SOCILOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POVERTY

This review describes and critically analyses sociological theories on the causes of poverty. It discusses contested concepts that relate to how poverty might be understood from a sociological/social theory perspective.

Key points

• Sociological thinking focuses on the structure and organisation of society and how this relates to social problems and individual lives.

• In looking to explain poverty, sociologists have often tried to balance the relative importance of social structures (how society is organised) and the role of individual agency – people’s independent choices and actions.

• Sociologists are interested in how resources in society are distributed.

• Some sociologists, especially those writing in the 1970s and 1980s, have tended to explain poverty by referring to people’s moral failings, fecklessness or dependency cultures. Others have argued that poverty can be better understood as a result of the ways in which resources and opportunities are unequally distributed across society.

• Some sociologists have pointed to the declining influence of social class in the UK. Yet research has shown that social class and processes of class reproduction remain important, particularly for the continuity of poverty over time and across generations.

• On a related topic, sociologists have pointed to the importance of stigma and shame in understanding the experience of poverty. A particular concern is with how the spending patterns of those in the greatest poverty are often subject to stigmatisation.

• The ways in which institutions such as public or welfare delivery services can negatively stereotype those experiencing poverty has also been shown to be important in stigmatising and disadvantaging those experiencing poverty.

• To a large extent, people’s social class positions still influence the opportunities open to them. Starting out life in poverty means a greater risk of poverty in later life.

The research
By Tracy Shildrick, University of Leeds

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BACKGROUND

Much sociological theory is directed at understanding social change. Social theorists throughout history have rarely talked about poverty as such, but nonetheless their insights into the economic ordering and structure of society offer valuable ideas for understanding poverty. Marx and Engels, writing in Victorian Britain, pointed to the stark divide between the impoverished working classes who had nothing to sell but their labour and the capitalist classes who, by virtue of owning the means of production, were able to exploit this labour to their profit.

Sociologist Max Weber, writing around the turn of the 20th century, pointed to the importance not just of economic factors in producing and sustaining inequality, but also the influence of power, status and prestige in perpetuating dominant relations. Emile Durkheim, on the other hand, emphasised the functional necessity of social inequality for the well-being of society. Echoes of these early theoretical ideas can be seen in sociological thinking, to a greater or lesser degree, right up to the present day.

This review analysed sociological theories and concepts on the causes of poverty, focusing on how to understand poverty from a sociological perspective.

Poverty and the ‘undeserving poor’

Much sociological thinking on poverty, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, has revolved around the relative importance of social structures and individual agency in explaining the prevalence and perpetuation of poverty over time. The social and political propensity to mark out some people as being somehow responsible for their own hardship has a long history. In many accounts, particularly popular and political ones but also some academic studies, the emphasis has been on the supposedly ‘undeserving poor’, citing individual behaviours, supposed fecklessness or moral failings as key causes of poverty.

More recently, it has been argued that the welfare system is responsible for encouraging and supporting claimants into welfare dependency. Further recent variations of these ideas point to ‘cultures of worklessness’, ‘troubled families’ or families who have never worked as key explanations for poverty. Sociologists have been keen to use empirical evidence to challenge these dominant, individual and often psychological explanations for poverty. They point to the importance of the broader context and the kinds of opportunities open to people as being more important than individual behaviours and choices in explaining and understanding poverty.

The close association made between poverty and individual behaviours means that it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle poverty from related issues such as unemployment or receipt of welfare. This is especially the case in some current popular and political discourse, which ignores the fact that not all unemployed people are poor and nor are all of those experiencing poverty out of work. The tendency to conflate poverty with other social issues such as unemployment, welfare receipt or substance abuse, or to uncritically cite these conditions as explanations of poverty, is tied up with the tendency to portray poverty as a problem created by those experiencing it. It is also indicative of a more general tendency to downplay the significance of poverty altogether.
The ‘cultural turn’, consumption and social class

Sociologists use the concept of social class extensively in their research, and most agree that social class has an economic base. In recent years, some have argued that social class distinctions have become more complex and fuzzy and less significant for lifestyles and life experiences. It has been suggested that opportunities for identity formation have opened up and become more reflective of individual choice than they were in the past. It is argued that individuals now have greater control over their own destinies. Consumption practices (what people buy and consume) are often cited as a key mechanism by which people can demonstrate their individuality and create their own individual identities.

Consumption, however, has also become an increasingly important element of distinction and stratification. Those experiencing poverty often find it difficult to partake in expected consumption behaviours. Furthermore, wider society often subjects the spending habits and patterns of those in the greatest poverty to stigmatisation.

So, while access to consumption might seem to open up opportunities for people to construct their lifestyles and identities in ways reflecting their own individual preferences and choices, it can also reinforce and support social class divisions and distinctions. Furthermore, social class positioning continues to be an important influence on many, if not all, aspects of people’s lives, including educational attainment, jobs and leisure activities.

Poverty, stigma and shame

Poverty and material deprivation are important drivers of stigma and shame. The depiction of those in poverty as ‘the other’ often occurs through the use of particular language, labels and images about what it means to be in poverty. These processes take place at different levels and in different sections of society. Those working in welfare sectors, for example, might negatively – and mostly mistakenly – point to individual character traits and behaviour when explaining the key reasons for unemployment. This is a process of negatively stereotyping those who are disadvantaged. While these labels are often applied from the top down, towards those experiencing poverty by those who are not, people in poverty can also buy into and perpetuate such stereotypes and stigmatisation. This is the consequence of the pressure those in poverty face to disassociate themselves from the stigma and shame associated with poverty.

Capitalism and the changing labour market

For a long time, successive governments have lauded work as the best route out of poverty. Yet the changing face of the labour market and work itself means that employment is no longer a guaranteed passport away from poverty, if indeed it ever was. In the current context, working conditions for many have worsened, public sector jobs have rapidly declined, unemployment and underemployment have been increasing, and low-paid and part-time work have proliferated. Low-paid work, or ‘poor work’ as it is sometimes referred to, is now an integral and growing aspect of the contemporary labour market. It is a particular problem for those countries which have followed an economy based on aggressive free-market principles. As a result, in-work poverty is an increasingly important explanation for contemporary poverty.
Conclusion

Sociology provides a powerful tool for thinking about poverty. ‘Thinking sociologically’ can help us to better comprehend social issues and problems. It allows us to understand personal troubles as part of the economic and political institutions of society, and permits us to cast a critical eye over issues that may otherwise be interpreted simplistically or misinterpreted. In looking at poverty, myths and misconceptions dominate both popular and political discussions. Sociological thinking can be helpful in trying to disentangle poverty from a range of related concepts and largely pejorative discussions about a variety of social problems.

Some attention has recently been devoted to the discussion of rising inequality. In the current context, economic inequality is getting more extreme, with those at the very top growing ever richer while the majority are finding life increasingly harsh and poverty rates are increasing. Much of the sociological evidence reviewed in this study has been concerned with the reproduction of (social class) inequalities over time. Research has shown that the majority of the British public accept that wealth can buy opportunities, but conversely most also believe in the notion of a meritocracy and that hard work is the best way to get on in life. Yet evidence shows that true equality of opportunity simply does not exist.

Using a framework of inequality (and equality) allows scope to think more closely about issues of class perpetuation and their relationship with poverty. It is not happenchance that countries with low rates of relative income poverty tend to have a strong focus on equality. Sociological theory can alert people to how a growing emphasis on individual responsibility and behaviour might make class inequality and the importance of opportunity structures less obvious. Despite this, it remains the case that where people start out in life continues to have a significant influence on where they are likely to end up. Starting out life in poverty means a greater risk of poverty later on in life.

About the project

This review analysed sociological theories and concepts on the causes of poverty and ways to understand poverty from a sociological perspective. The review was necessarily only partial, as the size of the field under consideration did not allow for a systematic review of all relevant literature. Hence, the review concentrated on what the authors deemed to be the most relevant debates for understanding poverty sociologically.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF’s research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF.

The main report, Sociological perspectives on poverty by Tracy Shildrick and Jessica Rucell, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

email: publications@jrf.org.uk
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