobs in inner-city neighborhoods; a relationship that might be partially mediated by racism (e.g. not creating jobs in primarily African-American neighborhoods). As a result of the lack of jobs available in inner-cities, working and middle-class African-Americans migrate out of these neighborhoods, causing social isolation among the poor residents who remain. The migration out of the inner-cities by working and middle-class African-Americans could also lead to a lack of human and social capital, as a lack of employed community members leads to the erosion of community agencies and organizations. This relationship is also partially mediated by the effect of social isolation, as socially isolated poor neighborhood residents lack access to other individuals or connections with human capital, resources, and influence. Finally, the lack of access to different kinds of human and social capital, such as financial resources, education, and peer role models, could result in a change in community values and aspirations, as mainstream social norms are abandoned in favor of ideals that more accurately match the poverty-stricken neighborhood conditions. These changed values could lead to lower expectations for success.
and achievement in educational and employment, exacerbating and continuing poverty in inner-city communities. The result is a complex downward spiral producing very complicated social problems.

This same conceptual framework can also provide insight into potential areas for intervention by practitioners and policy-makers. As displayed by the lettered arrows, each theoretical relationship could be altered to reduce and end the perpetration of poverty. For example, interventions at arrow A., connecting racism to residential segregation, could include policies ensuring fair and equal real estate and banking practices, as well the creation of grants for low-income families to purchase and revitalize property in urban neighborhoods. Arrows B and C illustrate the process of how racism creates a lack of jobs in inner-city communities and could be altered by affirmative action policies or employment practices that offer living wages for minorities in urban areas. The relationship between the lack of jobs in inner-cities and the migration of working and middle-class African-Americans out of urban areas could be prevented by alternatives to traditional gentrification practices, such as the creation of urban transit villages allowing safe and easy access to suburban areas (arrow D.). All of these policy level changes would create a more positive atmosphere for community-based agencies and religious organizations to create community cohesion and lessen the impact of social isolation (arrows E. and F.). An enhanced community infrastructure could also be created by community organizing, thereby expanding social networks and increasing human and social capital (arrow G.). Finally, micro-level interventions such as mental health services, mentoring, and after school programs could act to prevent negative changes in values and aspirations among community members (arrow H.)

The aim of this brief literature review was to examine major trends in sociological
theories explaining urban poverty. This review has several limitations due to its limited scope. Many important issues, including the feminization of poverty, poverty among different ethnic minority groups, and rural and suburban poverty are not discussed (Small & Newman, 2001). In addition, many qualitative sociological studies were not fully reviewed, although they have made important contributions to the field. A more comprehensive literature review would include a critical examination of these other aspects of the sociological literature. Finally, there are other social stratification and urban poverty theorists who are not cited in this review. This brief introduction to the sociological study of poverty is intended primarily to familiarize readers with some of the influential theories in the field. Consequently, the viewpoints of many scholars working in this field are not included, and more research is necessary to understand the full complexity and breadth of the debates mentioned.

The insights gleaned from sociological theories of poverty have several implications for policy and practice. The social stratification and social policy theories of poverty provide a mid-range perspective needed to critically assess the root causes of poverty. In contrast, the theories related to social capital and the impact of values on the behaviors of the inner-city poor have implications for interventions with individuals and families. Irrespective of the focus on micro or macro practice, racial segregation and racism theories offer similar challenges. While they can help illuminate the impact of social processes on neighborhood and communities, they call for significant policy interventions and social change.

The sociology approach to understanding poverty features the interactions between behaviors and surrounding systems, at the individual, family, neighborhood, and policy levels. At a time when most textbooks on human behavior and the social environment focus primarily on human behavior (Taylor, Mulroy, & Austin, 2004), the sociological perspective offers a
multi-layered framework for understanding the impact of poverty on human behavior as a critical component of the social environment. The conceptual framework proposed in this review of the literature focuses attention on multiple relationships that suggest pathways for intervention and advocacy leading to the reduction of poverty in inner-city communities.
References


## Poverty

### Figure 1: Classification of reviewed theories and authors

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Poverty

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of understanding sociological concepts of urban poverty
Psychological Theories of Poverty

Kelly Turner
Amanda Lehning
Abstract

Social work education, practice, and research are heavily influenced by theories developed by psychologists. A review of the literature was conducted to identify theories of poverty emerging from the field of psychology. In general, until 1980, psychological theories of poverty emphasized the role of the individual or group to explain the causes and impact of poverty. Between 1980 and 2000, psychologists began to consider the structural and societal factors that contribute to poverty and moved beyond the explanations of individual pathology. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of psychological theorists acknowledge the role of social, political, and economic factors in the creation and maintenance of poverty. Implications for social work education, practice, and future research are discussed.

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of individuals living in poverty in 2004 rose to 37 million, an increase of 1.1 million from 2003. (DeNavas-Walt, et al, 2005). Such an alarming statistic is of particular concern to the social work profession, whose primary mission has always included enhancing the well being of those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (NASW, 1999). The applied field of social work incorporates the theories of a wide array of social science disciplines, including psychology. It is important, therefore, to identify and assess the various psychological theories used to explain poverty. How do these theories inform social work practice with individuals and communities struggling with poverty?

This literature review examines the theories of both the causes and impacts of poverty emerging from the field of psychology. The first section includes a historical look at theories concerned with the study of the mind and behavior of an individual or group. The next section
presents a brief overview of the debates and changes within psychology from 1980 to 2000, as
the field of psychology sought to create more of a balance between the understanding of human
behavior and the impact of the social environment of poverty. The third and final section
examines psychological theories of poverty that have emerged from this more balanced point of
view. The conclusion addresses some of the implications of these theories for the social work
curriculum, especially regarding human behavior and social environment.

**Methodology**

This literature review included keyword searches in the most popular social science
databases, including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PubMed, Social Service Abstracts, Social
Work Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts. Each database was searched using the keywords
‘poverty,’ ‘poor,’ ‘socioeconomic,’ ‘economic,’ or ‘class’ in combination with the terms ‘theory’
or ‘analysis’ and ‘psychology’. Once an article or chapter was selected, the reference section
was searched to identify additional sources.

The limitations of this literature review include the small number of articles devoted to
theories of poverty within the psychology literature, the authors’ limited experience with
psychological theories related to poverty, and a reliance upon published reviews of theories in
psychology. A more comprehensive review of psychological theories of poverty has yet to be
found in the literature.

**Pathologizing the Poor**

**Theories on the Causes of Poverty**

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, psychologists developed a
number of theories that reflected either the field’s biases about poor people (Carr, 2003; Allen,
1970) or its tendencies to view them in terms of their pathologies (Carr, 2003). These theories
tend to locate the source of poverty within the individual (e.g., Pearl, 1970 and Goldstein, 1973) or within an impoverished culture (e.g., Pearl, 1970 and Rainwater, 1970), and do not address the larger societal or structural forces affecting the poor.

One theory, known variously as the naturalizing perspective, constitutionally inferior perspective, or nativist perspective, holds that intrinsic biological factors lead directly to poverty, an argument often supported by psychologist-designed intelligence tests (Rainwater, 1970; Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). While this perspective has historically reflected public attitudes (Rainwater, 1970), it appears that this perspective was held by some psychologists as recently as the 1970s (Rainwater, 1970; Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). Although IQ tests produce quantifiable evidence that has been used to support this theory, many argue that intelligence is not a measurable construct (Pearl, 1970) and even researchers disagree about the exact definition of the word (see Ginsburg, 1978), therefore calling into question the validity of these intelligence test results.

A related theory involves the role of language development and the accumulated environmental deficits that can lead to poor academic achievement and the continuation of the cycle of poverty (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). Based on the inadequate development of the language skills poor children in comparison with their middle class counterparts, researchers claim that the poor have cognitive deficiencies (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). There is very little research, however, that substantiate any significant class-based differences in language abilities (Ginsburg, 1978) and this perspective has been denounced as based on middle-class arrogance, rather than science (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). As an alternative theory, Ginsburg (1978) proposed a developmental view that acknowledges that there may be class differences in cognition but that children share cognitive potentials and similar modes of language.
Intelligence-based psychological theories of are not the only theories that suggest that individual deficiencies contribute to an individual’s inferior social and economic status. For example, Carr (2003) describes the McClelland approach, which gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. This approach suggests that the poor have not developed a particular trait, called Need for Achievement (nAch), which therefore prevents them from improving their situation. This approach was embraced as a way to help the poor escape poverty, and researchers sought to test this theory on populations in third world countries (Carr, 2003). Similarly, in the 1980s psychologists viewed attribution theory as a promising explanation of poverty (Carr, 2003); namely, the poor tend to attribute their failures to internal factors, while attributing successes to external, uncontrollable factors. On the other hand, the rich take the opposite view. Both of these theories drew criticism for maintaining the status quo and failing to produce real results (Carr, 2003).

Other psychological theorists identified poverty as a manifestation of moral deficiencies (Rainwater, 1970) or psychological sickness (Rainwater, 1970; Goldstein, 1973). While a rare view among professional psychologists, the moralizing perspective labels the poor as sinners who need to be saved (Rainwater, 1970), while the medicalizing perspective views the behavior of poor people in terms of psychological disturbance (Rainwater, 1970). A number of studies reveal a high concentration of schizophrenia and other psychopathologies among the poor. The social selection hypothesis posits that these mental illnesses actually determine one’s economic position (Goldstein, 1973; Murali & Oyebode, 2004). The social drift variant of this hypothesis suggests that most schizophrenics are born into middle or upper class families, but their illness prevents them from earning enough money to maintain this social status and they eventually drift into poverty (Goldstein, 1973). There is considerable debate surrounding this hypothesis,
however, and the author of one theoretical piece concludes that social selection is one of many different factors explaining the concentration of schizophrenics in the lower class (Goldstein, 1973).

Many social service workers employed by public welfare agencies in the 1950s also relied on psychological theories to explain the poor’s economic dependence on the state (Curran, 2002). They subscribed to Freud’s theories regarding the ego and psychosexual development by perceiving welfare recipients as victims of psychologically abusive histories resulting in character disorders that kept them in poverty. In essence, inadequate socialization and broken homes led to a poorly developed ego and low levels of self-sufficiency (Pearl, 1970). Feeling overwhelmed by sexual and aggressive drives, this theory suggests that the poor acted out this psychic conflict, much like a child (Curran, 2002). The appropriate role of the caseworker was to act as a parent substitute, setting limits and assimilating welfare recipients into the dominant culture (Curran, 2002). This theory was embraced by a prosperous postwar America concerned with the rising numbers of African Americans on the welfare rolls, and disinclined to entertain the idea that the same society that led to their own financial success could also contribute to poverty (Curran, 2002). Looking back almost fifty years later, Fraser commented that this approach reflected “the tendency of especially feminine social-welfare programs to construct gender-political and political-economic problems as individual, psychological problems” (1989, p. 155, as quoted in Curran, 2002, p.382).

Social work’s earlier characterization of the poor as children seeking to satisfy their aggressive and sexual urges (Curran, 2002) supports the once-popular culture of poverty thesis. Although the culture of poverty theory developed by Lewis (1975) emphasizes the role of the social environment in creating a culture of poverty, he still describes that culture in pathological
terms, claiming that the poor suffer from flat affect, family tension, a brutal nature, and a lack of refined emotions (Carr, 2003). The cultural-relativistic perspective suggests that while the poor have a different culture from the rest of society, it is not necessarily inferior or superior (Rainwater, 1970). Similarly, the normalizing perspective includes middle-class stereotypes that lead to pity or concern for the poor. For example, the poor were perceived as having their own culture that serves them quite well, and it would be best to insulate them from the outside world, rather than force them to integrate with the larger society (Rainwater, 1970). As noted in the next section, the tendency to emphasize the individual’s culpability for being poor occurs not only in theories of causation, but also in theories on the impacts of poverty.

**Theories on the Impacts of Poverty**

Historically, psychologists tended to neglect larger structural forces when exploring the impacts of poverty, especially when treating psychological distress (Goldstein, 1973; Javier & Herron, 2002; Luthar, 1999). Some critics attribute this to the profession’s middle-class bias (Pearl, 1970; Javier & Herron, 2002).

One of the potential impacts of poverty is the prevalence and incidence of psychiatric disorders. Many studies have shown that psychiatric disorders, such as depression, alcoholism, anti-social personality disorder, and schizophrenia, are more common in urban, poverty-stricken neighborhoods than in more affluent communities (Murali & Oyebode, 2004). A counter-argument to this social selection hypothesis is the social causation hypothesis, which holds that a patient’s economic situation actually causes psychopathologies, rather than the other way around (Goldstein, 1973; Murali & Oyebode, 2004). The conditions of poverty produce intolerable amounts of stress, which can lead to mental illness. For example, stress can occur when there is a wide gap between an individual’s achievements and their ambitions, a situation that is familiar
to those living in poverty (Goldstein, 1973). While this hypothesis places part of the blame for the poor’s plight on society (i.e., not providing sufficient opportunities for achievement), Goldstein also suggests that individuals play a role in their own psychopathology by noting that:

All of these dimensions of rearing, socialization, and personality development, which seem quite appropriate for adequate adjustment to a lower-class environment, also ill-prepares the individual for adequate coping and development in an essentially middle-class society – and especially for adequate coping with the stresses of this society (Goldstein, 1973, p.66).

In other words, lower-class individuals are perceived to have fewer coping skills compared to their middle-class counterparts. While the author also calls for social legislation to improve the conditions of poverty, his primary recommendation for psychologists is to improve the social and personal skills of poor clients (Goldstein, 1973).

Psychoanalysts also view the poor through a middle-class lens, which could disrupt the therapeutic process (Javier & Herron, 2002). Psychoanalysis has historically been identified with white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, male values, focusing on the nuclear family and intrapsychic conflict (Javier & Herron, 2002). Some therapists also believe that poor people do not have the proper skills to make use of insight and other therapeutic processes. This lack of understanding, often based on limited contact with those living in poverty and a belief that certain behaviors (e.g. discipline, hard work, and the ability to delay gratification) will necessarily lead to success, results in countertransference, in which the psychoanalyst’s personal feelings about the patient interfere with therapy and often discourage the patient from continuing with treatment (Javier & Herron, 2002). Some critics believe there are more sinister impulses at work, such as a fear that curing the poor of their psychological distress will hand them the tools to revolt against the middle and upper classes (Javier & Herron, 2002). There is, however, an
effort among psychoanalysts to provide better treatment of the poor, and the first step might be to acknowledge this countertransference before it becomes counterproductive in therapy (Javier & Herron, 2002).

Moreira (2003) expresses concern about what she calls the ‘medicalization of poverty’, a process involving psychologists and psychiatrists prescribing psychotropic drugs to treat the impacts of poverty, while ignoring other socio-political factors in the process. She accuses the psychology profession of maintaining the status quo by keeping the poor drugged and therefore docile (Moreira, 2003). Without a comprehensive view of the impacts of poverty that acknowledges external, structural factors, the poor will continue to suffer (Moreira, 2003).

Psychologists in the 1980s began to embrace this view, recognizing the integral role that social, economic, and political forces play in the causes and impacts of poverty.

**Unrest in the Profession: 1980 – 2000**

In the 1980s, psychologists began to criticize the overly pathological view of poverty held by their profession (Carr, 2003). They argued that applying McClelland’s “Need for Achievement” theory to poor people (i.e., they remain in poverty because they lack motivation) completely disregarded the external, societal factors that contribute to the epidemic of poverty (Carr, 2003). Similarly, various prominent psychologists also disagreed with the widespread application of Feagin’s popular attribution theory as a way to explain poverty, believing that it inappropriately blamed a poor person’s lack of self-esteem for his/her plight, without taking external factors into account (Carr, 2003). Mehryar, another prominent psychologist of the 1980s, noted that psychological theories had no effect on reducing poverty and possibly had the opposite impact, namely that “psychologizing poverty was liable to pathologize the poor rather than the system that constrained them” (Carr, 2003, p. 5). Mehryar went a step further by
blaming the individualistic view of psychology towards poverty as contributing to keeping the wealthy in power and the poor in poverty (Carr, 2003).

The psychologists of the 1980s, therefore, proposed a return to the culture of poverty theory (Lewis, 1975) that suggests that civilization itself (compared to pre-literate, tribal cultures) inevitably creates two cultures: one of wealth and one of poverty (Carr, 2003). While some psychologists in the 1980s rejected purely psychology-based theories in favor of society-based ones, they did not discount psychology entirely (Carr, 2003). Rather, they believed that psychology could make a positive contribution toward a new understanding of poverty if it was used to describe the psychological processes of the wealthy (i.e., not the poor) and how the biases of the wealthy helped to maintain the conditions of poverty (Carr, 2003).

Impact of Social Forces

*Theories of the Causes of Poverty*

Taking a broader perspective on the impact of the social environment on human behavior, Moreira (2003) sees globalization (including the spread of capitalism) as the major cause of both wealth and poverty. Specifically, she explains that, “globalization works in a selective fashion, including and excluding segments of economies and societies from information networks, giving us pockets of rich and poor” (Moreira, 2003, p. 70). Moreira particularly condemns globalization for disseminating Western culture’s greed for material goods, which she considers to be responsible for a particular kind of poverty called “Consumerist Poverty” or “Consumerist Syndrome”.

Drawing upon theories from other social science disciplines, some psychologists have adopted the Empowerment Theory of an economist (Sen, 19999) to explain the existence of poverty (Moreira, 2003; Carr, 2003). Whereas traditional definitions of poverty use ‘extremely
low or no income’ as the sole criterion for the term, Sen proposes that poverty is more than just low income: it is a lack of political and psychological power (Sen, 1999). More specifically, Sen suggests that modern society deprives certain citizens of power and control, which then results in poverty for those citizens. In order to escape from such poverty, Sen believes that a society must provide all of its citizens with three things: 1) political, economic, and social freedom; 2) security and protection; and 3) transparent governmental activities (Sen, 1999).

The World Bank Development Report for 2000/2001 expanded upon Sen’s Empowerment Theory to develop a three-pillar theory of poverty related to the absence of security, empowerment, and opportunity (World Bank, 2001; Carr, 2003). Carr (2003) and other psychologists view this as an extremely solid theoretical foundation from which the profession of psychology can proceed to investigate poverty. As Carr (2003) explains, “Without all three pillars together, there is no real foundation for concerted development out of poverty. One pillar does not carry the roof” (p. 8).

The World Bank’s concept of security includes factors such as clean water, adequate food and housing, and the reduction of vulnerability to natural disasters (World Bank, 2001). The concept of empowerment, similar to Sen’s definition, entails providing the poor with the means to acquire a greater voice to help them fight for justice within their society (World Bank, 2001). When applied to psychological treatment, empowerment encourages psychologists to work with the poor, not for them (World Bank, 2001; Carr, 2003). Of course, a society in which only a portion of its citizens (i.e., poor persons) lacks Empowerment implies that discrimination and prejudice is at the root of the problem (Carr, 2003). Finally, the World Bank’s third concept is opportunity. Poverty exists, in part, because the poor are deprived of opportunities to participate independently in the global economy (World Bank, 2001). Such opportunities range from a lack
of an affordable education to a dearth of living wage, entry-level jobs (World Bank, 2001). The World Bank’s three-pillar view of poverty seems to be a comprehensive theory from which psychologists can proceed with both research and interventions.

Instead of focusing on empowerment, psychologist Lott (2002) approaches poverty by focusing on discrimination linked to a theory of classism that explains the preservation of poverty in our society. As she defines it, classism is what results from the combination of three negative sentiments: stereotypes, prejudice, and distancing. Similar to discrimination, “distancing” describes how the wealthy distance themselves emotionally and physically from poor people. Although classism is considered to be an impact of poverty, Lott also states that, “Barriers erected by classist bias maintain inequities and impede access to the resources necessary for optimal health and welfare” (Lott, 2002, p. 100). In other words, Lott sees class-based discrimination as both a cause and effect of poverty.

Lott (2002) bases her views on Williams’ 1993 theory that the upper class purposefully categorizes people into lower, middle, and upper classes in order to maintain its power and to prevent the lower classes from receiving an equal share of resources (Lott, 2002). This approach has been described as “social poverty,” (Lummis, 1991) which occurs when the upper class purposefully keeps the lower class in poverty via economic control, thereby keeping themselves in power (Moreira, 2003).

Lott (2002) describes two theories that examine the mechanisms behind such unfair discrimination: Moral Exclusion Theory and Dehumanizing Theory. Moral exclusion theory, developed by Opotow, suggests that upper class citizens incorrectly assume that lower class citizens are less moral than those in the upper classes, thereby causing or passively allowing poverty to become more acceptable in the minds of upper class citizens (Lott, 2002). Similarly,
BarTal and Schwartz & Struch both propose that the upper classes dehumanize poor people, believing that lower class citizens have different (i.e., unacceptable) values and emotional tendencies (Lott, 2002). This dehumanizing process makes it easier for upper class citizens to reduce their empathy as well as discriminate against poor people (Lott, 2002).

The most recent comprehensive discussion of poverty within the field of psychology is found in the “Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status” by the American Psychological Association (2000). Intended to represent the collective opinion of psychologists nationwide, it clearly states, “perceptions of the poor and of welfare – by those not in those circumstances – tend to reflect attitudes and stereotypes that attribute poverty to personal failings rather than socioeconomic structures and systems” (APA, 2000, p. 2). Thus, the APA acknowledges that both structural forces in society as well as discriminatory practices contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

**Theories on the Impacts of Poverty**

In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner, one of the field’s most influential developmental psychologists, proposed his now-famous ecological theory about how an individual is influenced by “systems” of interaction that include family and friends, community, and society, and constantly change and influence each other over a lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This was one of the first developmental theories that took into account the effects that the social environment can have on human behavior and life course development. This theory of interacting systems was used to explain the experiences of children and adults living in poverty, especially the causes and impacts of poverty (Fraser, 1997).

For example, whereas psychologists of the 1960s and 1970s tended to attribute the relatively low IQ score or sub-standard scholastic achievement of the poor to inherent moral or
genetic deficiencies, most psychologists today recognize that the multiple systems of a person’s life can have an impact on such scores or performance (Fraser, 1997). As a result, psychologists have moved from blaming the individual victims of poverty to incorporating the social environment into their understanding of people in poverty.

Lott (2002) views discrimination directed toward poor people by the upper classes as yet another negative product of a poor person’s circumstances. Lott (2002) calls this particular type of discrimination “Distancing,” which she divides into the following three subcategories: 1) *cognitive distancing*, wherein the upper classes hold onto negative, unjustified stereotypes about poor people’s characteristics and behavior by blaming the condition of poverty on a person’s individual failings, 2) *institutional distancing*, which involves “punishing members of low-status groups by erecting barriers to full societal participation” (p. 104), such as the disparity between suburban and inner city public schools, and 3) *interpersonal distancing*, wherein middle or upper class individuals directly ignore, insult, or discriminate against lower-class individuals to their face (e.g., a shop owner forcing poor children to wait outside the store while their mothers shopped because they might steal if allowed to enter the store). In summary, Lott (2002) views all these forms of distancing as significant in their negative impact on people living in poverty.

Other negative impacts have been identified by Moreira (2003), such as the loss of culture whereby dominant Western culture obliterates regional cultures. For example, cultural rituals are disappearing from poverty-stricken areas, such as a community ceremony to grieve the death of an infant (often related to poverty and malnutrition). The loss of such cultural rituals that serve to ease the grief of the surviving mother are related to increasing rates of depression among poor women who have lost children (Moreira, 2003).
In a similar vein, Moreira blames the invasion of Western society’s consumerist ideology (i.e., assigning great value to the accumulation of material goods) for causing consumerism syndrome in poor people; namely, an unrelenting desire to own more and more material goods. Since poor people do not have the financial resources to satisfy such a desire, she believes it unnecessarily exacerbates a self-perception of being poor and can lead to mental health problems (such as depression). As Moreira (2003) explains, “it is more probable to find someone who thinks he is poor without really being poor, and who is, in fact, just the opposite” (p. 73, emphasis added). Lummis (1991) expands upon this view and notes that when consumerist ideologies dominate a society, people perceive that the only things of value are those that are purchased with money. For example, poor people from regional cultures no longer want to plant vegetables because they prefer to buy them in grocery stores (Moreira, 2003).

Depression and misplaced low self-esteem resulting from a consumerism syndrome are not the only psychological problems that poor people face (Moreira, 2003). Moreira (2003) notes that globalization and consumerist ideology can cause multiple psychopathologies, ranging from anhedonia (i.e. no longer taking pleasure in activities that were previously pleasurable) to nihilism and suicidal ideation. The invasion of Western culture is particularly damaging to a poor person’s self-esteem, since it imposes the belief that Western culture is superior to the cultures it is supplanting (Moreira, 2003). The APA supports Moreira’s view that the condition of poverty increases one’s chances of experiencing mental illness. As reported in the Resolution on Poverty that “poverty is detrimental to psychological well-being, with [National Institute of Mental Health] data indicating that low-income individuals are 2-5 times more likely to suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder than those of the highest socio-economic-status group” (APA, 2000, p. 1). While psychologists have recognized that poverty can increase one’s
chances of developing mental disorders, today they attribute such illnesses to broader societal forces as well as intrinsic, personal characteristics.

While societal forces can overwhelm the poor, there are also poverty-stricken individuals who have overcome the negative impacts to succeed in school or the workplace. Explanations for this form of success emerged from the study of risks, which Fraser (1997) defines as any factor that either 1) increases the probability of a problem, 2) makes a problem more serious, or 3) helps maintain a problem. Not surprisingly, poverty is a risk factor for child abuse, illness, family stress, inadequate social support, depression, and delinquency (Fraser, 1997).

Furthermore, because poverty is typically long lasting, it accumulates and magnifies such risks, whereby problems like mental illness are magnified (Fraser, 1997).

Despite all of the risks and negative consequences associated with poverty, some individuals succeed despite living amidst such risks (Garmezy, 1985). According to Fraser (1997), one of the first theorists to tackle that question was E.J. Anthony, who called such individuals “psychologically invulnerable” (p. 14). Subsequent theorists criticized this label, saying it gave the false impression that the successful individuals were completely unaffected by risk factors. As an alternative, theorists such as Garmezy (1985) suggested the term “resilience,” which he defined as “risk factors in combination with positive forces that contribute to adaptive outcomes” (Fraser, 1997, p. 14). Garmezy and others went on to propose three different types of resilience: 1) success despite numerous risk factors, 2) sustained coping despite chronic stressors, and 3) recovery from a trauma (Fraser, 1997).

According to Garmezy (1985), a person achieves such resilience with the help of positive forces or “protective factors” which can be any internal or external force in a person’s life that helps him/her avoid risk. Garmezy (1985) divides these protective factors into three categories:
1) dispositional attributes (e.g., positive temperament), 2) family milieu (e.g., solid family cohesion), and 3) extra-familial social environment (e.g., extended social supports). According to the theory of resilience, a protective factor can function in one of four ways: by reducing the impact of a risk, by reducing a negative chain reaction that might have actualized a risk, by developing a person’s self-esteem, or by creating opportunities through social reform (Fraser, 1997). It is not surprising that resilience theory is the most recent psychological theory to emerge, given psychology’s own self-criticism for having been previously too disparaging of the inherent abilities of the poor.

Conclusion

From this literature review on psychological theories of poverty, two themes emerged: those that emphasize the role of the individual, and those that emphasize the role of society. Theories that emphasize the role of the individual attribute poverty to one’s intrinsic deficiencies, while theories that focus on society find fault in its broader, structural forces. Based on this brief literature review, it appears that the field of psychology now favors the more ecologically-based theories as reflected in the APA’s Resolution on Poverty (2000) calling for more attention to the social environment and the nature of resilient human behavior. For example, the APA (2001) calls for the support of any public policies that will help eradicate poverty, such as those that provide equal public education, living-wage jobs, and affordable housing. The APA (2000) also calls for further psychological research into the causes and impacts of poverty, especially economic disparity, classism, and prejudicial stereotypes.

The conceptual map found in Figure 1 illustrates the major concepts covered by this literature review. The map is divided into two components: the top half represents psychological theories of poverty that focus solely on human behavior; the bottom half contains theories of
poverty that address the social environment. The theories on the causes of poverty that focus on the individual include such personal failings as: 1) inferior genes, 2) the absence of a “Need for Achievement” (nAch), 3) inherent mental illness, 4) sinister morals, or 5) internal ego/superego conflict stemming from an unhealthy childhood. These theories focused primarily on internal deficiencies, whereby individuals bring poverty upon themselves and contribute to their own mental illness.

The bottom half of the conceptual map illustrates an entirely different picture, where causes of poverty are attributed to aspects of the social environment: 1) civilization itself, 2) the spread of a consumerist ideology, 3) structural forces of society (e.g., lack of living-wage jobs), 4) lack of power, security, and opportunity for certain groups, or 5) discrimination by the upper classes toward the lower classes. Such theories focus on both the behavioral impacts of poverty (mental illness, consumerism syndrome, or resilience) as well as the environmental impacts (a loss of culture, low-paying jobs, a risk-filled environment, and discrimination).

One of the implications for understanding human behavior and the social environment is to recognize the historical trajectory of the development of psychological theories and the recent efforts to balance the impact of societal forces with the resilient behaviors of poor people. Further research is needed in order to understand the interaction between individuals and their social environment, and how this interaction is exacerbated by the condition of poverty. It is equally important to gain a more in-depth understanding of how psychological theories were used to explain poverty and thereby “blame the victim” while ignoring the impact of the social environment, which has been and will be the primary arena for eliminating poverty.
Figure 1: Psychological Theories of Poverty

(Psychological theories that focus solely on human behavior)
Before 1980

HUMAN BEHAVIOR:
Inferior Genes
Lacks need to achieve
Inherent Mental Illness
Sinister Morals
Ego/Superego Conflict

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT:
(none)

Results in

POVERTY

(Psychological theories that focus on human behavior and social environment)
1980-Present

HUMAN BEHAVIOR:
Mental Illness
(poverty is an illness that needs to be treated)

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT:
(none)

Results in

HUMAN BEHAVIOR:
Mental Illness
Consumerism Syndrome
Resilience

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT:
Loss of culture
Low Paying Jobs
Risk-filled environment
Classist discrimination

(none)

(none)
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An Anthropological View of Poverty

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An Anthropological View of Poverty

ABSTRACT

The anthropological view of poverty incorporates various social science disciplines as it seeks to explain the relationship between human behavior and the social environment as well as the relationships between human beings. The anthropological views are rooted in comparative perspectives across cultures as well as in the analysis of local cultures. This literature review of poverty from an anthropological perspective includes theoretical perspective utilized contemporary anthropologists. It concludes with a discussion of the major challenges inherent in the anthropological study of poverty.
An Anthropological View of Poverty

INTRODUCTION

The field of anthropology holds a unique position in the social sciences based on its methodology of participant observation, cross-cultural comparison, and ethnographic research depicting human experiences from the point of view of its subjects. Using anthropological concepts, these studies often focus on human behavior in the context of the social environment. This is an important perspective when it comes to increasing our understanding of poverty. The purpose of this literature review on theories of poverty from an anthropological point of view is to provide another social science perspective on understanding poverty.

The primary contribution of anthropology to the social sciences has been its study of the concept of culture and its use in cross-cultural comparison. Using ethnographies, narrative analysis, and participant observations, anthropologists are able to describe the complex bonds of human and social relations within a society through descriptive studies of living cultures. As Lewis (1959), “To understand the culture of the poor, it is necessary to live with them, learn their language and customs, and to identify with their problems and aspirations. (p. 3).

Embedded in the anthropological perspective is the concept of culture. Theories of culture attempt to reconcile ideas of human uniqueness with human diversity based on exploring beliefs and customs (Winthrop, 1991). Major developments in cultural theory have come from evolutionary and ecological approaches that view cultures as adaptive systems. Keesing (1974) identified four broad assumptions for culture as adaptive systems: 1) cultures are systems that serve to relate human communities (such as technologies, economic systems and social grouping) to larger ecological settings, 2) cultural change is a process of adaptation, much like the process of natural selection, 3) the most adaptive aspects of culture related to the ways that technology, the economy and social organizations lead to production, and 4) cultural systems have adaptive consequences, especially when they control populations and contribute to survival.

While theories of culture have been the predominant focus in the past, the different ways in which cultures are conceptualized and investigated are central to contemporary anthropological research. Critical theory epistemologies are fused with cultural and global perspectives to expand the unique viewpoint that the field of anthropology contributes to the discourse on poverty. One
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of the major theories discussed in this review of the literature is the culture of poverty, developed in the 1960s by Oscar Lewis, along with the emergence of alternative theories. The review concludes with implications for practice and future research.

SEARCH PROCESS

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to describe the process of database searching for abstracts of relevant literature. University databases (Melvyl and Pathfinder at the University of California) were used to locate books on poverty by combinations of “poverty” and “anthropology” in keyword searches. The abstract of each book or article was read and relevant resources were identified.

While various other internal sites were explored, the Anthropology library and affiliated websites proved to be the most fruitful. In particular, literature pertaining to the field of cultural anthropology and sub-categories provided the bulk of the articles used in the literature review. In addition to using the University’s sites, the World Wide Web was explored using Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com) as the main search engine. Keywords such as “anthropology poverty” and “anthropology poverty U.S” were used to search for promising articles. After skimming the abstracts, interesting articles were perused for more detail. Only relevant articles were used in this literature review.

There are obvious limitations to this brief literature review. It does not allow for a comprehensive study of all books and articles related to the anthropological perspective of poverty. Topics related to poverty such as inequality, social justice, and socio-economic status may have generated many resources that would have enriched this literature review. However, the literature found by searching for the terms “poverty” and “anthropology” resulted in sufficient resources to capture the anthropological views of poverty. The essence of this view is the debate between those who identify with the cultural explanations of poverty and those who ascribe to the social environment explanations based on the role of social class.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

Interest in the culture of poverty gained momentum in the early 1960s when several anthropologists sought to investigate and define poverty as a distinct and separate entity. Theorists attempted to explain the poverty construct as an adaptive, self-sustaining system with a unique language and organization that sustains and perpetuates the
condition. In his seminal book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Oscar Lewis (1959) presents vivid images of poor Mexican families using ethnographic methods. It is here that the term “culture of poverty” was first coined. Lewis suggested that behaviors and beliefs are learned in early childhood and can contribute to multigenerational poverty. Some of the behaviors included sexual promiscuity resulting in out-of-wedlock births, strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, and dependency, a lack of clear judgment, and experiences that reflect limited knowledge of personal troubles, local conditions, and their own way of life (Lewis, 1959). Many of those living within a culture of poverty can also feel marginalized by the provision of services that are perceived to be irrelevant to their interests and needs. Lewis observed that by the time children were six or seven, the culture of poverty was so ingrained in them that they were more than likely to live the same impoverished lives as their parents. Although Lewis uses five Mexican families as examples, he theorizes that the culture of poverty is not just limited to Mexicans. The attitudes and beliefs underlying the culture of poverty transcend both ethnicity and geography (Lewis, 1959).

Lewis’s findings and interpretations sparked considerable controversy among scholars about the distinction between the culture of poverty and socio-economic poverty rooted in social class differences. The *culture of poverty* school of thought ascribed personal characteristics to the cause of poverty in which poor people have a distinct set of behaviors that deviate from the social norm. These behaviors are unique to the lower classes and are passed down from generation to generation, thus perpetuating the culture of poverty. According to the scholars who supported this theory, these undesirable behaviors can only be changed by modifying individual behaviors. In contrast, the *class poverty* school of thought argued that the behaviors exhibited by the poor are adaptations to their impoverished environments that emerge from failures in the social, political, and economic structures of society. These scholars proposed that environmental factors cause adaptive behaviors which can be viewed as a subculture of poverty and that the poor hold values similar to those held by other segments of society.

The advocates for the culture of poverty theory argue that poor people have values unique to themselves that differ from middle-class, and therefore the only way to change both values and behaviors is to change the poor person (James, 1972). Frazier (1962) studied the
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disorganized lives of poor black people living in urban areas to illustrate the promiscuous behaviors of the culture of poverty by citing the high rate of illegitimate children. Similarly, Moynihan (1965) writes in the so-called “Moynihan Report” that the African-American family was in danger of falling behind middle-class whites because of the culture in which they live. Stein (1974) further validated the culture of poverty theory as proposed by Lewis, citing examples of learned behaviors of those living in poverty that are passed on from generation to generation.

In contrast, the class poverty school of thought suggested that the behaviors of poor people are the result of social class and that their behaviors are adaptations to the environment in which they live, not a set of distinct values and attitudes. From this point of view, behaviors could be altered by policies that are designed to remove obstacles faced by the poor. Parker and Kleiner (1970) hypothesized that “attitudes characterizing the ‘culture of poverty’ help people living in poverty to maintain their sanity. They reflect a ‘realistic’ appraisal of the constraints of their social situation” (Parker and Kleiner, 1970, p. 519). Parker and Kleiner based some of their study on the work of Valentine (1968). For Valentine, culture is a structural phenomenon of its own that influences the behavior of the people it encompasses. By applying the concept of culture to the poor, researchers ignore the significant norms that the poor share with the rest of society, in essence blaming the victims of poverty for their decisions, attitudes, and way of life.

Whether one agrees with the culture of poverty or class poverty theories, it is obvious that the culture of poverty proposed by Lewis had a significant impact on anthropological views of poverty. The new challenge for anthropological research on poverty in the 21st century is to move beyond the study of isolated cultures to incorporate more global perspectives. However, as Susser (1982) noted, small samples of ethnographical data gathering make it difficult for anthropologists to generalize to larger and global populations. She contended that this issue could be addressed by studying the influence of the state on the social organization of urban populations and by making connections between these local events and national and global processes.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Critical theory integrates the major social science theories that can be used to explain social phenomena, including economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and
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psychology. Anthropologists in particular have used critical theory to focus on globalization, materialism and feminism to explore the concept of poverty that include economic and social inequality, social suffering, and homelessness. The fact that many of these issues can overlap into different domains provides evidence of the pervasive extent to which poverty touches the many aspects of human life.

Current anthropological research incorporates a blending of cultural and critical theories in a global perspective to address the concept of poverty. According to Benton and Craib (2001), the focus of critical theory is to critique and change society by investigating human capacity in relationship to oppression and emancipation. Since reality is seen as distorted by a range of contextual and structural factors, the distortion needs to be eliminated by considering broader historical, political, cultural and structural factors in order to lessen and end human oppression. Critical theories challenge assumptions about society and place explanations in a context that encourages practical actions and emancipation.

Globalization

Contemporary anthropologists have combined cultural theories with critical theories, such as globalization, in an effort to identify the forces and effects of the global economy on the urban poor. While theorists are in disagreement about the precise nature of the causal forces (one group favors a Marxist view and the other questions the predominantly economic viewpoint), Scheuerman (2006) contends that four core assumptions need to be stipulated. First, the concept of de-territorialization refers to the assumption that territory (in the sense of the traditional concept of geographically identifiable location) no longer constitutes the whole of ‘social space’ in which human activity takes place. Mainly due to enhanced telecommunication access, events occur simultaneously around the world. Thus, globalization includes the spread of new forms of non-territorial social activity. Second, the concept of interconnectedness investigates the way any given social activity might influence events across the world. Even though some activities seem connected, others may solely be regional or local phenomena. Third, de-territorialization and interconnectedness are intimately tied to the acceleration of the pace of social life across geographic locations. Finally, although each facet of globalization is linked to the other three assumptions noted above, each process is different and needs to be assessed separately.
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In the context of globalization due primarily to the use of ethnographies, narrative analysis, and participant observations as principle research tools, the anthropological perspective differs from other social science disciplines. Anthropologists are able to describe the complex bonds of human and social relations within a society through descriptive studies of living cultures and are thereby equipped to interpret the effects of globalization on a given culture or community. Anthropologists are able to link individual experiences to larger local and global processes to describe the many facets of poverty.

In their collection of essays on social suffering, Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) argue that suffering is a collection of human problems that stem from destructive powers that major social forces can impose on human lives. Farmer (1997) illustrates the impact of such forces in the contexts of AIDS and the politics of individual experiences. Farmer uses traditional ethnographic methods to describe two impoverished individuals from Haiti: one is a woman who unknowingly contracts AIDS from a soldier and the other is a civilian man who was jailed and tortured by military personnel. The author suggests that social and economic forces help to shape the forms of structural violence, such as AIDS and oppressive government powers. Structural violence, especially in developing countries, can conceal the underlying impact of poverty. Globally, poverty is seen as a major risk factor for disease. Political violence often erupts, not only as a result power struggles, but also as a struggle to meet the basic needs of civilians. Consistent with the approaches of critical theory, Farmer notes that the impact of global and national forces on the local economy is the appropriate arena for societal change when understood within the context of anthropological analysis.

Nguyen and Peschard (2003) contend that globalization has helped to increase the awareness of inequality, poverty and ill-health around the world. Utilizing a medical anthropological viewpoint, the authors investigate the biology of inequality in an effort to understand the effects of inequality on health. Medical anthropologists attempt to link theory to local level inequalities and large scale social forces by extrapolating from their findings collected from various field sites. The focus is to ascertain how the implementation of social policy affects local action and how ideological and political commitments shape the environments that contribute to the formulation of such policies. For example, material deprivation in childhood was found to perpetuate unhealthy behavior later in life, regardless of social status and high levels of socioeconomic inequality correlate with worsened health outcomes across an entire
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society. The relationship between poverty and ill-health has been well established; poverty can lead to weakened immunity and neuro-physiological development because of malnutrition, spread of pathogens, exposure to environmental pollutants, and other similar conditions. As Nguyen and Peschard (2003) illustrate, anthropologists can help to unearth the links between policy and everyday life to help more fully understand their dynamic interactions.

Leatherman (2005) proposed a political ecological approach to creating a more holistic view of the issues of power and inequality in the human environment linking social inequality and human biology. In an era of increased global economic interdependence, as well as increased inequality and poverty, high levels of illness and hunger require research approaches that are capable of linking human biology to social inequalities in the context of globalization. In particular, anthropologists need to document how large scale processes (ex: global capitalism) shape local environments and in turn how individuals play a role in constructing the environment. He sees poverty and poor health as conditions that serve to reproduce each other. He argues that the question of ‘how’ should lead to research that identifies the ‘space of vulnerability’ in order to examine the intersection between poverty, hunger, nutrition, health and how individuals operate within and help to create this space.

Leatherman (2005) contends that there are three basic risks associated with vulnerability: 1) exposure to stress, 2) inadequate capacities to cope and, 3) severe consequences from stress, crisis and shocks. The most vulnerable are those with limited coping mechanisms who are exposed, suffer the most and are least able to recover. While it is important to examine the structured inequalities and social relations that underlie poverty (and how they affect levels of illness and coping capacities), it is also important to identify the conditions that make some more or less vulnerable to hunger, malnutrition, disease, stress, and how vulnerabilities affect perceptions of environment. The ‘space of vulnerability’ captures a set of conditions in which people live, the constraints on perception, how goals are prioritized and what actions seem appropriate and possible. The goal of this anthropological approach is to see how people function/survive within this space and to view this space within a continuous and ongoing process of change.

Materialism
The concepts of inequality and risk have become a major part of the general poverty discussion. From an anthropological perspective, societies are structured in hierarchically-ranked social groups that have different amounts of political power and control over resources (Winthrop, 1991). Theories of materialism, which include cultural and Marxist perspectives, view the material constraints of the environment as central to the process of adaptation. The concept of materialism seeks to explain events and behaviors in terms of such material factors as the environment, technology and the economy rather than on the basis of non-material factors such as belief or custom (Winthrop, 1991). Social inequality, a concept prevalent in the discussion of the poor, is seen as a reflection of the differences between groups in the organization of production and the ownership of property, where the interaction creates a consistent hierarchy of wealth, power and prestige (Winthrop, 1991; Keesing, 1974). The social groups are separated by distances that are culturally based; inequality is used to describe the distance between the social groups or the ‘haves’ and have-nots.’

Keesing (1974) describes cultural materialism as a theoretical approach to explain the effects of material conditions on the non-material dimensions of culture ideology. Cultural materialism is similar to the Marxist theory but differs in that it theorizes the explanation of cultural systems as relying almost entirely on diet, technology, population and environment. According to Winthrop (1991) the Marxist theory of culture stresses the role of culture in reconciling contradictions inherent in a society’s connection with economic production and the culture to ideology. Karl Marx based his concepts on class struggle and believed that material conditions shape the other domains of social life (e.g. politics, law and ideology). His theoretical approach assumes that there is conflict between social groups that can explain the long term transformation of societies.

Morgen and Maskovsky (2003) suggest that current levels of poverty can be attributed to the new global economy and the need to reform welfare systems. The describe four perspectives that anthropologists use to explain the recent welfare reform process in the U.S.. First, the Marxist view of urban poverty focuses on new forms of worker susceptibilities that are related to the outsourcing of jobs to the global market. Based on Keynesian theory, Marx argued that capitalists used the labor market as a mechanism to keep the lower classes poor by increasing the demand for labor and creating higher wages for those who are employed. The second perspective emphasizes the new global information economy where the use of information
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technology has reduced the need for industrialized labor. The third perspective involves the neo-liberalist point of view that is characterized by privatization, marketization, and the reduction of the welfare state, all economic mechanisms designed to encourage self-sufficiency of the poor. This perspective illustrates how political, economic, and ideological generate and preserve urban poverty. The fourth and final perspective focuses on race and gender as explanatory factors in understanding how welfare reform relates to poverty. For example, with respect to gender, welfare states across the globe are viewed as historically biased; namely, treating men as economically productive workers and allowing them to receive social insurance, while women have been cast in the traditional role of care-taker and only eligible for minimal welfare benefits. From this point of view, gender-bias in welfare states places less value on women’s work in the home and its contribution to society, whereas men’s work has been rewarded with higher social value.

The changing global economy, deindustrialization, cuts in benefits and safety nets in conjunction with economic shifts have also contributed to the increase in the homeless population as an extreme form of poverty (Mathieu, 1993; Susser, 1996). Ethnographic studies have documented the ways in which stable working class households can dissolve into poverty through the loss of employment along with the negative impact on health and general living conditions linked to global changes. For example, Panter-Brick (2002) investigates street children as a reflection and symbol of homelessness and poverty around the world. While previous studies focused on these children as symbols of poverty and social exclusion, they tended to ignore the larger underlying societal issues that affect most low-income children and youth in poverty. Recent anthropological research seeks to be more holistic by examining the lives of children using the broader perspective of poverty, social exclusion, coping strategies, vulnerability and resilience within the context of adversity.

**Feminism**

The concept of the feminization of poverty emerged in the 1980s. Previous anthropological theory neglected the role of gender, especially in relationship to inequality and poverty. Winthrop (1991) speculates that the field of anthropology may have displayed its own cultural bias by treating women as invisible when focusing on issues that related predominantly to men. Anthropological theory and research have yet to determine the extent to which sex roles
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are molded by culture rather than biologically inherited or how the interaction between biology and culture shape gender in a given society (Withrop, 1991). Current anthropological research makes more of an attempt to incorporate cultural, feminist and globalization theory when exploring the effects of poverty on women.

The tenets of feminist theory are also embedded within the critical theory perspective. According to Benton and Craib (2001), feminist theory posits that women may have a very specific understanding of truth that is distorted or created by the historical place of women in society’s division of social labor. This truth may not be widespread because of the dominance of male truths. Recent research focuses on the ways in which females understand reality as opposed to the views of historically dominant male groups. One of the purposes of critical theory is to expose the nature of a patriarchal social order and to make sure that women are recognized for their diversity and not from a single or representative point of view. A core element of critical theory is that all claims about knowledge are grounded in the interests and values of a particular social group. Therefore, critical theorists need to make claims about history, sexuality and gender that help to establish a foundation on which feminist approaches to issues can be understood.

Gunewardena (2002) contends that while the elimination of poverty relies primarily on macro-economic factors and market regulation, the reasons why women live in poverty are less related to economics and more associated with the vulnerabilities resulting from gender discrimination. The economic position of women makes them more vulnerable to poverty due to the intersection of race, gender and class. Most research on women in poverty fails to assess the root causes related to power and gender. Questions that concern anthropologists include how cultural ideologies relate to gender and determine national commitments to particular issues, as well as how gender discrimination throughout the life course is related to lack of involvement in decision-making processes.

Mills (2003) looks at the processes through which gender and labor inequalities shape the global economy. Hierarchical gender ideologies serve to minimize the costs of labor by using segments of the population as supplementary or devalued workers (historically children and women as well as migrant farm workers, domestic workers). Patriarchal ideologies and related gender inequalities are significant features of the global economy as they support and perpetuate a segmented and flexible global labor force. Mills seeks to identify the conditions in which
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inequality is more likely to maintain or reproduce structures of power as well as gender hierarchies. She contends that the challenge is to clarify global processes in their locally specific forms while at the same time seeking connections across economic and social contexts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the anthropological view of poverty originated primarily with Lewis’s (1959) concept of the culture of poverty, it has been greatly expanded by critical theorists to encompass the global challenges emerging in the 21st century discourse on poverty. Lewis’s culture of poverty theory stimulated considerable debate within the anthropological community as well as in other social science disciplines. However, the main thrust of contemporary anthropology has moved the debate away from investigating the poor in isolation to the exploration and integration of individual communities within a global perspective.

By fusing cultural and critical theories with globalization theories, anthropologists have begun to document the way in which local processes are linked and integrated with global changes. Global and national structures and forces are investigated to determine their effects on local environments, and in turn, how these processes interact with individual experiences. The cyclical relationships between poverty and health conditions at the individual and local level are now being addressed in a way that incorporates the impact of global processes on the shape of the social environments. Similarly, the dynamic interaction of social policy, ideology and political forces that shapes the environment are also being evaluated in terms of their relationship to the experiences of individuals. The ways in which the global workforce has affected employment at local levels and in turn, how cultural beliefs regarding gender affect individuals are also being addressed. The interaction of all these perspectives is illustrated in Figure 1.

Anthropological research on poverty is different from research done by the other social science disciplines. Today poverty is viewed as a product of inequality that stems from global systems that affect the lives of individuals in local settings. Anthropologists are able to connect the global impacts with community issues. As Morgen and Maskovsky demonstrate, anthropologists have enhanced our understanding of the impact of welfare reform on the lives of individuals by developing alternative explanations to “blaming the victims” of poverty. Anthropologists have also made efforts to expand research and policy agendas related to
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increasing economic security by decreasing poverty, income disparities, and social inequality in the U.S. and around the world.

Anthropologists possess a unique ability to document and explain the individual experiences of people in poverty through their use of in-depth ethnographies, narrative analysis and participant observation. They are able to vividly tell the story of individual experiences within a particular group and culture. By investigating global phenomenon at the individual level they are able to document the interconnectedness between local environments and global processes and compare similar and contrasting dynamics across diverse populations. These capacities can expand our current knowledge of poverty and our understanding of the impact of global processes on local environments and persons. By uncovering unrecognized trends, the anthropological perspective may prove to be a powerful force in promoting change a the national and international levels of policy-making which may support national changes.
References


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Figure 1. An Anthropological View of Poverty

**Global World:**
Large-scale social forces

**Individual Experience:**
Gathered through ethnographies, narrative analysis, and participant observation

**Aspects of Poverty:**
economics, politics, health/disease, violence/war, gender

**Community/Culture:**
Policies/societal norms
Political Science Perspectives on Poverty

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Abstract

The social science discipline of political science focuses on the study of political systems and political behavior. While political science has not developed a comprehensive theory of poverty, this article reviews political science perspectives related to the causes of poverty (culture of poverty and neo-Marxist theories of class), the role of government in addressing poverty (theories of distributive justice and public support for antipoverty policies), and political participation. The article concludes with recommendations for future research and implications for Human Behavior and the Social Environment curriculum.
Introduction

Poverty is a persistent and serious problem in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), approximately 12.7% of the population lived below the federal poverty line in 2004, the highest percentage since 1998. While poverty rates have generally declined since the 1950s, the absolute number of Americans who live in poverty has remained almost the same for the past five decades, and those with low levels of education, female-headed households, the elderly, and people of color share a particular risk of falling into this category (Glasmeier, 2006). Why do so many Americans live in poverty? Why do antipoverty measures continue to fail? The social science discipline of political science provides important perspectives for understanding the political systems and political behavior that relate to the causes and impacts of poverty.

This article represents a brief literature review of political science theories of poverty. While political science has not developed a comprehensive theory of poverty, a number of political science theories help to explain some aspects of this problem. This analysis begins with a discussion of political science theories related to the causes of poverty, which reflect either the culture of poverty hypothesis or the analysis of social class differences. The next section addresses theories that examine the role of government in the alleviation or exacerbation of poverty, followed by a consideration of theories of political participation. The literature review concludes with recommendations for future directions for future research and implications for understanding human behavior within the social environment of poverty.
Methodology

The literature review included the searching of the major political science electronic databases (PAIS International and PAIS Archive, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and JSTOR) for literature containing the key words ‘political science’ and ‘theory’ combined with either ‘poverty’, ‘inequality’, ‘socioeconomic status’, or ‘class’. The search also included the website of the American Political Science Association and consultations with several experts political scientists.

There are several limitations to this literature review. The primary limitation is the limited amount of attention given to the theories of poverty by political scientists. This review therefore includes perspectives on poverty beyond the traditional focus of political science to include theories of justice, entitlement, and the welfare state. Second, while every effort was made to provide a representative sample of political science theories related to poverty, this is not intended to be an exhaustive review. The final limitation relates to the author’s limited experience with the theoretical literature within political science.

The Causes of Poverty

Political Science and the Culture of Poverty

The work of Oscar Lewis (1975) and his theory of the culture of poverty had a tremendous impact on the social sciences in the mid-twentieth century, and political science was no exception. While the majority of political scientists have moved away from this mode of thinking about the poor, it holds historical importance for this discipline.
Around the same time that Lewis was studying poor families in Mexico, political
scientist Edward Banfield (1958) traveled to a small rural village in southern Italy in an
effort to explain the extreme poverty of its inhabitants. Banfield determined that the bulk
of the blame for this poverty lay in a cultural trait he labeled ‘amoral familism’, which
impeded the ability of individuals to engage in the political associations and create
enterprises to promote economic development. Amoral familism is characterized by the
incapacity of a cultural group to work towards any goal beyond the immediate material
interest of the nuclear family. Rather than acting together for the common good,
individuals possessing this ethos seek to “maximize the material, short-run advantage of
the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise.” (Banfield, 1958, p. 83).
According to Banfield, amoral familism also existed in pockets of the United States, but
enlightened Americans who contribute to the political and economic development of their
communities helped this country avoid this same fate. The Italian villagers, however, had
no such leaders, particularly in the political arena, and according to Banfield (1958) their
only hope for economic improvement depended on an outside group that could change
their worldview. Banfield estimated that it could take up to four generations for
individuals in poor communities to transform their family centered approaches into a
society bonded together economically, socially, and politically.

While Banfield offered a dismal view of the future for Italians living in poverty,
which he characterized in terms of the moral basis of a backward society, Daniel Patrick
Moynihan, political scientist and then Assistant Secretary of Labor, used the culture of
poverty perspective in 1965 to inform federal intervention. In *The Negro Family: The
Case for National Action* (1965), more commonly known as the Moynihan Report,
Moynihan proposed that the family structure presented the primary barrier to economic success among African Americans. Specifically, the matriarchal pattern of African American families, a remnant of slavery, placed them at odds with the patriarchal pattern favored by the middle and upper classes. According to Moynihan, this matriarchal pattern “will be found to be the principal source of the most aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (1965, p.30). While acknowledging the role that slavery and past discrimination played in creating this culture, the implication of this theory is that African Americans are destined to a life of poverty if they do not conform to the values of the dominant, white culture.

While the Moynihan Report did help focus public policy on poverty and the other disadvantages experienced by African Americans, critics accused him of taking a “blame the victim” approach, ignoring larger structural factors and other causes of poverty. Valentine (1968) believes the Moynihan Report and similar studies of the causes of poverty represent a “corruption of the culture concept” (p. 35), the purpose of which is to reinforce stereotypical beliefs rather than make true social science discoveries. While Moynihan promoted his theory as a solution to poverty, it helped reinforce the status quo in terms of discrimination based on race and social class (Valentine, 1968).

The War on Poverty in the 1960s and subsequent antipoverty policies based on the culture of poverty have failed to address the multiple causes of poverty, in part, due to a simplified version of the culture of poverty, which lacks any understanding or respect for other cultures (Valentine, 1968). A review of the literature reveals that political
scientists have abandoned in recent years these cultural explanations of poverty, investigating other causal factors, such as social class and class struggle.

**Class and Poverty**

The classic concept of class structure (Marx & Engels, 1998) proposes that social classes are based on different modes of production, yet this idea does not adequately explain class structure in twenty-first century America (Wright, 2003). In an attempt to update Marxist ideas, Wright describes the current class structure as characterized by nonexploitative oppression, as opposed to the exploitation conceptualized by Marx. In exploitation, the exploiters need the exploited and depend upon them for their own success (Wright, 2003). In a capitalist, industrialized society the proletariat possesses potential power against their oppressors in their capacity to disrupt production. However, in the post-industrialized world, based on technological innovation and globalization, the underclass no longer has much capacity to organize the labor force. In essence, the exploiters no longer need the exploited, and the underclass continues to be denied access to resources, such as education and housing. Their only source of power stems from their ability to interfere with consumption through crime and other forms of violence (Wright, 2003). As a result, class structure is still a product of economic oppression that creates “a situation in which the material benefits of one group are acquired at the expense of another and in which unjust coercion is an essential part of the process by which this occurs” (Wright, 2003, p. 376). In this context, the underclass now has very little recourse to combat oppression.
While there are a limited number of political science theories that help explain the causes of poverty, there are others that examine the role of government in the maintenance and reduction of poverty.

**The Role of Government in Addressing Poverty**

**Theories of Distributive Justice**

Several political science theorists have crafted theories of economic inequality and distributive justice, in which political arrangements and ideologies determine the allocation of a host of goods (e.g., food, shelter, and medical care) (Walzer, 1983). As formulated by Rawls (1971), an ideal system of distributive justice is one in which rational individuals make decisions without taking into account their economic situation. This chosen system of distributive justice would then determine the structure of society, the distribution of rights and duties, and the disbursement of economic and social advantages (Rawls, 1971). Rawls defines two principles that any rational individual would chose: 1) “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others” (1971, p. 53), and 2) “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (1971, p. 53). This ideal system, however, in which everyone has the same access to economic and social goods does not exist in reality. Each society develops their own system of distribution by placing different values on different goods that affect the level of economic inequality.

Walzer describes three principles of justice that can guide the system of distribution of a society. The first is *free exchange*, which “creates a market within
which all goods are convertible into all other goods through the neutral medium of money” (Walzer, 1983, p. 21). Money, however, is rarely a neutral medium because certain individuals have access to resources and the talent to exploit them, while others have little or no access to resources (jobs, education, support networks, etc.) and often call for redistribution. The second principle is need (Walzer, 1983), in which the distribution of goods is based solely on need. The third principle of distribution, deservingness, called ‘desert’ by many distributive justice theorists, currently dominates discussions of distributive justice in the United States. Ideas of deservingness have two components: “a standard of conduct and a norm that determines to what extent any given individual is rightly held responsible for meeting or failing to meet the standard” (Arneson, 1997, p. 342).

In the United States, widely held beliefs about the equality of opportunity and the importance of an individual’s control over their own fate impede any significant redistribution of goods (Lane, 2001). This leads to separating the poor into categories of the deserving and the undeserving, or those who have made an effort to conform to moral requirements (including being a self-supporting, contributing member of society) and those who have not conformed (Arneson, 1997; Wax, 2005).

Arneson (1997) highlights several problems with this line of thinking. First, he claims that those who have limited skills or access to adequately compensated employment do not have a moral obligation to be economically self-supporting (Arneson, 1997). In addition, poor people generally have a smaller range of choices and skills needed to evaluate these choices (Arneson, 1997). In other words, it is inappropriate to judge those living in poverty by the same criteria as those with access to greater
resources. Finally, it is very difficult to distinguish between the poor who deserve some form of redistribution and those who do not (Arneson, 1997). The ideal form of distributive justice is based on the principle of deservingness and requires a neutral party that can accurately assess or judge the deservingness of every individual, a task that is viewed by many as impossible (Walzer, 1983). The principle of deservingness is difficult to implement despite the fact that it still prevails in this country.

Why do Americans continue to view the poor in terms of their worthiness when it comes to receiving government aid? As Wax (2005) points out, “what the majority of [American] citizens accept as reasonable may not comport with any coherent conception of equality or justice” (p. 214). She believes that most Americans view distributive justice in terms of conditional reciprocity: those who are able-bodied should work, and only those who are not able-bodied should receive public assistance. Ideas about equality in this country are not derived from theories of justice, but rather from theories of fairness (Wax, 2005). Unconditional assistance to the poor is not seen as a way to correct inequality, but rather a way to promote inequality, where those who refuse to work are supported by the hard work of others (Wax, 2005). Wax sees this type of thinking reflected in the 1996 federal welfare reform, which requires all recipients to work.

White (2003), on the other hand, proposes an alternative philosophy of economic citizenship that builds on the ideas of Rawls and still resonates with the popular values of the American public. He terms the policies and institutions that emerge from this philosophy as the ‘civic minimum’, and views justice as fair reciprocity, but not in the ideal form as formulated by Rawls. White believes that income redistribution should not be based solely on a citizen’s willingness to work, as in conditional reciprocity, but also
on the social rights possessed by every citizen (White, 2003). If the government has not insured that every citizen is endowed with the social rights necessary to make a productive contribution, then every citizen is not under the same obligation to make a productive contribution in return. White suggests that until the government guarantees a living wage to all workers and acknowledges the productive contribution made by those engaged in ‘care work’, such as women who are raising children or caring for the sick elderly, the government should not impose the strict work requirements that characterize the welfare system today. According to White (2003), this civic minimum is compatible with the dominant values in America. Wealth transfers, for example, can be viewed as insuring equal opportunity, since they eliminate the class-based obstacles that prevent everyone from competing in a ‘meritocracy’ (White, 2003). Similarly, the civic minimum does not conflict with the values of freedom and independence, since “freedom and independence have a material basis, and if citizens have a right to freedom and independence, they must have, by right, meaningful access to a decent share of society’s resources.” (White, 2003, p. 214). The challenge, therefore, according to White, is to show the American public that a fair distribution of justice requires more than simply relegating the poor into the categories of deserving and undeserving, because a citizen is not obligated to make a contribution to society until he or she possesses that same social rights as everyone else.

Another explanation for the dominance of the principle of deservingness lies in a cultural preference for independence over interdependence (Lane, 2001). The American culture is one in which individuals see themselves as independent of their society, identifying with ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural groups, rather than with members of
their economic class (Lane, 2001). This separateness is further enhanced by the geographic segregation of different groups into either gated communities or ghettos (Bickford, 2001). There is little contact between those living in urban poverty and those living in suburban affluence. This separation prevents the formation of cross-class and cross-racial political coalitions (Bickford, 2001) or the development of any empathy for members of different groups. This results in support for very limited redistribution policies and a belief in the principle of deservingness rather than need (Lane, 2001). Lane warns that “the priority given to self-interest over group interest has gone beyond the point where it is economically beneficial, and has now reached a threshold where societies seem to suffer socially more than they gain economically” (2001, p. 488). This reflects a growing awareness that poverty impacts everyone.

Nancy Fraser (2003) proposes that justice in twenty-first century America requires both redistribution and recognition because these ideas are ultimately intertwined. She refers to the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution as “bivalent collectivities”, a result of the “political-economic structure and the cultural-variational structure of society” (Fraser, 2003, p. 383). The politics of recognition focus on cultural, ethnic, and gender identities, while the politics of redistribution focus on social class. Cultural norms about women or racial and ethnic minorities are embedded in the state and the economy, reinforcing the economic disadvantage of these groups (Fraser, 2003).

According to Fraser, there are at least two ways of addressing economic and cultural disadvantage: the politics of affirmation and the politics of transformation. Politics of affirmation seek to redress cultural and economic injustice by celebrating
differences. The affirmative politics of distribution is represented by the welfare state in terms of economics, and multiculturism, a celebration of different group identities, in terms of culture (Feldman, 2002). Fraser believes that the politics of affirmation fails to produce either redistribution or recognition. Instead, she advocates for socialism and deconstruction, the economic and cultural aspects of the transformative politics of distribution (Feldman, 2002). The politics of transformation involves a deeper engagement of the underlying structures of injustice that create artificial economic and cultural divisions between groups. Without deconstruction, the public will retain such stereotypes as the 'welfare queen', and the poor will continue to struggle with internalized stereotypes and low self-esteem that make it nearly impossible for the politics of redistribution to occur (Feldman, 2002).

Building on the ideas of Fraser, Feldman (2002) outlines a theory of justice that reflects “the fundamental role of the state in classifying populations along these lines of identity and difference” (2002, p. 420). From his perspective, any discussion of redistribution and recognition needs to involve the role of the welfare state in allocating political power with respect to who receives aid and who is denied aid. For example, the current situation of the homeless illustrates the inter-relationships of politics with economics and culture. Feldman argues that the homeless not only suffer from a low socioeconomic status but from a low recognition status that is perpetuated by political decisions. Anti-homeless laws, such as sleeping bans and panhandling restrictions, contribute to the stigmatization and invisibility of the homeless, reinforcing the negative self-conception of the homeless (Feldman, 2002). In addition, negative representations of
the homeless in the media impact public opinion and public policies, perhaps leading to more restrictive redistribution policies (Feldman, 2002).

It is clear that the theories of distributive justice find their expression in public policy and that government plays an important role in promoting or alleviating poverty in the United States.

**Public Policy and Poverty**

The relationship between economic inequality and public policy has become a major area of study in political science. Spencer (2004) contends that policymakers often view approaches to poverty in terms of binary categories; antipoverty policies are formulated as either people-based or place-based and as either supply-side or demand-side. Supply-side and people-based policies include cash benefits to the poor, while tax credits to businesses that hire low-income workers reflect demand-side and people-based policies. Improvements in local schools reflect a supply-side and place-based policy, while business development incentives in poor neighborhoods is a demand-side and place-based policy (Spencer, 2004). As Spencer points out, “economic opportunity for an individual is a result of both individual and neighborhood attributes as well as the behavior of workers and those that employ them” (2004, p. 562) and concludes that antipoverty policies that focus on just one aspect of poverty are doomed to failure. While evidence of the positive impact of an antipoverty policy contributes to political support, Spencer concludes that partisan politics play the primary role in determining which pieces of antipoverty legislation are passed into law.

Support for public welfare and poverty prevention policies fluctuate over time and across nations (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Piven and Cloward (1971), for example,
collected data showing that government relief programs are often expanded during periods of civil disorder stemming from mass unemployment, but restricted once a society achieves times of prosperity. They argue that public welfare is actually a means of regulating the poor rather than an altruistic act. Piven and Cloward contend that “expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms” (Piven & Cloward, 1971, p. xiii).

In 2004, the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (created by the American Political Science Association) reported two major findings: 1) unequal political participation due, in part, to the prominence of lobbyists, and 2) unequal government responsiveness due to special access given to major campaign contributors (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Lawmakers tend to respond to the needs of those who provide the greatest financial support and ignore the needs of those with more limited resources. According to the report, “bias in U.S. governance toward inaction and selective responsiveness may well be compounded by the impact of big monetary contributions, which play an ever-greater role in electoral and policy campaigns” (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005, p. 221). A big contributor to successful election campaigns is often rewarded with access to lawmakers, where he or she can personally express his or her concerns (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). The recent lobbying scandals in both houses of Congress reinforce the idea that money has a disproportionate influence on American politics.

Those living in poverty seldom have the same opportunities as those who lobby and gain special access. As a result, the U.S. government often fails to enact adequate antipoverty policies in response to the rising economic inequality in this country (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). While the poor lack the financial means to influence policymakers
through campaign contributions, they have potential power through their voting behavior and yet rarely see political participation as a way to address their concerns.

**Political Participation**

Political scientists have found that individuals living in poverty fail to participate in such political activities as voting, protesting, or contacting elected officials (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). While the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which increased access to voter education and reduced administrative barriers to registration should have increased the number of voters who are poor, these developments do not appear to have significantly increased the participation of those living in poverty (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005).

There are some potential explanations for the low rates of political participation among the poor. Trade unions and voluntary associations, which traditionally extended membership to lower socioeconomic groups, have declined in recent decades while professional advocacy groups and business associations have come to dominate the political arena (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Another explanation posits that those living in poverty tend to be poorly organized. Another explanation relates to the impact of antipoverty policies. Policies that extend benefits to large segments of society and portray those benefits as ‘rights’ make recipients feel as though they are deserving of such public support, and thereby encourage beneficiaries to participate in the political process (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Older adults, for example, tend to exhibit higher rates of political participation than other groups, a behavior attributed to their stake in the Social Security and Medicare programs (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). On the other hand, policies that require recipients to deal with demeaning eligibility procedures tend to
discourage political participation (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Some policies foster a sense of empowerment among beneficiaries, while others lead to feelings of disempowerment.

**Future Directions for Political Science Theories of Poverty**

While no comprehensive theory of poverty has emerged in political science, three domains of theory relate to: 1) the causes of poverty (culture of poverty and neo-Marxist theories of class structure), 2) the role of government in addressing poverty (theories of distributive justice and the evolution of antipoverty policies), and 3) political participation (both the behavior of individuals as well as the larger social environment).

Shapiro (2002) has called upon political science to balance what he terms ‘method-driven approaches’, which focus on prediction, to more ‘problem-driven approaches’ that address current social problems like the persistence of poverty and growing inequality in the midst of wealth. While he notes that the most important problems are frequently the most difficult to isolate, political scientists should not be discouraged from conducting research on and developing theories about these problems (Shapiro, 2002). Without theories of the causes of poverty, it is difficult to design policy interventions and assess their impact social problems like poverty. For example, with their considerable investment in the study of voting behavior, political scientists could also look more closely at the behavior of poor people with respect to political participation. Why are the poor not involved in the political arena? What kinds of community organizing and policy advocacy activities are needed to address the causes of this political behavior? It is clear that the discipline of political science has the potential to make an important contribution to our theoretical understanding of poverty.
Conclusion

In an effort to summarize the evolution of political science perspectives on poverty, Figure 1 presents a map of theories of poverty from a political science perspective. This figure illustrates that the concepts introduced in this article emerged from some of the traditional foci of political science and relate to some promising new areas of political science theory and research.

Political scientists have long been interested in government, public administration, and human rights (Ranney, 1996), and political science perspectives on poverty reflect these interests. Political scientists who focus on government, for example, investigate different forms of government and the basic tasks and tools of government (Ranney, 1996), and this tradition continues in the concept of the role of government in addressing poverty. Political scientists also study public administration, particularly in terms of the discretion that administrators often exercise in terms of policymaking and policy implementation (Ranney, 1996). Administrators therefore have a potentially large amount of influence over antipoverty policies. Finally, political scientists define human rights as “the protections to which all human beings are entitled because of their humanity and not because of their social status or individual merit” (Ranney, 1996, p. 349). Ideas about human rights lie at the core of theories of distributive justice.

Growing out of the culture of poverty and the War on Poverty in the 1960s, poverty was viewed as a cultural defect, and this greatly influenced the ideas about the role of government in addressing this social problem. The role of government in the promotion and reduction of poverty continues to interest political scientists with respect to antipoverty policies and theories of distributive justice. Antipoverty policies often fail
to achieve their stated goals, either because they are inadequate to address all the aspects of poverty or because of the unequal access granted to different members of American society.

The role of government in addressing poverty eradication is also reflected in theories of distributive justice. In the ideal system of distributive justice, everyone has the same access to economic and social goods. However, in the United States, ideas about distributive justice are based on the principle of deservingness. The majority of Americans appear to support the idea that those who receive governmental assistance must prove that they are deserving of such aid, either by being disabled in some way or by making an effort to become a contributing member of society (typically through work requirements).

In contrast to the culture of poverty perspective and related governmental policy development, the bottom half of the map in Figure 1 features the class structure perspective. The updated version of the classic Marxian theory of class struggle argues that class structure is a product of economic oppression. This relates to theories of distributive justice and theories about political participation. Despite the development of an underclass, people in twenty-first century America identify with ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural groups, rather than with members of their economic class. As a result, members of the underclass focus more on the politics of recognition, and less on the politics of redistribution. In addition, they practice the politics of affirmation, rather than the politics of transformation, and therefore never address the underlying structures that keep them in their current economic position. The principle of deservingness continues to dominate the discourse of distributive justice. It appears as though members of the
underclass find few prospects for success by engaging in political participation. To what extent could political participation, particularly voting, represent the one source of power available to members of the underclass? Political scientists have found, however, that individuals living in poverty have extremely low rates of political participation. Have years of economic oppression by the ruling class prevented the poor from going to the polls? To what extent have government unresponsiveness and ineffective antipoverty policies convinced the poor of the futility of trying to enact political change? To what extent has culture of poverty stereotyping convinced the poor that they are different from mainstream society and therefore do not deserve to participate?

Perhaps some of these questions can be answered by three emerging areas of political science theory and research: 1) theories within the area of political-economy, such as the work of Michael Porter in inner-cities, 2) theories within the area of the socio-political, such as the ideas of Robert Putnam regarding social capital, and 3) theories within the area of the political-religious, reflected in the work of E.J. Dionne and John DiIulio on faith-based organizations.

Following years of ineffective antipoverty policies, Porter (1997) has proposed a way to increase inner-city economic development that emphasizes the role of the private sector over the role of the government. Porter believes that the artificial inducements offered in the form of government subsidies to businesses for ongoing operations will never succeed in creating stable jobs and economic development in poor urban areas. Instead, he urges the private sector to recognize the many advantages for businesses that choose to establish themselves in the inner-city, such as the high levels of local unmet need and a large pool of potential employees who are willing to work (Porter, 1997).
Government should focus on indirect intervention, providing basic public safety, creating job training programs, crime prevention, and enforcing anti-discrimination laws. According to Porter, “we need to turn our attention to new, market-oriented strategies that will build on strengths and engage the private sector.” (1997, p. 24).

Putnam (2000) takes a different approach, focusing on the role of community rather than the role of business in his theory of social capital. Social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The idea of social capital relates to political participation, and Putnam presents declining rates of political participation among all members of American society as evidence of the decline in social capital since its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. Putnam believes it is the responsibility of citizens, with some help from the government, to rebuild the bonds of community that have weakened over the past forty years. If poor communities work together to regain social capital, this could result in a substantial improvement in the lives of the poor.

Finally, some of the ideas of distributive justice can be seen in the work of faith-based organizations and the current debate regarding the relationship between politics and religion. Political scientists have recently recognized the pivotal role that religious organizations play in the alleviation of poverty (Dionne & DiJulio, 2000). Faith, similar to the principle of deservingness that dominates ideas about distributive justice in this country, emphasizes the role of personal responsibility, but it also stresses the importance of collective responsibility. In addition to providing material support, faith-based organizations often attempt to help those that they serve develop a conscience, which “may prompt individuals to change their own behavior and also prompt them to become
agents of social change. The role of faith in either case is not to impose itself through the state but to move individual citizens to demand greater responsibility from themselves and from their institutions” (Dionne & Dilluio, 2000, p. 7). While government funding for faith-based organizations remains a controversial issue, their belief in collective responsibility could lead to a fairer form of distributive justice in this country.

While political science perspectives on poverty seem to raise more questions than they answer, they still have a number of implications for increasing our understanding of human behavior in the context of a political environment. First, political science perspectives on the causes of poverty include the role of culture and class from a political perspective. As it moved away from blaming the victim, political science increasingly recognized the diversity of poverty experiences along with a growing recognition of the interdisciplinary forces that contribute to the persistence of poverty. While it is relatively easy to see the evolution of theories related to culture of poverty and social class, it is more difficult to evaluate the social, cultural, and political impact of antipoverty policies. Second, political perspectives on the development and implementation of antipoverty policies are guided by two powerful forces in this country: 1) a theory of distributive justice that draws upon the principle of deservingness, and 2) the government’s tendency to respond to the needs of those with the greatest financial resources. This important contribution to our understanding of poverty complements the perspectives of other social science disciplines as they seek to explain the persistence of poverty. Finally, political science perspectives on the role of political participation among the poor provide opportunities for intervention. Voting and other forms of political participation represent a source of power that can impact the government’s responsiveness to the needs of the
poor. This could ultimately be the primary way in which the human behavior of the poor could directly affect their social environment.

References


Figure 1: Theories of Poverty from a Political Science Perspective

- Government
- Public Administration
- Human Rights

Causes of Poverty
- Culture of Poverty (Lewis)
- Class Structure (Marx)

Role of Government

Anti-poverty Policies

Political Participation

Distributive Justice

Political-Economy

Socio-Political

Political-Religious
Theories of Global Poverty

Comparing Developed World and Developing World Frameworks

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Abstract

In September 2000, participants in the United Nations Millennium Summit made a commitment to alleviating global poverty and inequality through the Millennium Development goals. This historical pledge has raised public and academic awareness of the issue of global poverty. In light of this interest, this literature review seeks to clarify the issues surrounding global poverty by focusing on the developed world and the developing world. Given the substantial amount of interdisciplinary research on global poverty, it can be organized into at least four areas: poverty definitions, units of measurement, theories concerning resources, and findings on effective interventions. It is clear that context influences these four areas and the resulting theories relate to: 1) inclusion, exclusion and access 2) individual rights and responsibilities vs. community focus 3) human capital theories, structural poverty and resource inequality and 4) theories of welfare vs. theories of development. This analysis of these four theoretical domains concludes with a conceptual framework for understanding of global poverty and the influence of the social environment on human behavior.
Introduction

Poverty remains a stark reality to more than 2.5 billion people around the world who live on 2 dollars a day or less (Watkins, 2005). Developed and developing countries are all challenged to seek lasting solutions to end poverty within their own borders, but with increased economic globalization in recent decades, the need for collective action to tackle international poverty has become increasingly pressing as the disparities in population and resource distribution become increasingly vivid. From elite international conversations of top government representatives through the United Nations and International Trade Organizations, to the popular yet political expressions of the lead singer Bono of the Irish rock band U2, a collective energy has gathered at a time of, as Nelson Mandela described it, “massive poverty and obscene inequality . . . rank[ing] alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils” (Watkins, 2005).

Among the goals announced in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit was the bold pledge to halve the level of extreme poverty by 2015 through the implementation of and collective commitment to eight Millennium Development Goals. Progress made thus far in alleviating poverty is further encouraged by the recent commitment of 15 European Union countries to earmark 0.7 percent of their national income for international aid ("MDG status report," 2005). With such levels of attention and commitment, there is a critical ongoing need for reliable and credible research on poverty to support national and international poverty alleviation efforts. This paper reviews the literature on global poverty with specific consideration to comparing the theories of poverty in both developing and developed nations. Given the population and resource differences between these two portions of the world, it follows that theories of
poverty would correspondingly reflect the context of the theories. The goal is to explore concepts within these theories that can provide insight into the nature of poverty along the lines of status, political position, and region.

The six sections of this analysis begin with a description of search efforts in retrieving suitable literature and a review of articles describing developed and developing world perspectives on poverty. These articles are analyzed and a table of the key concepts is presented in order to identify the concepts in the form of a framework. The paper concludes with implications for both poverty research and teaching about global poverty within an HBSE course.

Literature Search Methods

The search of relevant bibliographic material included full-text articles in print and electronic journals, abstracting journals, textbooks, web pages, international agency reports, and electronic databases. The articles that were reviewed were very broad in scope and range from conceptual definitions and measurements of poverty to specific poverty reduction programs. The articles selected for this analysis were reviewed in light of their theoretical contribution to our understanding of global poverty.

The following bibliographic sources were utilized for this review:

1. Websites:

   Asian Development Bank: [http://www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org);

   The Department for International Development (United Kingdom): [http://www.dfid.co.uk](http://www.dfid.co.uk);
Theories of Global Poverty

The Free Africa Foundation: http://www.freeafrica.org/

The Millennium Project:
http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/reports/index.htm;

The One Campaign: http://www.one.org/About.html;

The US World Census: http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/world.html;


The World Bank: http://www.worldbank.org;

World Resource Institute: http://earthtrends.wri.org

2. Databases:

Expanded Academic Database; LexisNexis Academic Database; The Scholarly Journal Archive; Sociological Abstracts; International Bibliography of Social Sciences and Social Services Abstracts

3. Google Scholar search engine

4. University of California, Berkeley Pathfinder

Goals and Limitations

The goal of this analysis is to illustrate various theories of poverty related to a global context. It is important to note that the theories of poverty located in the interdisciplinary literature were often embedded within policy, development and implementation
discussions. This literature often utilizes a value-laden approach linked to an overall theoretical approach to addressing global poverty. This analysis, therefore, does not include an overview of various theories of political economy (i.e. Marxism, capitalism, populism, liberalism) or a consideration of theoretical policy analysis approaches (i.e. representational theory, normative theory, explanatory theory). Another limitation of this review is that it is not comprehensive because the issue of global poverty cannot be adequately addressed in one short review article. Instead, the goal of this analysis is to compare approaches to poverty in the developed and developing world in order to identify similarities and differences as well as underlying themes that are useful for understanding how the social environment can impact human behavior throughout the world. And finally, this review is based on two important assumptions about theories of global poverty; namely that there are important distinctions between the developed and the developing world with respect to poverty and that the concepts of poverty and inequality within the analysis are linked together but do require further investigation.

Review and Critical Assessment of the Literature

The vast literature on global poverty reflects multidisciplinary viewpoints that diverge as often they converge. For example, as early as 18th century America, Adam Smith -- often regarded as the definitive market capitalist -- defined and illustrated poverty in both absolute and relative ways:

By necessaries I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. (Smith, 1776)

The expanded definitions of poverty go beyond the lack of indispensable commodities (absolute) to those considered necessary for a given context (relative). In addition, theories of poverty intrinsically raise issues of poverty measurement and effective intervention. Current research on poverty points to the many perspectives emerging out of various disciplines, including cultural studies, economics and social sciences. In this paper, the theories of poverty are compared in terms of the differences of viewpoint between developing countries and developed countries.

*Theories of Poverty among Developed Countries*

The discourse on poverty in developed countries focuses on increasing our understanding of the causes and solutions related to poverty alleviation. The analyses of poverty have moved away from a focus on absolute poverty, as “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs” (*The Copenhagen declaration*, 2000), to one defined as relative, encompassing the complexities of poverty in contemporary, post-industrial societies. For example, these complexities include welfare provisions, benefits from the state, tax systems, social security transfers, education, social exclusion, social capital, feminization of poverty and inequality.
Esping-Andersen’s “three regime” theory of social welfare policy formation in the developed world provides a framework for understanding current theories of poverty in developed nations. The framework differentiates between liberal (i.e. laissez-fair), corporatist and social democratic models of welfare, reflecting the degree to which social rights and responsibilities are balanced when social welfare provisions are dispensed. Under these categories, the United States, UK, Australia and Canada are viewed as more market-oriented “liberal” states that have less generous benefits, while Sweden, Denmark and Norway are more generous social democratic states. Balancing generosity with responsibility, the corporatist states like France, German and Italy have welfare rights that are also tied with social position as well as income (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The categories established by Esping-Andersen reflect societal views about the roots of poverty in the developed world. For example, social democrats view welfare assistance as a right of citizenship and see poverty as a systemic concern and normal result of a market-economy. In contrast, more market-espousing states tend to connect poverty with individual deficiencies. Rank et al. (2003) further develop the social vs. individual blame approaches to poverty by identifying that American poverty theory and research as focusing primarily on individual characteristics. These researchers found that individual characteristics attributed to “cause” poverty range from “the lack of an industrious work ethic or virtuous morality, to low levels of education or competitive market skills” (Rank, 2003, p.1).

Rank et al. suggest an alternative theory of poverty based on: 1) the lack of sufficient jobs that provide a living wage, 2) the ineffective nature of current government “safety nets” and 3) the experience of poverty-level income that is episodic throughout an
adult’s lifetime. All of these observations, according to Rank, point to a theory where the experience of poverty in the United States is actually the result of vulnerabilities inherent in the system rather than the lack human capital, personal deficiencies and demographics. These system vulnerabilities include the growing number of jobs paying less than a living wage.

The findings of Rank et al. (2003) suggest that experiences of poverty in the United States are more widespread than most citizens believe and therefore lead to the importance of measuring both relative and absolute poverty throughout the lifespan. In contrast to America poverty theorists, European poverty researchers are focusing on theories of social exclusion to explain poverty in developed countries. Hills and Stewart (2005) explore pathways of social inclusion and exclusion by focusing on education, employment, health, and political and social participation. They define social exclusion as more than the lack of material resources by reframing poverty as a characteristic of society at large that fosters lack of participation. Working on the definition of social exclusion developed by Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud (as cited in Hills & Stewart, 2005, p. 15), poverty is regarded as non-participation in consumption, production, political engagement and social interaction. The need to empower the poor is central to the operationalization and measurement of social exclusion, particularly as, for example, two-fifths of the total real increase in personal income in Great Britain between 1979 and 1999 went to the top 10 percent of the income distribution and more than one-sixth of the total increase went to the top one percent (p.1).

The burgeoning gap in inequality is therefore an important part of the discourse on poverty, where inequality is not confined to income alone, but also defined in terms of
limited opportunities for the poor and a redistribution of resources in society (Hills & Stewart, 2005). Furthermore, the use of the concept of exclusion allows governments to expand the scope of poverty analysis beyond quantitative lines of income trajectories. The official adoption of social exclusion as a social phenomenon to be addressed through policies and programs allows for policy discussions to move beyond child poverty, pensioner poverty and working-age poverty to include health and neighborhood inequalities in addition to income inequality.

Social exclusion frameworks focus the discussion of poverty on the widening income gaps between groups in developed nations. Establishing a consistent measure of poverty from a wide range of possibilities (income, material resources, social connections, relative deprivation) is one concern of such theories, as well as psychosocietal factors of the poverty experience. Is poverty a product of social isolation or exclusion, for example, or does one perceive his/herself to be poor only when exposed to one who possesses more income? Sen (1997) defined the experience of poverty as a function of opportunity, by what people can do or be in a given context relative to possibilities for others. Many factors can be used to account for these perceptions of poverty, including money income, availability of items for purchase, and resources needed to meet basic needs (including food, health, and housing). As Prime Minister Blair (2005) stated:

The issue isn’t in fact whether the very richest person ends up becoming richer. The issue is whether the poorest person is given the chance that they don’t otherwise have … the justice for me is concentrated on lifting incomes of those that don’t have a decent income. It’s not a burning ambition of mine to make sure that David Beckham (soccer celebrity) earns less money. (as cited in Hills & Stewart, 2005, p. 233)
While inequality in income and other areas are clearly central to the larger discussion of social exclusion across the developed countries, some have argued that the idea of social exclusion/social inclusion runs counter to the redistributive and egalitarian notions of social rights and social justice and that attention needs to be given to policies and programs that directly or indirectly benefit the rich (Baratz & Grigsby, 1972; Levitas, 2005; Øyen, 2002). If living standards continue to rise and inequality ignored, programs and policies encouraging social inclusion and alleviating poverty will not be entirely effective.

The notions of social rights and social justice relate to the individual’s relationship to the state and the extent to which needs and opportunities are the responsibility of the state or the individual. The theory of poverty that relates to the rights of citizenship follows a more social democratic philosophy where the state is the identified resource provider based solely upon citizenship. The Scandinavian welfare model (Else et al., 2005) illustrates the structural theory of poverty related to vulnerabilities in market systems rather than in the character of individuals. In this model, citizens are deemed worthy of government benefits based on their membership in that society, rather than proof of need. This distinction reflects the continuing tension between individual and structural theories of poverty that generally do not account for the growing inequality within nations.

The issue of inequality is explored extensively by Australian scholars (Western, Dwan and Kebonang, 2005) who sought to address the following questions by reviewing articles from 1960 to 2002 in the Australian Journal of Social Issues: “What issues pertaining to social inequality were of most interest to the readers and editors of AJSI?”
and “How were these issues perceived and empirically understood?” (Western, Dwan, & Kebonang, 2005, p. 125).

In presenting their findings, Western et al. (2005) noted that there was more agreement among scholars in defining and understanding social inequality and very little consensus about the various definitions poverty; they found that social inequality is defined as a “result of differential access to scarce and valued social resources by some individuals and groups, on the grounds of structural factors beyond their control” (Western et al., 2005, p. 127). The factors that influence inequality and the accessibility to resources include: Aboriginal origins, class, ethnicity, gender, age and space (urban-rural differences), and these findings were correlated to the concepts of crime, education, health, housing, income/wealth, occupation, and unemployment. Access difficulties for resources and well as the disproportionate representation of negative social factors across communities resulted in the inequality experienced along these social lines.

As the descriptions of theories above suggest, poverty research from the perspective of the developed world contains four characteristics. First, poverty is defined as person’s inclusion or exclusion in a given social context. In terms of the unit of measurement, the literature largely focuses on individuals in terms of inclusion, exclusion, and accountability. Alternative literature suggests researching system vulnerabilities rather than individual deficiencies; this alternative is also present in the debate between universal or selective qualifications for benefit eligibility. Third, discussion of resource distribution tends to focus on the qualities of human capital necessary to earn resources or inclusion within society; literature on structural poverty provides another perspective involving the functioning of the distribution systems.
Finally, welfare “benefits” are the primary unit of intervention rather than poverty’s origins. The discussion of inequality in developed world literature usually reflects the perspective of non-dominant communities such as racial and ethnic groups; therefore, theories of poverty’s origins can be overshadowed by more mainstream theories focusing on individual deficiencies and market distribution.

The next section considers theorists who seek to offer explanations for and solutions to poverty in the developing world. Although different points of view are included in depth, the themes of poverty definitions, units of analysis, resource distribution and interventions are explored emphasizing different dimensions than in the developed world literature. These differences suggest frameworks considering global poverty are influenced by context. Given the fact that 5.2 billion of the world’s 6.2 billion people live in the developing world, and 2.5 billion of the developing world’s people live at or below $2/day (Sachs, 2005), an overview of the theoretical literature provides a fuller picture of the human lifespan and how both privilege and poverty affect behavior and perspective. This 2.5 billion people represents 40% of the world’s population and only 5% of global income (Watkins, 2005), challenging mainstream notions of “normative” developmental course in light of the economic environment that faces the majority of the world’s inhabitants.

*Theories of Poverty among Developing Countries*

The focus on social inequality and poverty in the United States, Europe and Australia provides a stark contrast to extant literature on poverty in the developing world where most measurements and poverty levels are based on purchasing power parity (e.g.
the World Bank’s $1 a day for absolute poverty and $2 a day for relative poverty). The standardization of poverty measurements in developing countries is based on often debatable and varying definitions of poverty. The large body of literature on poverty in the developing world emphasizes the causes and consequences of poverty in terms of income or economic poverty, yet more complex models are suggested. Three notable economists reviewed below exemplify the diverging views of poverty discourse among developing countries.

In his newly published book *The End of Poverty* (2005), Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs outlines a plan grander than the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations, namely, to reduce extreme poverty by 50% by 2015 and to eliminate extreme poverty all together by 2025. Using case studies of specific countries, Sachs refers to his methods as “differential diagnosis” in “clinical economics” (Sachs, pp. 74-89) that address the root cause of poverty. Presence or absence of the following seven categories of symptoms are used to craft a strategy for addressing poverty: (1) the poverty trap, (2) economic policy framework, (3) fiscal framework and fiscal trap, (4) physical geography, (5) governance patterns and failures, (6) cultural barriers, and (7) geopolitics. While some of the symptoms relate to conditions such as human capital, investment policy, trade policy, and population densities, the differential diagnosis framework is unique in that it seeks to combine many factors before intervention is designed and implemented.

Such an innovative way to understanding poverty, particularly in the field of economics, addresses some of the limitations of current poverty reduction programs that utilize a one-size-fits-all prescription. In Sachs’ view, a new multi-faceted and holistic
approach to addressing poverty ought to be applied to improve poverty reduction programs, and also to educate and train economists. Critical of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sachs likens the organization’s obligatory budget-austere prescription imposed on impoverished countries to “…eighteenth century medicine, when doctors used leeches to draw blood from their patients, often killing them in the process” (Sachs, 2005, p. 74). Sachs does not suggest a process of ignoring the contribution of economists, but rather calls for the inclusion of knowledge from other disciplines that are often neglected in the field of economic development.

One example of a multi-disciplinary approach is the role of geography as it relates to a country’s transport conditions, population density, agronomic conditions and disease ecology as relates to hunger. With this model, it is possible to address the following questions: “What is the length of the growing season, and how does that affect crop choice, nutrition, and income levels?” (Sachs, 2005, p. 86) and “What are the key patterns of animal disease that may have major effects on agricultural productivity …?” (p. 87). In this situation, differential diagnosis is implemented to account for the multiple factors leading to outcomes that may be unaccounted for in a more classical model. He views his approach as a new “enlightenment” approach to globalization that is inclusive of “a globalization of democracies, multilateralism, science and technology, and a global economic system designed to meet human needs” (Sachs, 2005, p. 358).

The approach by Sachs is in stark contrast to Bhalla’s (2002) neoclassical economic interpretation of poverty and growth in developing countries. Like Sachs, Bhalla is pro-globalization, but Bhalla’s goals for global poverty reduction are strictly econometric and supports the conclusion that “[g]rowth is sufficient. Period.” and that
“…money income, though imperfect, is the best proxy for human welfare” (Bhalla, 2002, p. 52). In Bhalla’s case, income is the primary consideration in the alleviation of poverty because income: (a) enables the poor to have some purchasing power, (b) provides access to resources otherwise unavailable to the poor, and (c) enables the poor to purchase or receive free public goods (p.52).

Bhalla (2002) presents an alternative approach to measuring poverty by counting the number of persons instead of using the World Bank standard of countries as unit of measurement. He also posits arguments that call for a reassessment of the World Bank’s “… ‘natural monopoly’ of intellectual leadership, in-house research, and funding for research outside the bank” (Bhalla, 2002, p. 56). However, it is important to note that this approach fails to consider that marginal differences in income can easily place a person above or below the poverty line without any point of reference to actual well being. Bhalla’s thesis leads to overconfidence in achieving the Millennium Development Goals of reducing global poverty by 50% by 2015. The implication is that the liberalization and globalized flow of capital and labor represents the natural forces of free-market economies and therefore positive development outcomes.

Although Bhalla seeks to challenge the World Bank’s existing measures of poverty, it is also clear that political ideologies are reflected the understanding and addressing of poverty. While Sachs is critical of the role played by the United States in war-mongering and thereby undermining its role in global peace, social justice, environmental protection and economic stability, Bhalla takes a more conservative approach by arguing that we have just witnessed the twenty best years in global economic development as well as improving the lives of poor people (Bhalla, 2002, p. 202).
In contrast to both Sachs and Bhalla, Ayittey (2005) has developed a theory of poverty based on the perspective of the poor themselves, especially in Africa. Ayittey argues that economic freedom -- rather than Sach’s economic security model – is the key to Africa’s future economic development. While African economic freedom was first limited by colonial powers and now by elite dictatorships, Ayittey posits that African agricultural and village economics provides a framework of enterprise and social decision-making and the basis for successful resource cultivation and distribution for both local consumption and export. Ayittey argues that the African people must be allowed the freedom to develop economically without the interference of international or foreign pressure or elite control. He notes that “Famine, civil wars, devastated agriculture, collapsed infrastructure, and political repression [as well as HIV] have sapped African vitality and sentences Atingas to near stone-aged existence” (Ayittey, 2005, p.15). The new paradigm of development, rather than starting from the elites, must move the African people to the center of production and governance.

While some poverty literature concerning the developed world describes alternative frameworks that discuss structural poverty and some resource inequalities, the literature of the developing world concentrates almost exclusively on issues of access, community-specific solutions, resource inequality and development. Given that more than one-third of the world’s population lives on the equivalent of $2/day, the value of this perspective in the arena of global poverty theory cannot be overemphasized. The final sections of this review further develop the attributes of these frameworks and propose suggestions for future work in poverty research and education.
Conceptual Framework and Analysis

This analysis has addressed global poverty from the perspectives of both the developed world and developing world. The goal of this section is to compare these poverty theories and their dominant themes and concepts as summarized in Table 1. The major themes, as identified in the review, are definitions of poverty, main unit of focus or measurement, resource distribution and theories of interventions.

The first comparison involves how the developed and developing world differ in their definitions of poverty. While the idea of social exclusion in the European literature refers to intra-country poverty and the difference between included and excluded groups, the literature of the developing world reflects a two-pronged approach that focuses on the present global economic policies and their policies affect their local region. The developing world literature emphasizes the concept of access in contrast to the market-focused developed world perspective where poverty is regarded as an exception rather than the norm. Furthermore, the developed world theorists consider their own context primarily unless the analysis explicitly references “global poverty,” while the developing world inherently references the developed world in describing the relationships that contribute to poverty and lack of access.

The second point of comparison involves the locus of rights and responsibilities within the theoretical framework, or the unit of measurement in the poverty discussion. In the developed world analyses, the focus is on the individualistic concepts of “citizenship” and individual rights and responsibilities. In contrast, the literature of the developing world emphasizes collectively at the community and countries levels in relationship to resources and distribution. In addition, the developing world literature
emphasizes basic human needs – (e.g. food, medicine, water, income) – rather than the abstract principles of “participation,” “inclusion”, or “benefits” in the literature of developed countries. Developed world theorists debate universal vs. selective approaches to welfare as well as individual vs. social blame, while developing world theorists focus upon specific attributes and needs of whole communities experiencing minimum incomes (e.g. less than $1 or $2/day).

The issue of measuring poverty leads directly to how resources are distributed within each context. In the developed world literature, the discussion centers on markets and individual productivity in reference to market functioning. In the developing world, the discussion of resources based upon merit only exists as developed apply this market-determined measure to them in order to “judge” their global performance. Developing countries and the theorists concerned with poverty in these regions discuss global trade imbalances and policies that tend to favor post-industrialized countries (such as budget policies of the IMF). Theorists in the developing world also critique local access barriers in relationship to these global policies, such elite local governments misuse of trade

Table 1: Comparison of Theories of Global Poverty

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<th>THEMES</th>
<th>THEORIES OF POVERTY</th>
<th>DEVELOPING WORLD</th>
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<td>1. DEFINITION OF POVERTY</td>
<td>SOCIAL EXCLUSION</td>
<td>LACK OF ACCESS</td>
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<td>Absolute vs Relative Poverty</td>
<td>Globalization through market approaches VS. pro-poor growth</td>
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<td>Market-based</td>
<td>Critique of multi-nationalism, colonialism, racism and global economic institutions</td>
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monies intended to improve the quality of life for all citizens. The primary targets of accountability in terms of resource distribution are those in positions of power rather than the poor themselves.

Finally, the types of interventions also differ between developed and developing regions in terms of poverty alleviation. The developed world, through systems that are moving toward a less universal and more merit-based distribution, distinguish between those deserving and those undeserving to receive different types of welfare benefits. On the other hand, developing world literature focuses on the internal infrastructure of entire communities and regions and the capital (in terms of skills and money) required to build

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<th>2. UNIT OF FOCUS AND MEASUREMENT</th>
<th>RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP ENTITLEMENTS VS RESPONSIBILITES</th>
<th>COMMUNITY FOCUS</th>
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<td>Universal vs Selective Benefits</td>
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<td>Individual vs Social Blame/Responsibility</td>
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<th>3. RESOURCES</th>
<th>HUMAN CAPITAL THEORIES VS STRUCTURAL POVERTY THEORIES</th>
<th>RESOURCE INEQUALITY</th>
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<td>Income poverty</td>
<td>Global Trade Imbalances vs Internal Corruption; Basic Need Distribution (Food, Water, Medicine)</td>
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<td>Welfare vs Workfare</td>
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<th>4. INTERVENTIONS</th>
<th>THEORIES OF WELFARE</th>
<th>THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Market vs Non-Market</td>
<td>Human Capital</td>
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<td>Rights vs Responsibilities</td>
<td>Trade Participation vs Internal Infrastructure</td>
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these systems. This issue of resource distribution is central to this discussion as it defines the extent to which communities possess the ability to grow in a sustainable direction.

Conclusions: A Future Agenda for Understanding Global Poverty

Much of the current theoretical literature on global poverty can be divided into two perspectives: theories related to developing countries and those focusing on developed countries. Understanding the conceptual frameworks resulting from the four themes of poverty definitions, measurement, resource distribution and interventions lends legitimacy to these perspectives as they operate from their respective contexts. Furthermore, recognizing the value of these two perspectives can assist theorists in addressing the dynamics between them, such as the relationship between the poor in the developing world and the poor in the developed world. In addition, if current work on global poverty continues to be dominated by economists trained in the developed world (regardless of the authors’ country of origin), then it is plausible that a disconnection between training (theory) and practice will continue to exist in finding lasting solutions to global poverty. This observation is especially relevant to writers like Midgley (2001) who view identification of different theoretical themes that are context-specific (rather than “cookie cutter” solutions) as key to social work cooperation internationally. Discussion of these differences, as well as collaborations on the international level that lend support to local initiatives, are key to the future of social work in a development arena.

The recent devastating effects of natural disaster on the global stage (e.g. the Asian Tsunami, hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the earthquake in Pakistan) demonstrate
the universal vulnerabilities of regions throughout the world when it comes to eliciting assistance and attention. These disasters provide vivid reminders of the interaction between the social environment and human behavior and challenge practitioners, educators, and theorists to investigate the relationship between poverty, racism, and economics. Martin-Baro (1994) notes in his work on liberation psychology:

What would mental health look like from the place of a tenant farmer on a hacienda, or personal maturity from someone who lives at the town dump, or motivation from someone who sells goods in a market? Note that we say . . . “from” the tenant farmer on a hacienda and the woman in the market, not “for” them. This is not a matter of thinking for them or bringing them our ideas or solving their problems for them; it has to do with thinking and theorizing with them and from them (Martin-Baro, 1994, p.11).

Martin-Baro directly challenges the assumptions underlying “professionalism” and its power in relationship to impoverished majorities and learning about effective interventions from, rather than for, the most vulnerable members of society. In essence, he redefines the role of the professional to include simultaneously the functions of observation and participation as well as solidarity and advocacy.

It is evident from the literature on global poverty that it is indeed a complex and multifaceted subject that warrants a more holistic and inclusive approach to understanding human behavior and the social environment. Naturally, the complexities of poverty pose a challenge in teaching, but can be managed by a multidisciplinary approach in order to cover its many aspects. The understanding of global poverty does require a historical perspective in order to provide a foundation for assessing contemporary issues of poverty as they relate to causes, conditions and solutions. It is also important for students of global poverty to be aware of the theoretical differences that underlie the study of poverty, including definitions, measurements, resource
distribution and interventions. The ultimate hope is that students will not only understand poverty, but will be better equipped to actively work for its eradication.

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Social Capital and Neighborhood Poverty:  
Toward an Ecologically-Grounded Model of Neighborhood Effects

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Abstract

Research indicates that concentrated neighborhood poverty has numerous detrimental effects on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities. The term “neighborhood effects” has been used to describe the interaction between socioeconomic disadvantage and social problems at the neighborhood level. Social capital theory, defined broadly as social networks characterized by trust and reciprocity represents one prominent explanation for the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. Within poor neighborhoods, it is theorized that socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood foster inadequate social capital and it is this low level of social capital that leads to the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. In order to explore the utility of social capital theory in explaining neighborhood effects, this paper argues for an ecologically-grounded model of social capital that allows for the different ways in which social capital operates within different types of neighborhoods. Implications for social work practice, policy and education are discussed.
Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in understanding the impact of neighborhood-level poverty on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities. This growing interest has been partially fueled by a national increase in the rate of concentrated neighborhood poverty. Between 1970 and 2000, extremely high poverty census tracks (defined as a neighborhood poverty rate of 40 percent or higher) jumped from 1,662 to 2,222 and the number of poor residents of high poverty neighborhoods increased from 4.9 million in 1980 to 6.7 million in 2000 (Kingsley & Pettit, 2003). Research also suggests that urban and central city areas are more likely to include high poverty neighborhoods than are suburban areas, and that African Americans and Hispanics tend to be overrepresented in these communities (Berube & Frey, 2002; Kingsley & Pettit, 2003; Jargowsky, 2003). The rise in concentrated neighborhood poverty, especially within urban communities of color has brought with it an associated increase in a number of other neighborhood level indicators of social distress. Studies consistently find an empirical association between neighborhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage and many other social problems including unemployment, crime, health problems, child maltreatment, low educational achievement and mental, physical, behavioral and educational problems--especially among children and youth (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Jargowsky, 1997; Pettit, Kingsley, Coulton & Cigna, 2003). The term “neighborhood effects” has been used to describe this simultaneous presence of neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage with social problems occurring on a neighborhood level (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowly, 2002).

The co-occurrence of neighborhood level poverty and other community social problems...
is a well-documented phenomenon (Sampson et al., 2002), but theorists and researchers have only recently focused attention on the specific mechanisms through which neighborhood conditions in high-poverty areas are associated with poor outcomes. Social capital theory represents one prominent explanation for the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. Robert Putnam (2000) popularized the term social capital and defined it broadly as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.19). It is theorized that social networks and social processes can generate a variety of resources that can contribute to overall community well being (James, Schulz, & van Olphen, 2001). Within poor neighborhoods, it is theorized that socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood can foster inadequate social capital and it is this low level of social capital that leads to the phenomenon of neighborhood effects.

Theorists from social science disciplines (e.g. sociology, political science, economics, psychology and anthropology) have used social capital as an explanation for a wide variety of problems ranging from such large-scale issues as the economic development of states and countries and eroding national democracy, to smaller-scale issues such as the wide range of social problems that fall under the rubric of neighborhood effects. As such, social capital theory represents a uniquely interdisciplinary theory. This rise in popularity of social capital theory has encouraged an important shift away from traditionally individualistic interpretations of social problems (Sampson, 2001). Rather than focusing solely on human behavior, social capital theory encourages a discourse that considers the broader social environment and emphasizes the importance of social processes in the development and amelioration of social problems; in doing so, social capital theory helps to capture some of the complexity of such social problems as poverty, crime, poor educational outcomes, and health and mental health problems (Sampson,
2001). As such, social capital theory is also closely aligned with the ecological tenets of the social work profession. The field of social work is unique in its long-held acknowledgement of the importance of viewing the person within her or his environment. Social capital theory’s emphasis on linking micro and macro processes is consistent with social work’s person-in-environment perspective.

The available evidence suggests that social capital does play some role in neighborhood effects (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001). Yet, a critical analysis of social capital theory reveals limitations to its explanatory capability. Much of the work on social capital fails to adequately acknowledge or incorporate the context of social capital (Foley & Edwards, 1999). While social capital focuses on the relationship between neighborhood and individual, the ecological context of the neighborhood is not often incorporated into the discussions of social capital’s mediating functions and resulting resources. Yet the specific context of communities, as well as larger macro-level forces are crucial to our understanding of how social capital operates in poor neighborhoods.

Community attributes such as economic capital, political power and neighborhood resources all serve to enhance the ability of social capital to yield a positive return to the community (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001). As James et al. (2001) note, “…social networks in poor communities may be quite strong, but these networks may have a critical undersupply of certain critical resources (such as political power)…” (p. 169). The unequal distribution of resources and access to decision-making between poor communities and more affluent communities is well documented (Wilson, 1996, 1987) and research consistently identifies high concentrations of poverty and racial segregation within certain neighborhoods—especially those in urban areas (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). The failure of social
capital theory to adequately integrate the potential effects of these inequities suggests that the theory reflects primarily White middle class norms about neighborhoods by which other neighborhoods are compared. This potential bias can limit our understanding of how social capital operates in low-income neighborhoods. The concept of social capital really only begins to have utility in explaining neighborhood effects in poor communities when we fully consider the ramifications of the inequities that exist between neighborhoods, the differing social contexts that result from these inequities, and the impact these factors have on social capital’s ability to yield a positive return for the community.

In order to improve social capital theory’s utility in explaining neighborhood effects, theoretical refinement of the concept is warranted. Specifically, this paper argues for locating social capital within the specific ecological context in which it is operating in order to identify different pathways through which social capital operates within different types of neighborhoods. Delineating these pathways can improve our understanding of neighborhood effects in poor communities and reduce the biases inherent in many contemporary discussions of social capital. Moreover, identification of the types of social networks and social processes that contribute to resources within poor neighborhoods has the potential to inform practice, policy and research.

Social Capital Theory

The roots of social capital theory can be traced to the functionalist tradition within classical sociology. In particular Emile Durkheim’s ([1893], 1963) work on linking human behavior and social environment serves as a strong foundation for contemporary social capital theory (Loury, 1977; Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Loury (1977) used
the term social capital in an attempt to highlight the inadequacy of traditional economic theory and its overly narrow focus on individual human capital as the driving force in economic progress, especially the income disparities between Black and White youth. Instead of looking only at an individual’s level of human capital (education, family support, workplace skills, etc.), Loury argued that human capital is closely linked to social context and social origin:

An individual’s social origin has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested in his or her development. It may thus be useful to employ a concept of “social capital” to represent the consequences of social position in facilitating acquisition of the standard human capital characteristics (p. 176).

According to Loury, the economic positions of social groups and communities determine, in large part, the differing types of opportunities available to Black and White youth. Loury incorporated the notion of social capital into discussions of human capital and economic progress in order to highlight the inherent inequity of social processes and conditions. He states, “The social context within which individual maturation occurs strongly conditions what otherwise equally competent individuals can achieve” (p. 176). As such, Loury’s conceptualization of social capital focuses on the utility of the concept to help explain differential economic outcomes between minorities and non-minorities.

Although Loury’s definition of social capital was rather circumscribed, Bourdieu (1985) refined social capital theory somewhat by viewing it as a tool used to facilitate the production of other forms of capital. Specifically, Bourdieu (1985) defined social capital as:

…the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition—or in other works, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word (p.248–249).

In essence, social capital embodies both social networks themselves as well as the types of
resources that are expected to result from membership in a group. Bourdieu (1985) also sought to explain the divisions between classes and the role of capital in accessing and producing power and resources (DeFilippis, 2001; Schuller, Baron & Field, 2000). Social capital is valuable because it can increase access to power and other forms of capital.

Following Bourdieu, Coleman expanded social capital theory considerably by arguing that social capital is a critical component in the creation of human capital. For Coleman, “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors” (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Coleman acknowledged that social capital is not tangible like physical capital, and it is less tangible than human capital because it exists in the “relations among persons” (Coleman, 1988, p. S100-101, italics in original). Yet, like physical and human capital, social capital can “facilitate productive activity” (p. S101). He states, “For example, a group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust” (p. S101). In effect, social capital is an asset that is realized through specific types of social relations and benefits not only individuals within groups, but also benefits the collective as well. For instance, norms and sanctions “do not benefit primarily the person or persons whose efforts would be necessary to bring them about, but benefit all those who are part of such a structure” (Coleman, 1988, pg. S116). In this sense, social capital is a resource realized by a collective; even if one member does not contribute directly to the functions of social capital, they will have access to resources and benefits by virtue of their membership in a group.

Perhaps the most widely known social capital theorist is Putnam (2000) who argues that social capital in the U.S. has declined considerably in recent years. Putnam defines social capital as social networks, trust and norms of reciprocity and links social capital to the “civic virtue”
associated with civil society. Using de Tocqueville’s ([1835] 1969) concepts of civil society and democracy, Putnam conceives of civic associations as the cornerstone of social capital within a successful democratic state. In Tocqueville’s view, civic associations fostered engagement in political life and also served as a mechanism through which effective norms and societal stability could be achieved (Cohen, 2001). Putnam is specifically interested in the links between the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that can result from strong social networks and civic engagement. Like Tocqueville, Putnam envisions civic participation as an integral aspect of successful societies. He states, … “‘social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). For Putnam, social capital is beneficial because it promotes democratic institutions and civil society, which he equates with people working together for mutual interests and shared goals.

Putnam also describes social capital as both a private good and/or a public good and distinguishes between two different types of social capital: bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital encompasses outward looking networks that connect diverse groups of people and can be useful as a source of information or external assets. Bonding social capital refers to inclusive and dense social networks within fairly homogenous groups that can be a source of support and strong in-group trust and reciprocity. Putnam believes that both bonding and bridging capital can be helpful and can occur simultaneously as well as reinforce each other.

Social Capital as an Explanation for Neighborhood Effects in Poor Neighborhoods

The basic assumption of social capital theory as an explanation of neighborhood effects
is that poor neighborhoods are theorized to be lacking in a variety of different types of social capital and as a result, residents of the community do not benefit from the resources that emerge from social relations. Using Putnam’s concepts of bridging and bonding social capital, the following section describes mechanisms through which different types of social capital can help to explain specific neighborhood effects in high poverty communities.

**Bridging Social Capital**

Putnam (2000) describes bridging social capital as inclusive social networks that link diverse groups. Bridging social capital is considered beneficial because it can link people to resources, information and norms of behavior that may not be available within their own social network. As an explanation for neighborhood effects, a lack of bridging social capital can be conceived of as operating through two mechanisms within poor neighborhoods: 1) a lack of bridging social capital may be associated with the lack of connections or even “weak ties” and an ineffective use of “structural holes;” weak ties and structural holes are a reflection of social networks that extend beyond one’s immediate social group and bring with them opportunities for information not available in one’s own social group (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1973) and 2) a lack of bridging social capital may exacerbate the social isolation of poor neighborhoods, resulting in a lack of contact with positive, prosocial role models; this situation may create a contagion effect in which maladaptive norms of behavior are spread more easily—especially among children and youth (Crane, 1991; Vartanian, & Gleason, 1999).

**Weak ties and structural holes**

Putnam’s conceptualization of bridging social capital as a type of social network that links diverse groups draws heavily on Granovetter’s (1973) concepts related to “the strength of weak ties.” Granovetter (1973) defines “weak ties” as social networks that extend beyond one’s
immediate social group; because weak ties are considered to yield opportunities and information not available within one’s own social group, they are important resources for upward mobility. Similarly, Burt (1987) describes the importance of social networks that extend beyond one’s own social group with his concepts of “structural holes” that are defined as “the gaps between nonredundant contacts” (p. 341). Like weak ties, nonredundant contacts within a social network are considered important because they provide information opportunities that are “additive rather than redundant” (p. 341). Burt (1997) explicitly links social capital theory to the concept of structural holes by describing social capital as a “function of brokerage opportunities in a network” (p. 340). In essence, when an individual spans a structural hole, that person can gain important information and opportunities not available within her/his own network.

Bridging social capital, weak ties and structural holes are social capital concepts typically associated with employment outcomes and illustrated in Figure 1. Bridging social capital in the form of weak ties and structural holes is viewed as an important mechanism that links individuals to job opportunities they would otherwise not be aware of. For instance, Granovetter’s (1973) work was born out of his discovery that people seeking employment often heard of job opportunities through social contacts they did not know well—thus coining the term “the strength of weak ties.” In a similar way, Burt derived his concept of structural holes primarily within the context labor and organizational settings by perceiving the spanning of structural holes as an example of entrepreneurial behavior. Within an employment-based setting, individuals who take advantage of structural holes are then able to move up the organizational ladder (Burt, 1997).

An absence of “weak ties” or the ineffective use “structural holes” within low-income communities is thought to foster unemployment (and accompanying economic distress) within
these neighborhoods. Wilson (1987) suggests that poor, racially segregated neighborhoods are socially isolated from mainstream society and are thus disconnected from what he defines as a “job network” (p. 60). In other words, the social isolation of poor neighborhoods decreases the chances that residents within these neighborhoods can establish weak ties and take advantage of structural holes. This absence of bridging social capital can lead to a lack of information about job opportunities and thereby hinder the ability of residents in poor neighborhoods to find jobs. This situation perpetuates the socioeconomic disadvantage within the neighborhood (Kasinitz & Rosenberg, 1996).

**Contagion effects**

In addition to the concepts within bridging social capital, the social isolation of poor neighborhoods is also thought to decrease the exposure of community members to mainstream, prosocial norms of behavior (Wilson, 1987, 1996). As a result of this social isolation and lack of positive norms, certain social problems may be transmitted through peer influences, a process commonly referred to as a *contagion effect* (Crane, 1991). A lack of bridging social capital may cut off access to alternative role models and norms of behavior. This situation may create a contagion effect in which maladaptive norms of behavior are spread more easily, especially among children and youth. If detrimental neighborhood conditions are particularly harsh, they are considered to reach an epidemic threshold level in which there is a virtual absence of any positive role models or exposure to social groups outside of the neighborhood (Crane, 1991). If only a small proportion of an individual’s social group are unemployed or have low educational attainment, there is likely to be little impact because the individual can still find other social contacts or role models (Crane, 1991; Vartanian, & Gleason, 1999). However, as poor neighborhoods become increasingly socially isolated from prosocial role models, residents can
be more susceptible to negative peer influences. A lack of bridging social capital may exacerbate this situation by further isolating residents from contacts who can serve as positive role models.

For instance, Wilson (1987) theorizes that residents of high poverty inner city areas may rarely have contact with people who have steady jobs, higher education or who are not receiving public assistance and there is some evidence to suggest that residents of poor neighborhoods are socially isolated from these mainstream social networks. Rankin and Quane (2000) found that African Americans in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago tended to have social networks characterized by fewer number of employed friends, fewer friends with a college degree, and more friends who were receiving public assistance than those living in more affluent neighborhoods. Similarly, Tigges, Browne, & Green (1998) found that poor African Americans in Atlanta were less likely than non-poor African Americans and Whites to have friends with a college degree. Wilson (1987, 1996) suggests these types of restricted social networks foster norms of behavior that reinforce the high rates of unemployment and low educational attainment found in poor neighborhoods. With few social contacts who have stable employment or a college education, residents of poor neighborhoods are theorized to be cut off from norms of behavior that support activities such as steady employment or a college education. In addition, contagion processes and social isolation have also been linked to youth outcomes such as teenage childbearing and dropping out of school (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; South & Baumer 2000; Vartanian & Gleason, 1999).

**Bonding Social Capital**

Putnam’s (2000) notion of bonding social capital includes exclusive or inward looking social networks that are characterized by strong social cohesion and social support. Bonding social capital is considered beneficial because dense and cohesive social networks are thought to
foster reciprocity, solidarity and support. As an explanation for neighborhood effects, a lack of bonding social capital can be conceived of operating through two mechanisms: 1) problems related to community social organization (Sampson et al., 1997), and 2) a general absence of trust and reciprocity and social support among neighbors (Kawachi, Kennedy & Glass, 1999).

Community social organization

Putnam’s bonding social capital draws on Sampson’s concept of community social organization that stresses the importance of social cohesion for the functioning of a community. Sampson et al. (1997) argue that neighborhoods characterized by strong social cohesion and a sense of trust among community members also tend to have a high degree of informal social control and collective efficacy. Sampson et al. (1997) describe informal social control as “mechanisms by which residents themselves achieve public order,” (p. 918) which is contrasted with formal social control such as community policing. Informal social control is connected to “the willingness of local residents to intervene for the common good,” (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 919). Sampson et al. (1997) provide the following examples of informal social control: “the monitoring of spontaneous playgroups among children, a willingness to intervene to prevent acts such as truancy and street corner ‘hanging’ by teenage peer groups, and the confrontations of persons who are exploiting or disturbing public space” (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 919). For Sampson and his colleagues, social cohesion, informal social control and collective efficacy represent “social organizational processes” (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999, p. 634), that reflect the level of a community’s social organization. Sampson (2001) contends that neighborhoods with a high degree of social capital are also characterized by an ability to “realize common values and maintain social controls that foster public safety” (p. 95). Informal social control, he contends, is best achieved within neighborhoods that possess strong social networks.
and a sense of shared trust.

Dense informal social networks are often able to control problematic behavior such as delinquency, because of the reactions of network members to help shape pro-social behavior (Sampson & Groves, 1989). In this way, Sampson’s community social organization is similar to Coleman’s notion of norms and effective sanctions. From this perspective, communities with stronger social networks will be characterized by less deviant behavior. A community that is characterized by a high degree of social cohesion and trust among neighborhood residents (e.g. a high degree of social capital) is considered better able to achieve collective values and maintain social control (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

In addition to the importance of dense informal social networks, participation in formal community organizations is also considered an important method of fostering social cohesion within neighborhoods. Putnam (2000) notes that participation in formal community organizations can foster norms of reciprocity, cooperation and trust among community members while also helping residents to wield collective power in order to influence decision making about their neighborhood. Likewise, Coleman also conceived of social capital in the form of appropriable social organizations in which formal networks can be used for a variety of resource sharing activities. Sampson and Groves (1989) note that formal organizations or associations are thought to reflect community solidarity and neighborhoods characterized by strong community organizations or institutions are thought to have a better capacity “to defend [their] local interests” (p. 779), especially in terms of advocating for neighborhood resources. In this sense, formal social networks are thought to represent an important form of social capital because they provide the vehicle for community members to exert their collective influence for the good of the community.
Sampson and his colleagues argue that structural aspects of low-income communities tend to foster informal and formal social networks that are characterized by poor social cohesion, resulting in a lack of informal social control and collective efficacy, which creates community social disorganization. In turn, community social disorganization, as noted in Figure 1, has been linked to certain neighborhood effects, including crime and public disorder (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989), child and youth behavioral problems (Elliot, Wilson, Huizinga, Sampson, Elliot & Rankin, 1996), child maltreatment (Coulton, Korbin, Su & Chow, 1995; Ernst, 2001) and adult depression (Ross, 2000).

*Trust, reciprocity and social support*

In addition to the role of bonding social capital in the development of community social organization, the basic attributes of bonding social capital (including a sense of trust and reciprocity among community members) have also been linked to neighborhood effects. A sense of trust and reciprocity is perhaps the most commonly used definition of social capital. Onyx and Bullen (2000) consider a sense of trust within a social network as involving the expectation that others in the network are mutually supportive. The social capital concept of reciprocity involves a member of the social network acting on behalf of others (even at a personal cost) with the expectation that others will act for her/his benefit at some point in the future (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). This form of social capital is similar to Coleman’s notion of social capital as obligations and expectations, which consist of shared trust, reciprocity and fulfillment of obligations.

The social capital concepts of trust and reciprocity are considered important sources of social support. A large body of research suggests that strong social support is associated with improved mental health and health outcomes (Barnett, & Gotlib, 1988; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Indeed, social support is considered to
contribute to general well being and to help protect people from health and mental health problems during times of stress or crisis (Cohen & Willis, 1985). As an explanation for neighborhood effects the lack of trust, reciprocity and social support are considered to be associated with the health and mental health problems often found in poor neighborhoods. There is some evidence to suggest that when social capital is operationalized as trust and reciprocity, it is associated with health outcomes as noted in Figure 1 (Kawachi, Kennedy & Glass, 1999; Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner & Prothrow-Smith; 1997), and may be associated with mental health (Norman, 2003).

Limitations of Social Capital Theory

As the previous section illustrated, research suggests that there are links between social capital and neighborhood effects in poor neighborhoods; however, the theory of social capital has certain limitations. The majority of current conceptualizations of social capital fail to capture the context in which social capital is generated (Foley & Edwards, 1999). The ability of social capital to yield resources for a community depends not only on social networks and social processes, but also on the availability of such community attributes as economic capital, political power and concrete neighborhood resources. A lack of these community attributes can hinder the use of social capital, making it difficult for poor neighborhoods to acquire the same type of benefits and outcomes as more affluent communities (with comparable levels of social capital).

The lack of attention to the ecological context of social capital in poor neighborhoods is an ironic and puzzling omission. Social capital serves as a mediator between neighborhood conditions and individual outcomes, yet the ways in which ecological contexts impact the ability
of social capital to provide resources for a neighborhood are rarely considered. Unfortunately, this absence severely limits its ability to explain neighborhood effects. As Warren et al. (2001) note, it also can foster a “blame the victim” approach that is reminiscent of an out-dated moral deficiency notion of poverty being a result of lazy people who do not want to work. When social capital is not considered within specific contexts, the moral deficiency argument can be replaced by a “social deficit argument” (Warren et al., 2001, p. 2), in other words, “if poor communities just got their social capital ‘act together’ so that they could be more like middle-class communities, then the problems of poverty could be solved” (p. 2). This lack of attention to specific neighborhood contexts suggests that social capital theory has been built off of the notion that White middle class communities and neighborhoods are the norm through which other communities should be compared.

Foley and Edwards (1999) are perhaps the most prolific on the issue of social capital as a context-dependent construct. They argue that a true understanding of social capital must consider the “social location” (p. 165) in which the social capital is located. They suggest that “the use value of social capital depends on how specific networks are embedded in the broader system of stratification” (Foley & Edwards, 1999, p. 168). Much of the research and theory on the role of social capital in poor neighborhoods ignores this “broader system of stratification,” and makes an assumption that poor neighborhoods have lower levels of social capital than do more affluent neighborhoods. Yet when social capital is grounded within an ecological context, the picture becomes much more complicated. Portes (1998) provides the following apt example of the importance of context for understanding social capital:

Saying for example that student A has social capital because he obtained access to a large tuition loan from his kin and that student B does not because she failed to do so neglects the possibility that B’s kin network is equally or more motivated to come to her aid but simply lacks the means to do so (Portes, 1998, p. 5).
Cleary, the context in which social capital operates has a significant impact on the types of resources available to members of various types of social networks. When social capital theory is invoked as an explanation of neighborhood effects in poor neighborhoods, these inequities in social conditions must be considered.

In examining the social conditions of poor inner-city communities it is important to acknowledge certain macro-level trends that impact the neighborhood context. For instance, Edwards and Foley (1997) note that macro trends related to economic restructuring in the latter half of the 20th century, as well as the dismantling of the welfare state have dramatically changed the American landscape. With respect to economic restructuring, trends related to deindustrialization and globalization have transformed the U.S. economy from a goods producing to a service producing economy. This transformation has brought with it widespread closure of manufacturing plants, especially in central city areas and these changes have resulted in huge losses of living-wage unionized manufacturing jobs for central city residents (Wilson, 1996; Massey & Fischer, 2000). The negative effects of these trends have been concentrated on urban communities of color (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Additionally, the gradual dismantling of the welfare state has also affected neighborhood contexts. Edwards and Foley (1997) note a general reduction of government involvement in social services and safety net programs, as well as the increasing devolution of federal responsibility of safety net programs to state governments. These changes have resulted in fewer resources being directed toward social welfare programs within poor neighborhoods. For instance, between 1965 and 1975, total social welfare expenditures grew by approximately 65 percent; yet between 1975 and 1995, total social welfare expenditures grew by only 15 percent (Social Security Administration, 1999, as cited in
Infoplease, 2004), suggesting a gradual decline in government investment in public social welfare.

In addition, the increasing racial/ethnic segregation of poor neighborhoods also represents an important macro trend that affects neighborhood context. Wilson (1996) notes that redlining practices by the Federal Housing Administration’s mortgage program during the 1940s and 1950s made it difficult for urban inner city neighborhoods to attract homebuyers. These trends prompted middle class Whites to move to the suburbs, leaving many Blacks in the urban areas of cities. The racial/ethnic segregation that often characterizes poor inner-city communities has important effects on the context of neighborhoods. Massey and Fischer (2000) have found that racial/ethnic segregation serves to further concentrate poverty in certain communities. The additional concentration of poverty that accompanies racial/ethnic segregation can then accentuate neighborhood effects.

These macro trends have greatly affected the ecological context of poor neighborhoods. Economic restructuring has reduced the availability of living wage work in the central city and decreased overall economic development in these neighborhoods. Reductions in welfare expenditures and the dismantling of safety net programs have reduced critical neighborhood resources in poor communities including access to health, mental health, education, and employment services. And increased racial/ethnic segregation increased the concentration of poverty, thus accentuating the negative effects of high poverty neighborhoods. These conditions all serve to disenfranchise the residents of poor neighborhoods, reduce their political power and access to community decision-making.

Without adequate attention to the ecology of these macro trends and their impact on poor communities, discussions of social capital advertently or inadvertently imply that all poor
neighborhoods are deficient in social capital. For example, there is little systematic evidence that poor neighborhoods have less social capital than more affluent neighborhoods. The notion that neighborhood effects are a result of low levels of social capital in poverty-stricken neighborhoods is overly simplistic. Although some research has found lower levels of social networks in poor communities (Tigges et al., 1998) there is by no means a consensus on this issue. For instance, Rankin and Quane (2000) found that African American families living in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago were actually more likely than residents of other neighborhoods to be members of community organizations. Similarly, in Portney and Berry’s (1997) investigation into the political participation of minority communities in five cities, survey results revealed that residents of poor African American neighborhoods participated in neighborhood associations and city politics at high levels. Moreover, participation rates of residents of poor African American neighborhoods were almost twice as high as participation rates of residents of poor non-minority neighborhoods.

Instead of deficient social networks and social processes in poor neighborhoods, Cohen (2001) suggests that the ways in which social capital is used in poor neighborhoods may be qualitatively different from the ways in which it is used in more affluent communities and that these differences result in divergent types of resources. She notes that residents of poor neighborhoods may use social capital to help acquire basic necessities such as food, shelter or income. As such, poor neighborhoods may in fact have plenty of social capital, but the types of resources that result from this social capital are different than the resources one would expect in more affluent communities. Instead of a college education or a job, the social capital of poor neighborhoods may yield much more concrete resources that assist in day-to-day functioning and survival within neighborhoods that are depleted of important resources. Warren et al. (2001)
note: “the main problem for poor communities may not be a relative deficit in social capital, but that their social assets have greater obstacles to overcome, and are constantly under assault” (p. 4). Conceptualizations of social capital are based on White middle class assumptions when restrict our understanding of the resources emerging from social networks and producing only certain kinds of benefits. Such conceptualizations do not consider the ecological realities and social context of life in poor neighborhoods.

For instance, in Altschuler, Somkin, and Adler’s (2004) qualitative study of social capital in both high and low socioeconomic status neighborhoods in one large California city, results revealed that social capital was alive and well in poor neighborhoods, but that obstacles related to neighborhood context prevented residents from attaining the same kinds of benefits and resources that residents of more affluent neighborhoods were able to obtain. For instance, residents of both poor and more affluent neighborhoods often mobilized into socially cohesive groups in order to work together to address community problems, yet the issues they faced were quite different. Residents of poor neighborhoods tended to mobilize to address chronic threats such as crime or public disorder, whereas residents of more affluent neighborhoods mobilized to address such discrete and less urgent threats as “a proposed Starbucks opening in their neighborhood” (p. 1227). These findings suggest that in poor neighborhoods, social capital tended to act as a tool for securing concrete resources; whereas in more affluent communities, where concrete resources were in plentiful supply, it operated as a tool for mobilizing neighborhood preferences.

Toward an Ecologically-Grounded Model for Understanding High Poverty Neighborhoods
In order to address the current limitations of social capital theory, Figure 2 presents an ecologically grounded model of social capital that captures the context-dependent nature of social capital. This model is partially based on a conceptual model of social capital and community health put forth by James et al. (2001), however this ecologically grounded model of social capital extends beyond community health and is applicable to all neighborhood effects. At the top of the model are macro trends, such as economic restructuring, dismantling of the welfare state, and increased racial/ethnic segregation. These macro trends are posited as factors that contribute to the neighborhood context of poor communities (second box). The neighborhood context of poor communities is often characterized by a lack of living wage employment, a lack of resources (such as health, education and employment services), an increased concentration of poverty that often accompanies racial/ethnic segregation and a lack of political power. Neighborhood context is directly linked to social capital.

When social capital explanations for neighborhood effects fail to adequately account for the ecological context of social capital, the gaps in our understanding of neighborhood effects become obvious. For instance, in the case of bridging social capital as an explanation for unemployment, macro trends and neighborhood context may be of critical importance. If residents of poor communities have not had access to quality public education in their neighborhood or do not have the financial capital needed to attend college, addressing weak ties and structural holes may be of little value in helping them to obtain a job. Similarly, if macro trends have contributed to the loss of employment opportunities within poor urban neighborhoods (even if bridging social capital is prevalent), it may not be a source of job information because the jobs are not available. Moreover, neighborhood context and availability
of resources is also likely to affect the types of resources that might result from trust and reciprocity. For instance, even if trust and reciprocity produce social support, the ability of this social support to help buffer residents of poor communities from health and mental health problems may be limited if these residents do not have health insurance or access to affordable health care in their neighborhoods.

An important feature of the ecologically-grounded model of social capital is that it does not assume that social capital is necessarily always a positive attribute. Although Putman’s (2000) conceptualization of social capital is largely positive, he does acknowledge that social capital can have a “dark side” in which dense social networks are used to realize goals that do not contribute to a civil society. Portes (1996) also describes the “downside of social capital,” and notes that in addition to public goods, social capital can yield “public bads” (p. 20). He describes mafia families, prostitution rings and youth gangs as examples of social networks that may yield substantial social capital for their members, yet obviously do not contribute to community well being.

Conclusions and Implications

An ecologically-grounded model of social capital has important implications for social work practice, policy, and education. In terms of theory for practice, such a model of social capital suggests that discrete efforts to increase social networks or participation in community organizations among residents of poor neighborhoods will have little impact if attention is not given to the availability of other resources within the neighborhood context. For instance, Gittell and Vidal (1998) describe building social capital as a strategy within the Local Initiatives
Support Corporation (LISC) national demonstration project, which used a consensus organizing approach to community organizing. DeFilippis (2001) points out that Gittell and Vidal perceived the ten-year operation of the LISC pilot site as a success because the project had: 1) created 17 new community development corporations, 2) sustained resident volunteer commitment and 3) garnered increased support from the larger community within the metropolitan area. Yet, Gittell and Vidal also state that there was “limited physical and economic improvement” (p. 4) in the area. DeFilippis is correct when he questions whether the LISC project was successful in promoting social capital if there were few tangible neighborhood improvements. Increasing the number of community organizations in a neighborhood or increasing residents involvement in community organizations may represent one necessary, but not sufficient component of social capital development in poor communities. Indeed, in addition to fostering social networks and social processes in poor neighborhoods, practitioners seeking to foster social capital should also focus on increasing the quantity and quality of neighborhood resources and opportunities. For instance, Cohen (2001) suggests that “intervening institutions” (p. 267) are needed to leverage and convert social capital in poor neighborhoods into tangible resources. Intervening institutions consist of community resources and organizations, such as community development programs, or comprehensive community initiatives such as the Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Community Initiative. Cohen (2001) notes that in order for such community-wide resources to be effective in converting existing social capital in poor communities into actual resources, they need to build off of existing community infrastructures, address relevant demographic changes in the community and also not be limited to government programs.

An ecologically-grounded model of social capital may have important implications for neighborhood social and economic policies. For instance, policies that seek to address the ways
in which macro-level factors negatively impact poor neighborhoods may help to improve neighborhood conditions and thereby allow social capital in these neighborhoods to actually produce beneficial resources. Real economic development policies that actually bring living-wage work into poor inner-city neighborhoods could have a tremendous impact on the use and value of social capital in these communities. Targeted policies that seek to improve neighborhood conditions may also increase the usefulness of social capital in poor communities. An infusion of resources and social welfare services in these communities may help to improve the ability of social capital to yield beneficial resources for poor neighborhoods.

The ecologically-grounded model of social capital also has important implications for social work education. The social work profession is founded on ecological tenets and is expressly interested in interactions between people and their environments. Courses in Human Behavior in the Social Environment can use the ecologically grounded model of social capital as a way to illustrate the importance of context in understanding human behavior, as well as an illustration of the need to continually question the underlying assumptions of popular social science theories.

The impact of neighborhood-level poverty on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities is of vital importance to the social work profession. As theory and research on the connection between neighborhood-level poverty and outcomes for residents continues to expand, the identification of mechanisms through which neighborhoods experience social problems is becoming more and more critical. The co-occurrence of neighborhood level socioeconomic disadvantage with a wide range of social problems is an urgent issue. Although social capital theory provides an explanation of some neighborhood effects, the limitations of the theory suggests that a unified theory of neighborhood effects in poor communities is needed. The
ecologically-grounded model of social capital, proposed in this paper, can serve as a model for improving our understanding of the complex relationship between poverty, people and places.
References


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Figure 1. Social Capital as an Explanation of Neighborhood Effects in Poor Communities

- **Social Capital**
  - **Lack of Bridging Social Capital**
    - Weak Ties and Structural Holes
      - Unemployment (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1973; Kasinitiz & Rosenberg, 1996; Wilson, 1987).
    - Contagion Effects
      - Unemployment (Wilson, 1987, 1996)
      - Low educational attainment/dropping out (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; Vartanian & Gleason, 1999; Wilson, 1987, 1996)
      - Teenage child bearing (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; Vartanian & Gleason 1999)
  - **Lack of Bonding Social Capital**
    - Community Social Disorganization
      - Crime and public disorder (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Child and youth behavioral problems (Elliot et al., 1996)
      - Child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 1995; Ernst, 2001)
      - Adult depression (Ross, 2000)
    - Trust, Reciprocity and Social Support
      - Health (Kawachi et al., 1999; Kawachi et al., 1997)
      - Mental health (Norman, 2003)
Figure 2. Ecologically Grounded Model of Social Capital as an Explanation of Neighborhood Effects in Poor Communities

Macro Trends, such as:
- Economic restructuring
- Dismantling of the welfare state
- Racial/ethnic segregation

Neighborhood Context, such as:
- Loss of living-wage employment
- Lack of resources
- Accentuation of poverty
- Lack of political power

Social Capital

Neighborhood Effects
Social Work Students’ Perceptions of Poverty

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Abstract

Over a period of 14 years (1991 – 2004), graduate social work students (n = 2213) in ten California schools were surveyed about their perceptions of poverty as they entered and exited their graduate programs. Entering students expressed preferences for societal/institutional change methods to address poverty, as opposed to methods of individual adaptation and were even more inclined upon graduation.

Implications for social work education and practice are identified.
Social Work Students’ Perceptions of Poverty

INTRODUCTION

The social work profession is committed to the values of service and social justice, especially in terms of helping the poor and disadvantaged (NASW, 1999). Some scholars have argued that the profession has abandoned this commitment because a growing number of social work graduates choose to work with primarily middle class, Caucasian individuals with non-chronic emotional issues in private practice using psychotherapeutic methods (Rubin, Johnson and DeWeaver, 1986; Rubin and Johnson, 1984; Specht, 1990; Specht and Courtney, 1994). Others argue that the experiences of oppression and vulnerability are not unique to the poor and that people from all social classes have problems that create disadvantages and therefore can benefit from the aid of professional social workers (Butler, 1990; Wakefield, 1992).

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students with regard to the causes of poverty and the methods to address it. Students were surveyed upon entry and exit from ten graduate social work programs in California over a period of 14 years. The study was guided by the following questions: 1) What do social work students think causes poverty and what are the best methods for addressing it? 2) Should social work help individuals find a mode of adaptation to the world around them or should the emphasis be placed on societal/institutional change? and 3) Should social work practitioners devote equal attention and equal resources to all social class groupings or primarily to the problems of the poor?.

This report of an exploratory study consists of a brief literature review of studies about social workers and students regarding their perceptions of the poor, the results of a survey that addressed the research questions, and a discussion of the findings and their implications.
BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

This brief review begins with a seminal study of public perceptions of the poor in America (Feagin, 1975). Its findings provide a basis for comparing the views of students with the general population. From a 1969 public opinion survey consisting of 11 items, Feagin (1975) was able to cluster the perceptions of Americans about the poor into three factors: 1) individualistic (the responsibility of the individual), 2) structural (external to the individual and due to societal/institutional forces), and 3) fatalistic (something that could happen to anyone, such as bad luck). Given the predominant American beliefs in the worth of independent action, hard work, and individualism, poverty is seen as failure by not living up to the expectations of a capitalistic society (Weber, 1958). Not surprisingly then, Feagin’s survey respondents (including those who reported incomes below the poverty level) placed a great deal of importance on individualistic causes for poverty. The two most important reasons for poverty were lack of thrift and proper money management by the poor themselves and lack of effort on the part of the poor (Feagin, 1975, p. 97). Only Black Protestants and Jews attributed more importance to structural factors for explaining poverty than other groups. In addition, when it came to their views of the role of government in helping the poor through public welfare policy, the majority took an individualistic anti-welfare position in every instance except one. They indicated that “too many people are on welfare who should be working”, “they are having illegitimate babies in order to get more welfare”, and “they are not honest about their need for welfare” (Feagin, 1975, p. 103). In the one exception related to a pro-welfare position, a plurality of respondents agreed that welfare “was too little to live on” (Ibid). Feagin’s scale of 11 items has been used in more recent studies of the reasons for poverty, for example to distinguish between races/ethnicities in Hunt’s (1996) report on southern Californians.

In contrast, the perceptions of social workers about poverty, the poor, and the willingness to help with public funds reflect different understandings about the root causes of poverty. Societal or institutional racism, job discrimination and bad economic times are seen as the primary causes as opposed to
individual causes such as laziness or the unwillingness to work hard (Roff, Adams, and Klemmack, 1984). It is no surprise, then, that most of the research on social work student attitudes about the poor found that the majority of social work students viewed poverty as a function of external sources, rather than internal shortcomings of the individual (Grimm and Orten, 1973; Reeser and Epstein, 1987; Rehner, Ishee, Salloum, and Velázquez, 1997; Roff, Adams, and Klemmack, 1984; Rosenthal, 1993).

However, previous research is mixed about student views of the profession’s strategies for helping the poor and disadvantaged. Those who are or who want to become social workers are more apt to attribute societal causes for poverty than individual causes and prefer institutionalized political/social advocacy to address those problems. They show more willingness to help the poor when the reasons for poverty are unstable (short term), unintentional, and not due to internal causes (individual shortcomings).

The demographic factors that help to explain the willingness of social workers to help include: minority status, region of the country, graduate school attended, political orientation, graduate degree, and socioeconomic background. All practice specializations (casework, group work, and community organization) appear to be associated with a positive desire to work with the poor. At the same time, a significant minority of social work students preferred to pursue the development of a private practice.

Political activism may mean advocating for the profession, not necessarily for better policies for the poor. It is not clear what role social work education plays, since only one of the studies used a pre-post design to test for changes before and after MSW study (Bogo et al., 1993 and 1995). However, the studies by Reeser and Epstein (1987) and Roff, Adams, and Klemmack (1984) were the primary sources for framing this study.

Roff, Adams and Klemmack (1984) surveyed three groups of students at one university to determine attitudes and values regarding government support (paying taxes or providing welfare) for the poor. Using attribution theory as their conceptual framework, the authors noted that differences in willingness to help the poor were based on whether the reason for the poverty was seen as internal or
external, stable or unstable, and intentional or unintentional. These attributes about the cause of poverty have been historically associated with the concepts, worthy and unworthy poor. Those who are poor due to internal, stable, intentional reasons (e.g., not willing to work hard over the long term) are the least likely to evoke a helping response from public policy (Feagin, 1975; Roff, et al., 1984, p.13). Roff et al. hypothesized that MSW students would: 1) hold more favorable attitudes toward using public funding to help the poor than other students; 2) be more impartial than others, as a result of the professional commitment to the poor, and 3) be more likely than others to attribute poverty to external sources. They expected to find that second year MSW students (n = 29) would be more committed to professional values than would those enrolled in an introductory undergraduate social welfare class (n = 30) and that the graduate students enrolled in the introductory social welfare class, in turn, would be more committed than those in an introductory sociology class (n = 142) that was open to all liberal arts majors.

They found support for their first hypothesis; namely, that MSW students were significantly more likely to help the poor, regardless of the reason for being poor, than were students in the introductory sociology course. However, the second and third hypotheses were not supported. Contrary to the hypothesis that MSW students would be impartial, both the second year MSW group and the introductory social welfare class students were unwilling to use public funds to help the unworthy poor (those unwilling to work hard). In fact, second year MSW students were significantly less likely to help those who were not willing to work hard than were the introductory sociology students. The MSW students were significantly more willing than students in the sociology class to use public funds to help the poor when the reasons for need were unstable, external and unintentional (in bad economic times, for example) and under stable, external and intentional conditions (job discrimination, for example). Although MSW students and those in an introductory social welfare class were more inclined to help the poor, there were no statistically significant differences between the MSW students and the introductory social welfare students.
Even though the first hypothesis was well supported, it was not possible to distinguish whether this result was due to the professionalizing influences of the MSW program, self-selection, or screening of MSW applicants. Further generalization was limited by the composition and size of the sample (i.e. small number of students at only one university). Roff et al. (1984) concluded by recommending that social work education continue to teach about the harm caused by the stereotyping of the poor as well as the causes of poverty.

**Causes of Poverty and Activist Strategies**

In contrast to assessing perceptions and attitudes, Reeser and Epstein (1987) focused on the extent to which social workers use social activism to improve the lives of the poor by comparing the 1960s and 1980s attitudes of social workers toward the poor. Citing 1960s and 1970s national surveys of the general population’s views of poverty, they hypothesized that the conservative 1980s would have the effect of decreasing social work activism; in essence, social workers in the 1980s would be less willing to participate in social activism and advocate for the poor than social workers in the 1960s.

Epstein (1969) distributed a self-administered survey sampling to every third social worker name that appeared on the New York City NASW member list in 1968, resulting in a sample of 1020 and a response rate of 65 percent. Reeser and Epstein (1987) compared the 1968 responses to the same questions with those obtained by Reeser in 1984 and administered to a sample of 1333 NASW members from the national membership list, resulting in a sample of 657 and a response rate of 57 percent. Although the authors do not elaborate, the two samples compared were significantly dissimilar with respect to agency auspice, race, religion, and position, but not on gender. There were more social workers in the mental health field and in private practice in 1984 than in 1968. Fewer were employed in the public sector in 1984 than in 1968. Social worker perceptions of the causes of poverty were classified in terms of: 1) individualistic (the poor lack motivation), 2) structural (powerful interests are opposed to the solution to poverty), 3) technological (we don’t know enough to solve the problems of poverty), or 4)
interest group related (people don’t get together to talk about the problems of poverty). The individualistic and structural classifications (Reeser and Epstein, 1987) are similar to Roff et al.’s (1984) internal/external characterization of the poor. The technological and interest group classifications are strategies rather than characteristics of the poor.

Reeser and Epstein (1987) measured commitment to activist strategies by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the view that social workers should use various strategies to achieve change; the responses ranged from working within systems (e.g. providing expert testimony at a legislative hearing) to strategies that operate outside the system (e.g. organizing protest groups). Epstein (1968) characterized activist goals in two ways: 1) using social change methods to focus on the problems of poverty, and 2) using individual methods to help people adjust to their circumstances.

Contrary to expectations, Reeser and Epstein (1987) found that more social workers in 1968 thought the poor lacked motivation and that society lacks the technical knowledge to solve poverty than those in the 1984 sample. Fewer social workers in 1968 thought that powerful interests were opposed to solving poverty and that the upper classes must be forced to help. More than half of the 1984 participants (53 percent) thought that powerful interests were opposed to addressing poverty were to blame for the existence of poverty, rather than the individual shortcomings of the poor. Nearly half of the 1968 participants thought interest groups were not addressing the problems collectively and that the poor must organize to help themselves (less than a third agreed in 1984). A larger proportion of the 1984 respondents believed that we need to make basic changes in the system and that the poor should be able decide on what they need (81 percent versus 51 percent) than 1968 participants (61 percent and 35 percent, respectively).

Regarding the involvement of the profession in activist strategies, more than 84 percent of the participants in both years (1968-1984) preferred consensus-building forms of activism (e.g. conducting studies and delivering direct services). While more than two-thirds of participants in both years approved
of confrontational forms of activism (e.g. using formal protests), non-confrontational strategies (e.g. educational activities) were supported by 28 percent in 1968 and 41 percent in 1984. In general, the participants in 1984 held more activist views about the causes of poverty and the need for activist strategies than did the respondents in 1968.

However, when it came to activist goals for the profession, the 1968 group responded more positively to societal change (rather than individual adaptation) and devoting social work resources to the poor rather than to those in need across all social classes (53 and 51 percent respectively) than did the 1984 cohort (37 and 23 percent, respectively). In contrast, more social workers in 1968 provided services to poor clients than in 1984 (50 versus 42 percent). This apparent contradiction was explained by Reeser & Epstein (1984) in terms of: 1) more opportunities for supporting the poor through government programs in 1968 than in 1984, and 2) the increasing demands for social services in 1984 in the context of a more conservative policy environment where helping the poor adapt to their environment was more acceptable than seeking to change societal institutions. Reeser & Epstein (1984) concluded that the majority of social workers in 1984 agreed that achieving consensus within existing societal structures was the best method to address poverty, unlike the social workers of 1968 that saw the role of the profession as dissenting from the status quo. However, neither group was willing to use conflict to achieve societal change. Both groups preferred to work with a mixed group of clients, not exclusively with the poor.

**Social Work Student Desire to Work with the Poor**

Three studies focused on the background characteristics of the graduate social work students to determine which individuals wanted to work with the poor. Grimm and Orten (1973) found correlations between positive attitudes towards the poor and: 1) holding undergraduate degrees in social work or sociology, 2) receiving undergraduate degrees from universities not in the south, 3) having little or no previous work experience in fields other than social work, and 4) having interest in casework, group work, or community organization. Being married with children and coming from a lower socioeconomic
background were correlated with less sympathetic attitudes towards the poor. Rehner, Ishee, Salloum, and Velázquez (1997) found that Mississippi social workers with graduate degrees (Ph.D., D.S.W., or MSW) who identified themselves as left-wing and moderate liberals had more positive attitudes towards the poor than those who did not have graduate degrees and identified themselves as right-wing or moderate conservatives. In contrast, Rosenthal (1993) discovered that none of the background characteristics of first and second year MSW students was related to whether or not students had positive attitudes toward the poor. Each of these studies used different scales for their correlations: Peterson’s Disguised-Structure Attitude Scale (Grimm and Orten); Attitudes Toward Poverty Scale (Rehner, et al.); Belief in the Individual Cause of Poverty and the Antipathy to the Poor Scales (Rosenthal). These studies have limited generalizability due to small sample sizes and correlational design. However they were used to identify relevant variables for this study.

While the previous studies did not compare the attitudes of students before and after completing their graduate social work program, there are a few exceptions. One study by Bogo, Michalski, Raphael & Roberts (1995) examined the practice preferences of students using pre- and post measures in a Canadian MSW program but these preferences were not related to working with the poor. In contrast, drawing upon the same database as this study, Perry (2003) found that students dedicated to working with the poor were: 1) primarily African American, 2) from a low socioeconomic background, 3) self-identified as leftwing-progressive or liberal, and 4) had experience working with the poor, primarily in community mental health settings prior to entering graduate school. While these differences were significant upon entry into MSW programs, they tended to be less significant upon graduation (Perry, 2003).

Preferred Client Populations

With regard to the preferred client populations, three studies found that the majority of students prefer to work with clients who present non-chronic psychological problems as opposed to those clients with long-term chronic or seemingly intractable problems such as poverty, disabilities and criminal
activities (Butler, 1990; Rubin & Johnson, 1984; Rubin, Johnson & DeWeaver, 1986). In contrast, Abell & McDonell (1990) found that students “placed high value on working with the disadvantaged” and “reported choosing social work over other degrees because of the professions traditional commitment to such populations” (Abell & McDonell, 1990, p.63).

Studies indicate that students from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds tend to show more interest in working with disadvantaged groups and less interest in private practice when compared to Caucasian students (Rubin & Johnson, 1984). Abell & McDonell (1990) found that minority students placed a higher value on social work’s traditional commitment to disadvantaged populations than did Caucasians and also found that significantly fewer minorities than whites reported plans to enter private practice (3.9% of minorities compared to 27% of whites).

In summary, the few studies found in the literature suggest that social workers and social work students do not share uniform perceptions of the poor. While student perceptions of the poor parallel those of the general public, differences emerge when assessing the demographic characteristics of the students.

METHODS

This study was designed as a pre-post, self-administered survey to all entering (between 1991 and 2000) and exiting (between 1993 and 2004) social work students in ten accredited MSW programs in California. The design of the survey instruments drew upon prior research related to attitudes about the poor, strategies for addressing poverty, and the role of varying demographic characteristics (Abell & McDonell, 1990; Feagin, 1975; Golden, Pins & Jones, 1972; Reeser & Epstein, 1987).

A matched data set of 2213 students was derived from an entry only data set (n = 8871) and a graduation only data set (n = 6194). The matched set compared favorably with the entry alone and graduation alone data on the demographic characteristic as noted in Table 1.
Table 1 Background Characteristics of MSW student respondents matched at entry and at graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>At Entry (n = 8871)</th>
<th>At Graduation (n = 6194)</th>
<th>From the Matched Set (n = 2213)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Program Status %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>86.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>66.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/Other</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship Status %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Citizens</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childhood Socioeconomic Background %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic partner</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married/single</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>59.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Party Affiliation %</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>70.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace and Freedom</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age in Years</strong></td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Aid %</strong></td>
<td>IV-E, IV-E+ combo</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non IV-E</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Years of Prior Experience in Social Work</strong></td>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td>3.31 (2.66)</td>
<td>2.0 (1.65)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The questions related to strategies for addressing poverty were derived from Feagin’s (1975) Attitudes Toward Poverty Scale and Reeser and Epstein’s survey instrument (1987). The following statements (with a Likert-type response pattern of agree-disagree) used the structural, technical, interest group and individual classifications developed by Reeser and Epstein (1987):

- powerful interests are fundamentally opposed to the solution of the problem of poverty;
- we do not as yet possess the necessary knowledge and techniques for abolishing poverty;
- people representing different interests do not often enough sit down together to work out problems;
- those people who are better off will never give up anything to the "have nots" unless forced;
- poor people are not adequately motivated to take advantage of existing opportunities; and
- poor people have not been organized to demand better treatment by society.

In addition to the attitudinal items, additional survey items included: motivations for entering graduate school, career aspirations, attitudes towards the poor/poverty, political and social action activities, prior work experiences, and demographic characteristics at two different times during the course of their graduate study—when they entered the MSW program and when they graduated. Works by Golden, Pins, and Jones (1972) and Reeser and Epstein (1990) were used to design questions that evoked the social work students’ attitudes and beliefs toward the poor and poverty. Questions regarding students’ motivations for entering graduate school were based on the work of Abell and McDonell (1990). Finally, questions concerning student’s future career interests, including preferred client groups and case situations, were adapted from the work of Rubin and Johnson (1984), Rubin, Johnson, and DeWeaver (1986), Butler (1990), and Santangelo (1991).
This exploratory study is part of an evaluation of long-term title IV-E funded public child welfare stipend and training program related to pre-service curricula and staff retention in public child welfare agencies. This multi-site, longitudinal effort examines the effects of MSW education on this stipend program designed to encourage MSW students to work with the poor, especially those who use the public child welfare system. This research was supported by the California Department of Social Services.

**Design**

To facilitate the data analysis, the researchers devised a participant-generated ID code that maintained student anonymity yet enabled the researchers to match students’ entry surveys with their graduation surveys. Application was made through the University of California Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and an exemption was granted based on the educational purposes of the study. Students were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

The entry surveys were administered to all MSW students in California at orientation (or as close to that time as reasonably possible). The graduation surveys were administered right before graduation two, three or four years later. The entry data set (n = 8871) included all responses obtained from students entering an accredited MSW program in California between 1991 and 2000. The graduation data set (n = 6194) included all responses obtained from the graduating student population starting in 1993 and ending in 2004. The matched set compared favorably with the entry alone and graduation alone data on the demographic characteristic as previously noted in Table 1.

To compute response rates, the numbers of entering students were compared with the student enrollment statistics that schools report annually to the Council on Social Work Education (C.S.W.E.). Graduation numbers from each of the schools were obtained separately and used to develop the graduation response rates. The overall response rate was 76 percent for the entering students and 48.5 percent through 2003 for graduating students. According to Perry’s analysis of the data in 2001, 90 percent of all MSW students in California participated in the entry, graduation or both surveys (Perry, 2001).
Limitations

It is also important to note that this exploratory study has the following methodological limitations: 1) survey self-reported information can lead to a social desirability bias (responding in a way that participants think they should), 2) some sampling bias in which the matched data set underrepresents minorities, part time students and older students, and 3) there is no a priori way to determine the extent to which all of the schools in the study are comparable to one another with regard to how they implement their CSWE accredited curriculum (e.g. how much attention is given to poverty in the required social policy, practice and the human behavior and social environment courses?).

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Poverty

Upon entry into graduate social work programs, 88 percent of the student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that societal institutions had to be changed in order to eradicate poverty; at graduation the percentage was only slightly higher (89.2 percent). In addition, while 57.9 percent of the students at entry agreed or strongly agreed that poor people were in the best position to decide what is best for themselves and 73.8 percent held this view at graduation, perhaps an indication that client self determination is one value that is being learned in social work school.

Overall, the student’s top two reasons for the existence of poverty as perceived were: 1) powerful interests are fundamentally opposed to the solution of the problem of poverty (structural) and 2) people representing different interests do not meet enough to work out problems (interest group). The percentage of those who thought that powerful interests were contributing to the persistence of poverty grew from 53.3 percent at entry to 64.3 percent at graduation. A similar increase occurred with agreement on the statement about whether the poor are well organized (32.6 percent at entry agreed or strongly agreed and that percentage increased to 36.1 percent at graduation) as well as the perception that those who are better
off will not give up anything to solve the problems of poverty (24.5 percent at entry and 31.6 percent at graduation).

With respect to major response items that reflected a decline from entry to exit, several are worth noting: 1) people representing the poor do not sit down often enough to talk to each other (46 percent at entry and 41.5 percent at graduation, 2) there is insufficient knowledge to do away with poverty (21.5 percent at entry and 17.8 percent at graduation), and 3) the poor were not adequately motivated (15.8 percent at entry and 5.8 percent at graduation). These limited findings suggest that the social work graduate programs may have some effect on decreasing stereotypes of the poor.

**Student Characteristics**

As noted in the third column of Table 1, the matched sample could be described as primarily single women who attended graduate school full time, two-thirds of whom were Caucasian from middle class backgrounds, affiliated with the Democratic Party (70 percent), with a median age of 26, and religiously identified as Protestant, Catholic or Jew (66.8 percent). There were no statistically significant differences in the views of students in terms of their year in school or the school attended. However there were statistically significant differences with regard to childhood socioeconomic background and race/ethnicity.

There were statistically significant differences in the attitudes of students upon entry when taking the race and ethnicity of students into account. Caucasian students were more likely to support the individual adaptation strategy while students of color (all minority groups were combined due to the small number of respondents) were more likely to support a strategy focused on societal/institutional change ($X^2 = 7.797$, d.f = 1, $p = .005$). However, at graduation the differences were not statistically significant ($X^2 = 2.069$, d.f = 1, $p = .150$). Among those who changed their attitudes between entry and graduation (34.8 percent), Caucasian students were more likely to shift their attitude from individual adaptation to the societal/institutional change strategies.
At entry and at graduation, students from lower socioeconomic class families were most likely to support the allocation of public resources/attention primarily to the poor, while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to think that resources/attention should be given equally to all social groups, not just the poor. Among those whose attitudes changed from entry to exit, however, students from lower socioeconomic class families were most likely to change their attitudes from allocating resources/attention primarily to the poor to giving resources to all social groups equally, while students from middle socioeconomic class families were most likely to change their attitude from allocating resources equally to all social groups to primarily giving to the poor.

Among those students whose opinions did not change from the time they entered school until they graduated (65.2 percent), students from lower socioeconomic families were most likely to support societal/institutional change as a better approach to addressing poverty, while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to choose individual adaptation. Among those who changed their attitude (about 35%), students from middle class socioeconomic families were more likely to change their attitude from individual adaptation to societal/institutional change while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to change their attitudes from societal/institutional change to individual adaptation.

In summary, most entering social work students in this study agreed that societal and institutional changes are needed to address the causes of poverty. This preference remained strong from the beginning of to the end of the MSW experience for the entire matched sample. Table 2 summarizes the findings on the changing perceptions of poverty and the poor from entry to graduation. At graduation, (65.2 percent) stood by their original entry statements with respect to individual adaptation versus societal/institutional change. Consistent with previous studies, the majority of entering social work students (54.1 percent) thought that focusing on societal/institutional change was a better strategy than individual adaptation for
achieving for addressing the needs of the poor. At graduation, 64.3 percent (up from 50.9 percent) agreed that focusing on societal/institutional change was a better strategy than individual adaptation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1: Should social workers help the individual find a mode of adaptation to the world around him/her, or should emphasis be placed on societal/institutional change? Which would you favor if you had to make a choice?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal/Institutional Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 2: Should social workers devote equal attention and equal resources to all social class groupings or primarily to the problems of the poor?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give to All Groups Equally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give Primarily to the Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in Social Work Students Responses to the Research Questions from Entry to Graduation
CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to examine student perceptions of the causes of poverty and strategies for addressing poverty in this country. The sample consisted of 2213 social work students who entered graduate school from 1991 to 2000 and who graduated from 1993 to 2004. This study supports the findings from other research that found that students’ race/ethnicity affected their perceptions of and interest in working with the poor.

Most students in this study agreed that the traditional mission of social work emphasizes helping the poor and disadvantaged through direct services and advocacy in the form of political and social action. One of the unique contributions of the social work perspective is an understanding of human behavior in
the context of the social environment in order to move “from a case to a cause” (Cooper, 1977, p. 361). This study suggests that there is some movement from case (e.g. individual adaptation) to cause (e.g. social/institutional change) within a graduate social work program but further research in the form of post-graduate follow-up studies are needed to assess the depth and breadth of this change.

Implied in the pre-post design were questions about the role that graduate social work programs may play in shaping these perceptions as well as the speculation that the lack of student interest in poverty might negatively influence what is taught. Given the limitations of this study, one of the most intriguing speculations relates to the yet-to-be documented/evaluated specific role (courses, fieldwork, socialization, prior experiences and passions, etc.) that graduate social work education plays in promoting strategies to change societal institutions in contrast to helping individuals adapt to the circumstances of poverty.
References


The Explosive Nature of the Culture of Poverty:
A Teaching Case About An Agency-based Training Program

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&

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Mack Professor of Nonprofit Management

June 2006
The Explosive Nature of the Culture of Poverty: A Teaching Case Based An Agency-based Training Program

INTRODUCTION

This is a story of an explosion in a social service organization that led to a melt-down of a promising in-service training program. The event can be traced to three ingredients that individually would not lead to such an extreme situation: the complex topic of poverty, an inadequately informed trainer, and a group of participants with a variety of views regarding the training. The fallout from this explosion was so substantial that special focus groups were formed to debrief the experience several weeks later. If you happened to attend one of these focus groups, you would have heard angry staff members share how they were:

- Insulted that someone from outside of the state had the audacity to tell them about poverty and race as it exists in their own county and ethnic communities.
- Offended by a trainer who believed that being married to an African-American gave her the appropriate credentials to talk about African-American culture.
- Shocked that the trainer failed to demonstrate a grasp of the complexity of poverty and did not provide a glossary of terms that would capture the multiple definitions of poverty.
- Surprised that the trainer failed to provide a diverse set of readings on poverty, especially examples that reflected the views of African-American researchers like William Julius Wilson.
- Committed to the idea that poverty is an important topic and should be effectively addressed in future training programs, especially if the learning activities are structured in a manner that allow for open dialogue to draw upon the participant’s personal experiences with poverty.
However, if you were to talk to the trainer after the training experience, you would hear a different story. The trainer would have told you that:

- She received little or no direction to orient her to the participants, the agency’s organizational culture, or the agency’s expectations of the training (see Note 2).
- The participants misunderstood the material and took it personally, believing that she was targeting her examples towards specific ethnic groups, particularly African-Americans.
- They had a pre-conceived bias that because she was Caucasian and from the Midwest, she could not understand poverty, dismissing her from the beginning.

In order to understand how this melt-down might have been avoided, it is necessary describe how the developed training program was developed and what actually occurred during the six hour training experience. The case concludes with a set of discussion questions and detailed background notes.

The following is a description of the major actors in this drama:

- The Manager of Staff Development, an experienced practitioner, who wanted to expand a successful diversity training program into the area of understanding poverty and was unaware of the negative connotations of the dated terminology of “the culture of poverty”.
- The training consultant with many years of experience in diversity training who searched for a qualified trainer to deliver the training sessions on the culture of poverty because this topic was not part of his area of expertise.
• The trainer who had many years of training experience in the human services and had conducted training programs on the culture of poverty workshop in different parts of the country.

• The training program participants who were experienced agency staff sincerely interested in learning more about poverty by participating in a pilot program, and fully aware that if it went well, the program would be rolled out for other staff to attend.
BACKGROUND

In wake of implementing welfare reform and experiencing the first five years of implementation (1998-2002), a West Coast county social service agency decided in 2003 to offer a training program on the culture of poverty (see Note 1). Upper management of the social service agency was concerned about the treatment of welfare-to-work program participants by line staff. There was a general sense that staff needed to be more sensitive to the needs of clients. Some of the staff had either come from poverty backgrounds themselves, were former welfare recipients, or had a personal history with the clients (e.g. gone to school together, lived in the same neighborhoods, belonged to the same church or community organizations). A few of the workers had articulated the following attitude to co-workers and clients: “If I made it (out of poverty), why can’t they (do the same)?” Upper management saw this attitude as a form of worker bias that could be transferred into working relationships with clients in the form of impatience and judgmental attitudes, unreturned phone calls, and long waiting periods before appointments. They saw a need to help workers and staff become more empathetic and responsive to their clients (see Note 2).

Since the majority of clients who come to the agency are poor, managers felt that workers would benefit from a better understanding of client perspectives and lifestyles. In addition, managers wanted to remind employees of the mission and history of the agency and their tradition of serving the poor. They requested a poverty program that could be part of the diversity training series to allow for discussion about what poverty is and the clients served by framing the class as providing information that may not be known to workers about the impoverished populations.
The trainer-developed objectives for the six-hour training program on the culture of poverty (previously implemented around the country) included:

- acquiring an understanding of the tenets and norms of poverty culture
- acquiring a capacity to utilize poverty culture norms to help those in the culture
- acquiring an understanding of the impact of economics on acculturation
- acquiring insight into past, present, and future perspectives the culture of poverty and how they affect the thinking and actions of the poor, middle class, and the rich
- acquiring an understanding of how to assist impoverished customers in finding and keeping jobs that are congruent with their talents, interests, and goals.

These objectives were also translated into the following outcomes: 1) participants would leave the program with a new or renewed sense of awareness about the differences between the middle and lower classes, 2) participants would understand that the behaviors displayed by poor people in their own community as survival skills are often misunderstood in the middleclass agency workers, and 3) participants would acquire an expanded understanding about inter-generational poverty so that they would not judge/assess client behaviors through middleclass value lens, especially in the context of the worker-client relationship.

The objectives were built upon a definition of the culture of poverty that included norms, traditions, behaviors, values and survival skills employed by the impoverished and the impact of generational poverty on behavior and thinking. The objectives were linked to the training content that was divided into three sections: 1) an introduction to what it means to live in poverty, 2) a description of the characteristics/behaviors of people living in a poverty culture, and 3) ways helping those in poverty culture move towards self-sufficiency. The expectations of the agency
were that these objectives would help address some of the worker-client issues by providing more information about the barriers faced by poor people (see Note 3).

**TRAINER’S PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINING EVENT**

While the trainer was unpacking her materials on the first morning of training, she was casually informed by a participant (who had arrived early) that she would be faced with a tough crowd of managers and administrators in the agency, some of whom were not happy about being encouraged to devote an entire day to training in this area. This took the trainer by surprise because she had expected to be presenting to a group of workers who would appreciate the content because they worked daily with poor clients (see Note 4).

As more people started to arrive, they were asked to sit wherever they liked at one of the round tables in groups of four to six. It appeared by their conversations that, while a few people knew each other, the majority of participants did not know each other well, since most were from different units in the department.

After everyone was seated, the consultant introduced the trainer, describing her background. The trainer elaborated on the consultant’s introduction by giving the group more details about her work and personal experience. She stated that she had witnessed poverty through her own daughter’s lifestyle of poverty and substance abuse. She mentioned that she was married to an African-American man and had experienced poverty through the connections that he had within the African-American community. Her statements conveyed that, through her observations and experiences, she had a thorough knowledge of poverty and how poor people lived.
Following the introduction of each participant and the distribution of a packet of worksheets and materials for use in discussions, the trainer talked about the federal definitions of poverty-level income, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and a model for Catastrophic Expectations.

After this presentation, the trainer instructed the group to complete brief self-assessment inventory on the skills and knowledge needed to survive in poverty, middle class, and wealth. For example, the social class inventory had statements related to poverty like, “I am very good at trading or bartering” or “I know what to do when I don’t have money to pay the bills,” while the middle-class section included items like “I know how to properly set a table” and “I know how to order in a nice restaurant.” The section for the wealthy included such statements as “I have several favorite restaurants in different countries of the world” and “I support or buy the work of a particular artist.” This inventory was meant to encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences with social class and related cultural characteristics. The results generated a fair amount of discussion and participation from the group, but also a growing sense of frustration with this apparent distraction from the topic of poverty.

The next part of the training focused specifically on the behavior and traits of people living in poverty (see Note 5). The trainer outlined some of the following common characteristics of generational poverty:

1) importance of relationships (one often has favorites and has only people to rely on),
2) ownership of people (people are possessions based on a fear about leaving your culture and “getting above your raisings”),
3) survival orientation (a job is about making enough money to survive, not about career),
4) polarized thinking (options are hardly ever examined and statements like “I quit” or “I can’t” are common)

5) life is lived in the moment (most of what happens is reactive and in the moment. Little planning or goal setting takes place).

The trainer also provided the following list of resources that poor people lacked: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationship/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules.

She described different situations to demonstrate how poor people are often able to get the things done by trading services or bartering for things they need in order to survive, even if they received welfare. For instance, people may give rides to friends or neighbors because they own a car in exchange for childcare, haircuts, or appliance repair services. Households may hold rotating meals to ensure that families could get something to eat on a regular basis. One example involved a low-income woman who had gotten a job promotion that enabled her to move out of the projects into a suburban neighborhood. When this woman moved, she was so happy that she wanted to invite all her friends and family over to celebrate. She held the party in their front yard and her guests parked all over the neighborhood, taking up spaces that were reserved for residents. Because entertainment is very important in poverty culture, the music was blasted loudly and food and drinks were strewn everywhere. The neighbors in this middle-class suburb, not used to having so much noise and so many people hanging around in the streets, called the police who broke up the party. While the host and her guests did not see that she had done anything wrong, the neighbors protested because it went against their middle-class values.

In addition to the behaviors of the poor, she also noted that there are survival rules and norms in the culture of poverty. Just as ethnic groups have their own cultures, she suggested that
poor people also have their own culture as illustrated by the metaphor “crabs in a bucket.” This refers to the idea that poor people are often unable to get ahead because of their peers. For example, if a woman receives money from her church to assist her during financial hardships, she is expected to share that money with other needy members of the church. If she does not, her community will turn its back on her during future times of need. By sharing her money, she is unable to get through her financial difficulties but is still be accepted by her friends and peers.

Entering poverty neighborhoods provided another example of the metaphor. People from outside the neighborhood or who look like they do not belong are often viewed suspiciously and approached with caution by residents in poor neighborhoods. She used an example of an African American neighborhood where she and her African American husband owned low-income property. She would always use her husband’s car to collect rents because the residents would recognize the car as belonging to an African-American man, even though she is not African-American. As a result, residents would leave her alone and not hassle her.

She also made the case that some people choose to be on welfare when describing her relative as someone who wanted to be on welfare because it allowed her a lot free time and able to enjoy life better on welfare than if the relative was working. She noted that some welfare recipients even pity working people because they have to deal with traffic or be stuck in an office all day. Equipped with the understanding that some recipients are on welfare by choice, she suggested that workers are in a better position to tailor the case plans to the needs of their clients.

The purpose of these examples was to demonstrate that poor people have particular survival skills and generally do not hold the middle class values as they are not needed to live in their environment. The goal was to present a strengths-based approach to understanding people in poverty, portraying the poor as being resourceful in finding ways to survive. The trainer.
wanted to convey that the people in poverty have alternative methods of self-sufficiency that should not be judged through middle-class lens.

While she was talking about these concepts, the trainer sensed a negative reaction from the group. Participants started to raise questions about the characteristics of generational poverty. Some people in the room stated that they had come from an impoverished background themselves, or had relatives who were still poor, and that the examples she cited were contrary to their experiences. Participants began to question her sources and demanded research data to support the assertions she made. Some began to get angry and emotional about the topic, claiming that she was falsely characterizing poor people. They said that it was not right to lump all poor people into one stereotype. They suggested that the type of poverty the trainer experienced in the Midwest was entirely different from the poverty people experienced in their county. By the time the group broke for lunch, the mood of the room had become hostile.

The remaining part of the day was designed to link the information from the morning with an afternoon session on how to use the concepts of the culture of poverty to help clients achieve self-sufficiency despite their impoverished environment. By observing, engaging, and encouraging clients living in a culture of poverty, participants were advised to point out what the poor person is doing well, explain where the poor person is falling short, and describe specifically what the poor person might do to improve. However, it became clear in the afternoon session that the trainer had lost most of the group to lack of engagement and negativity.

Even though the trainer was able to get through the entire training day, participants were still focused on their negative reactions to the information shared in the morning session. The participants became more candid in their criticism of her and the content by boldly disagreeing
with her and the information she presented. They told her that she was “classist” (distinct from a racist) and that she used too many stereotypes of poor people. While she tried to explain that her comments were not stereotypes but rather skills that poor people use to survive in their social setting, many of the participants continued to demand that facts and figures about the poverty, especially based on the data in their own county. They reminded her that she was from a small Midwestern town and was uninformed about urban poverty, especially in the light of her continued use of Midwestern examples that did not appear relevant to the population they served.

The day ended with a lot of resentment, frustration, and anger against the trainer from the class. The trainer, who had presented the culture of poverty material many times prior to this group, was disturbed by the fact that the information was not well received. That night, she met with the consultant who gave her tips on how to improve her presentation. He suggested that she not use personal examples to explain concepts and that she stick to the curriculum of the course. In addition to his ideas, she did research on the internet to learn more about the demographics of the county and the population served by the agency.

By the next training day she was better prepared with information about the county and its demographics. She had a better understanding of the people in the agency and their expectations of the training program. As she presented the same information from the previous day, she had expected the same resistance as she received from the first group, but was surprised by the receptivity of the second group. According to the trainer, the second group of participants was not as hostile as the first group.

Overall, she felt that her experience with these participants was a negative one because this was the first time in her twenty-year career that she had experienced such opposition to her material. She felt that the participants disliked her from the start of the training with negative
comments overheard about her appearance, inappropriate affect, and seemingly irrelevant Midwestern roots.

Most importantly, she felt the participants thought that her description of behaviors displayed by those living in a culture of poverty was specifically referring people of color, especially to the many African-Americans in the room. She felt that they took the content personally, as if she were talking about their ethnic culture in particular, and the perceived embarrassment about the way the participant’s poor family members were characterized resulted in their negative view that she was stereotyping them. She thought that they failed to distinguish between their own poverty and generational poverty of their clients. In addition, she attributed some of the negative reaction to the predominance of middle-class managers in the group of participants because of their lack of daily contact with poor clients and their naïve understanding of what it was like to be poor in today’s economy. She wanted the participants to understand the importance of social class (poverty is linked to socio-economic status and that social class disparities differ from racial differences) and the use of middle-class values in the assessment of poor clients (people live according to the class in which they have been socialized). She tried to assert that though racial and ethnic cultures influence traditions and norms, class differences also influence the way people behave.

PARTICIPANT’S PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINING EVENT

The participants had varying responses to the program when it was first announced (see Note 6). Most expected to learn about the changing demographics and needs of their clients, as well as the nature of their client’s cultures. They hoped that the training would provide helpful tools to better serve clients and improve service quality. Others thought that the training would
focus more on the role of culture in society than on the behavioral aspects of poverty. They thought it would deal with varying aspects and layers of culture that individuals are exposed to in their work with clients as well as in their own cultures (definitions of culture and how culture influences the development of goals and values of individuals). Others had low expectations of the training because of their “on-the-job” and “in-the-hood” experiences with poverty and wanted to see if there was anything new to learn.

The first impression in the morning session was that the trainer was not only from out of the area, but she was from out of the state, and she was a white woman married to an African-American man. Another impression was related to her definition of poverty income; namely, that a family of four with an income of $8,000 would be considered living in poverty while the same family of four with an income of $35,000 would be considered middle class. From the participant’s perspective, there was no way for a single person working full-time with an income of $8,000 to survive in their urban community, much less a family of four. This illustration struck a nerve for some people in the room who felt that, although they held a full-time county job, they considered themselves poor because of the exorbitant living expenses in the county. Although this point did not present itself as too contentious at the time, it would later have an effect on how they responded to the trainer’s presentation.

Additional sources of tension emerged when the trainer described some of the survival behaviors of people living in poverty. One example, about a single mother on welfare who had to sell drugs and braid hair on the side in order to support herself and her children, sparked a strong reaction. Although the trainer did not state the ethnicity of the single mother, it was perceived by the group that she was referring to an African-American woman. As one of the participants explained in the follow-up interview, “Who else would braid hair?”
By the end of the morning session, the tension in the room was perceived by many of the participants as almost unbearable. The trainer had managed to either upset the participants or lose their interest. In any case, she alienated herself from most of the people in the room. If participants were not vocalizing their disagreement, their body language indicated that they were either hurt or disinterested in what the trainer had to say. Some people turned their chair so that their backs could be toward the trainer. Many people could be seen doodling on their worksheets or writing in their planners. One woman kept her head down for most of the presentation. She was so angry and upset that she could not look up at the trainer or anyone else. Another person left the room because she was disgusted with the presentation. Others sat passively, obviously not listening or paying attention to what was going on, but not participating in the discussion either. There was a lot of whispering and side conversations at the tables. Although no distinct comments could be heard from the whispering, it was obvious that they were talking about the trainer and the content. After a certain point, there was complete silence in the room aside from the trainer’s voice. There was no interaction between the participants and the trainer. Most people had tuned out, and by lunch time there was a quiet resentment in the room.

During the lunch break, many of the participants expressed their anger to one another regarding the trainer’s presentation. They discussed some of the topics that were covered, particularly what they felt were stereotypes of poor, black people. Since most of the participants were high-level, educated, African-American women, participants could not understand why the trainer continued to stereotype black people while being insensitive to her audience. Many people considered not returning for the afternoon session. Others, in fact, did leave.

Not much was remembered about the material covered after lunch. The participants who came back were mainly there to fulfill their commitment or because they did not want to return
to work, not because they were interested in anything that the trainer had to say. The mood for
the rest of the afternoon was sullen and resentful. They all concurred that the training was
irrelevant to their county and was offensive due to the stereotyping of poor people as well as the
inappropriate use of personal examples.

When asked about their reflections on the training, the majority of participants responded
that it was a negative experience (while many of the participants did not remember whether they
had attended the first or second training, the general consensus was that it was a inadequately
conducted training program with simplistic and insulting materials). Almost all the participants
identified the discussion of common characteristics of generational poverty and the lack of
resources in poverty culture as being the pivotal point where the trainer really lost their interest.
From then on, she was unable to engage them any further without provoking anger and
frustration that was artuculated by the more vocal participants.

The training was offensive to most people in the room for different reasons. The
participants who thought of themselves as currently poor or coming from poor backgrounds were
insulted because they felt that the trainer was stereotyping them and their families as being
immoral and without goals and dreams. They felt she presented poor people as being without
morals, untrustworthy cheaters and liars who would stoop to any level, even illegal activity to
meet their needs. Many African-American participants were outraged because she linked the
behaviors of poor people with stereotypes of ethnic people, especially African-Americans. Other
participants who identified themselves as not being African-American expressed similar
concerns about negative stereotypes of poor people. They agreed that most examples referred to
African-American families, although they could not recall whether the trainer directly stated the
ethnic identities in her use of examples.
Not only did the trainer use examples that stereotyped poor people, she also gave a one-sided view of her stories. The trainer used an example about how often people ran from her when she came around to collect rent from her tenants. Instead of explaining the reasons why they may have ran out on the rent or what financial hardships people faced, she simply used the example that they did not pay to demonstrate what poor people do when they are faced with such a situation.

Many participants expressed their frustration about the fact that the trainer did not bother to learn about her audience or about the demographics of their county. More than one participant stated that “she obviously did not do her homework before she began the training.” Instead, she tried to generalize her experiences and observations from the Midwest in order to apply them to an urban area, not realizing that impoverished populations have different characteristics in different parts of the country. In addition, she did not have valid resources to back up her statements. When asked a question that she was unable to answer, she would defer it, change the topic, or quote the book by Payne (see Note 5).

The participants were also disappointed that they were not given an opportunity to share their own experiences with poverty. Many participants had experienced significant poverty at one point of their life, had family and friends who were in poverty, or considered themselves currently poor. Other people had different experiences working with poor people who did not exhibit the behaviors and values described by the trainer as being part of a culture of poverty. The trainer did not allow for a discussion about the participants’ personal experiences, and instead tried to present a one-sided view of what poverty was like.

The lack of the trainer’s visible sensitivity to the group’s reaction to her presentations also annoyed the participants. They did not feel that she noticed their resistance to her or her
content as she did not appear uncomfortable or phased by the comments or body language of the participants. If she was, she either hid it very well or did not know what to do but to continue on with her presentation, despite the fact that there was obvious tension in the room. The trainer did not do anything to acknowledge why things were going poorly for the participants or what she had done to lose the group. Instead, she continued with her curriculum throughout the rest of the day, ignoring the feelings of the participants.

The overwhelming majority of those interviewed agreed that the trainer excessively used inappropriate slang and personal examples to convey her message. She consistently referred to her African-American husband by his street name as if to gain credibility with the group. Stated one participant, “Her message early on was that she was married to a black man, and she had read a book about poor people, so she was the authority on blackness.” If this was her intention, it backfired because participants not only found it excessive and unnecessary, they also felt that it was unprofessional of her to divulge so many irrelevant details about her life without relating it to the literature on poverty.

While most of the participants did not remember the content of the training, they did recall that it was a bad experience, a waste of time and a waste of money. However, a few participants thought that the training went well with interesting and useful information that could be applied in the field. Several participants, recognizing that there was conflict in the room, stated that they were perplexed as to why so many people had gotten angry. They said that they felt the tension in the room but were confused about why people were so upset. One person was embarrassed at the way her colleagues disrespectfully treated the trainer. Others felt that although the delivery of the content could have been improved, the general presentation and ideas represented in it were interesting and should be repeated with another trainer.
After a total of two day-long training sessions with different groups of participants, the majority consensus was that the training program contained offensive and questionable material that was delivered in an inappropriate manner. These factors hampered the participants’ desire to listen to the trainer’s presentation and the trainer’s ability to engage the group. Due to the complex nature of poverty in terms of how it is presented and how it is perceived, neither the trainer’s nor the participants’ expectations were met.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How much of our understanding of poverty needs to be based on socio-economic factors (i.e. social class) and how much on racial/ethnic factors?
   - Does your answer change when you learn that people coping with poverty barely survive with incomes that are above the federal poverty line?
   - Does your answer change when you learn that the majority of the poor are Caucasian?

2. To what extent is the concept of inter-generational poverty a form of situational entrapment whereby urban poverty neighborhoods or rural impoverished villages lack the opportunities (economic, social, educational, medical, etc.) for upward mobility?

3. How much of the process of escaping from poverty is explained by motivational factors affected by limited family support (human behavior perspective) and how much can be attributed to the existence of a safety net of support (education,
health care, crime prevention, job training, etc.) located in their community (social environment perspective)?

4. How might you have advised the trainer to improve her presentation, especially with regard to the use an array of social science concepts of poverty?
1. About the agency and the community:
This case study takes place in a public social service agency serving a diverse metropolitan county. This urban county has about 1.5 million residents, with ethnic minority groups making up roughly two-thirds of the population. Based on the federal poverty level, about 11% lived below the poverty line in 2003. However, because of the high cost of living in this county, the federal poverty level is inappropriate for the people living there. Many people still live in relative poverty, even with stable employment. The agency serves 11.3% of the county’s residents. Services are delivered through five departments: Agency Administration and Finance, Adult and Aging Services, Children and Family Services, Workforce and Benefit Administration, and the Policy Office.

2. About the training director and consultant:
The agency’s Manager of Staff Development contracted with a consulting firm that specialized in diversity training to provide the course. The contract was based on successful prior experiences with this local firm including a working relationship that spanned many years (it was familiar with the agency’s organizational culture and the demographic characteristics of the county). However, the firm did not have experience in providing training on the topic of poverty and therefore facilitated a sub-contract with an out-of-state trainer.

Only telephone contacts between the consultant and the trainer were used to discuss the previously-designed training program in order to review the topics. The night before the first day of the training, the consultant met face-to-face with the out-of-state trainer to brief her on the culture of the agency and the demographics of the participant group, as well as the demographics of the population in the county. Because the agency had bought the training program after reviewing the standard outline, the trainer did not customize or tailor the content for the participants. Other than the phone conversations and the meeting, there was no other contact with the trainer. There was no direct communication between the trainer and the agency Manager of Staff Development prior to her arrival on the first day of the training.

3. About the development of this teaching case:
The case is based on a general description of what happened during the two days of training from the perspective of the trainer, the training consultant, the manager of staff development, and the participants. These events were recalled three years later during a series of phone interviews. The length of time that passed between the training events and the interviews may have limited everyone’s capacity to recall the exact details of training (although many of the interviewees reflect vivid and impassioned portrayals of the explosive events). Out of a total of 38 participants, twenty-three interviews were conducted. While the descriptions of the training experience do not represent everyone’s perception of what happened, they represent the perceptions of the majority the respondents.
4. **About the trainer:**
The trainer was from an Ohio-based consulting and training group. She had over 20 years of experience, providing training and consulting services in Social Service Agencies across the country. She had given over 300 trainings on the particular topic of poverty. Her personal experience with the poverty population included 250 interviews conducted with impoverished families in their homes while coaching Ohio Welfare-to-Work Caseworkers and Child Protective Caseworkers during home visits. She had strong references based on her previously designed workshop on the culture of poverty.

5. **About the origins of the term “culture of poverty”:**
The concept of the *culture of poverty*, first coined by Oscar Lewis in the 1950s, is historically associated with his 1959 ethnographic study of poor Mexican families (*Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*). Lewis describes the values and behaviors of poor Mexicans as a way of explaining how poor people live in impoverished environments. He describes the attitudes and beliefs specific in poor families as a way of life learned at an early age and passed on from generation to generation in order to cope against poverty. Individuals living in the culture of poverty can exhibit behaviors that include sexual promiscuity resulting in out-of-wedlock births, strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, and dependency, lack of clear judgment, and experiences that reflect limited knowledge of personal troubles, local conditions, and their own way of life. While the subject of this study included only Mexican families, Lewis generalized these characteristics beyond both national borders and ethnic races.

Lewis’ approach was used by *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998) by Ruby K. Payne, the book on which the trainer as being relied upon heavily for her information. Payne’s working definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 16), which include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationship/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. The book includes such topics as the role of language and story, hidden rules among the classes, characteristics of generational poverty, and discipline to help primary school educators understand the environments and behaviors of impoverished students in order to better respond to their needs. There are vignettes and scenarios that attempt to explain how poor people live. The author focuses on people in generational poverty, which is defined as being in poverty for two generations or more. The trainer uses much of Payne’s material, especially the characteristics of generational poverty, to focus on the absence of resources in a culture of poverty.

It was interesting to note that neither the trainers or staff development manager were aware of the degree to which the term “culture of poverty” had become outdated in the social science literature although some of the participants seemed to know that the term had been discredited in some circles due to its use by outsiders to implicitly “blame the victims” of poverty for perpetuating their condition.
6. **About the training program participants:**
   The training participants were organized into two groups of approximately 20 in each, with one group meeting on a Tuesday and the other on a Thursday. Both groups were comprised of predominantly African-American staff members who held supervisory and management positions along with a few who held direct service line worker positions. While the county has a long commitment to fostering diversity training given the diversity of its client population as well as staff (current agency director is African American and his predecessor is Asian American), it is also a county beleaguered by years of budget cuts, labor-management problems, and continuously being asked “to do more with less” in their efforts to address the complexity of urban poverty by policy makers at all levels of government.