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REPORT

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POVERTY

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This report describes and critically analyses sociological theories on the causes of poverty and discusses contested concepts that relate to how we might understand poverty from a sociological/social theory perspective:

- sociological thinking tends to focus on the structure and organisation of society and how this relates to social problems and individual lives;
- in looking to explain poverty, sociologists try to balance up the relative importance of social structures (that is, the ways in which 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, while others have argued that it 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 shows that social class and processes of class reproduction remain important, particularly in respect of the continuity of poverty over time and across generations;
- relatedly, sociologists point to the importance of stigma and shame in understanding the experience of poverty;
- the ways that those experiencing poverty can be negatively stereotyped by institutions such as public or welfare delivery services has also been shown to be important in stigmatising and disadvantaging those experiencing poverty; and
- the opportunities that are open to people are still influenced, to a large extent, by their social class positions.

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INSPIRING SOCIAL CHANGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much sociological theory is directed at understanding social change. Social theorists throughout history have rarely talked about poverty per se but nonetheless their insights into the economic ordering and structure of society offer valuable ideas for how poverty might be understood.

Early sociological theory: Marx, Durkheim and Weber

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 their ownership of the means of production, were able to exploit this labour to their profit. Sociologist Max Weber, writing around the turn of the twentieth century, pointed to the importance of not just 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. We can see echoes of these early theoretical ideas in sociological thinking, to a greater or lesser degree, right up to the present day.

Poverty and the 'undeserving poor'

Much sociological thinking on poverty revolves around the relative importance of structure and agency in explaining the prevalence and perpetuation of poverty over time. The social and political propensity to mark out some people as being in some way responsible for their own hardship has a long history. Thus, in many accounts, particularly popular and political accounts but also some academic ones, there has been an emphasis on the supposedly 'undeserving poor', where individual behaviours, supposed fecklessness or moral failings are cited as key causes of poverty. In recent times, the welfare system itself has been argued to be 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 and more often than not tend to point to the importance of the broader context and the sorts of opportunities open to people, as being more important than individual behaviours, and choices in explaining and understanding poverty. Because of this close association between poverty and individual behaviours it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle poverty from a range of related issues such as unemployment or welfare receipt. This is especially the case in some of the current popular and political discourse, and ignores the fact that not all of the unemployed are experiencing poverty 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 problem substance use, or to uncritically cite these conditions as explanations of poverty, is not only tied up with the tendency to portray poverty as a problem which is created by those experiencing it but 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 tend to 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. In this vein, it has been suggested that opportunities for identity formation have opened up and have become more reflective of individual choice than they tended to be in the past. These changes are often viewed through the lens of individualisation, where it is argued that individuals now have greater control over their own destinies. Consumption practices (what people buy and consume) is often argued to be one of the key mechanisms by which people are able to 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, the spending habits and patterns of the poorest are often subjected to stigmatisation by wider society. So, on the face of it whilst access to consumption might seem to open up opportunities for people to construct their lifestyles and identities in ways which reflect 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, influencing for example, 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 experiencing poverty as 'the other' is often undertaken through the use of particular language, labels and images about what it means to experience poverty. These processes occur at different levels and in different sections of society. Those working in welfare sectors, for example, can 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. Whilst these labels are often applied top down (towards

those experiencing poverty by those who are not) it is also the case that people in poverty can also buy into and perpetuate such stereotypes and stigmatisation. This is a consequence of the pressure faced by those in poverty 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 of 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 are increasing and there has been a proliferation of low-paid and part-time work. Low-paid work or 'poor work', as it is sometimes referred to, is now an integral and growing aspect of the contemporary labour market and is a particular problem for those countries that have followed an aggressive, free-market based economy. Hence, in-work poverty is an increasingly important explanation of contemporary poverty.

What can sociological thinking contribute to debates about poverty?

Sociology provides a powerful lens through which to view poverty and 'thinking sociologically' can help us to better understand 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 lens towards issues which may otherwise be interpreted simplistically or misinterpreted. When we look at poverty, myths and misconceptions dominate both popular and political discussions, but 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.

Recently, some attention has 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 whilst the majority are finding life increasingly harsh and poverty rates are increasing. Much of the sociological evidence discussed in this review has been concerned with the reproduction of (social class) inequalities over time. Research shows that the majority of the British public accept that wealth can buy opportunities but, conversely, most 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 room to think more closely about issues of class reproduction and their relationship with poverty. It is not just happenchance that countries with low relative income poverty rates tend to have a strong focus on equality. Sociological theory is useful in alerting us to how a growing emphasis on individual responsibility and behaviour can render class inequality and the importance of opportunity structures less obvious. Despite this, it remains the case that where you start out in life continues to have a significant influence on where you are likely to end up.

1 INTRODUCTION

Novak argues that 'for the past hundred years thinking about poverty has been stuck in an empiricist framework that has concentrated on the measurement of poverty to the neglect of theory and explanation' (1995). One consequence of this limited theoretical engagement has been that the causes of poverty (and to a lesser degree the experience of poverty) remain only partially understood.

This review describes and critically analyses sociological theories on the causes of poverty and discusses contested concepts that relate to how we might understand poverty from a sociological/social theory perspective. The review is, necessarily, partial. The size of the field under consideration, coupled with time and resource constraints, did not allow for a complete or systematic review of all of the relevant literature. Hence, the review concentrates on what the authors deemed the most relevant debates for understanding poverty sociologically.

Attention to poverty has ebbed and flowed in sociological thinking. As Welshman notes 'writers on poverty in the 1960s were sociologists', yet 'this area of research is now dominated by economists' (2013). That the 1960s was the most popular period for sociological theorising on poverty must, at least in part, be explained by the 'rediscovery of poverty' in this period (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965; Titmuss, 1962) and the realisation that poverty remained, even in times of near full employment and despite the welfare state. Rather than focusing on poverty per se, much sociological research tends to be interested in related issues, such as disadvantage, social class or economic marginality, with the focus on poverty being sometimes explicit but often implicit. In constructing this review, a further challenge was the difficulty in disentangling purely sociological work from that which falls into other disciplines. Over 20 years ago Peter Townsend observed:

> Sociology and Social Policy I find difficult to separate. They cannot be separated for reasons of intellectual principle. I believe that professional ideology in universities and within sociology itself, and

political ideology in general, obstruct the theoretical analysis of social policy and policy institutions as the primary instruments of social change.
– Townsend, 1993 (in Walker, *et al.*, 2011)

Townsend's observation is, perhaps, even more relevant today. In reviewing the literature here, we found ourselves drawn into work that might be more closely associated with social policy, but also economics, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies and politics. Our experiences lead us to conclude that interdisciplinary research and cross-disciplinary working are probably more important than ever in thinking about the causes, consequences and policy responses to poverty. We conclude that it is perhaps through its ability to offer counter narratives and to try to challenge popular mythology and dominant discourses with empirical evidence, that sociological thinking has the most to contribute to understanding poverty.

Sociology is, as Norbert Elias claimed, a *myth buster*, tearing down prevailing misconceptions and folk beliefs, not least, as Bourdieu added, the myths wielded by the dominant and perpetuating the reproduction of inequality. Sociology is thus a means of *defence against symbolic domination* (which amongst other things maintains *material domination*).
– Atkinson, *et al.*, 2012

Sociology provides a powerful lens through which to view poverty. As C. Wright Mills argues, 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (2000), hence, 'thinking sociologically' can help us to better understand social issues and problems. More specifically, it affords us the capacity and privilege to understand 'personal troubles' as part of the 'economic and political institutions of society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals' (Wright Mills, 2000). Using unemployment (a key cause of poverty for many) as an example, Wright Mills offers the following analysis:

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When, in a city of 100,000 only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed.
– Wright Mills, 2000

For Giddens it is sociology's ability to 'bear most directly on issues that concern us in our everyday lives' that makes 'sociological thinking indispensable in contemporary society' (1996). It allows us to cast a critical focus on issues that may otherwise be interpreted simplistically or misinterpreted. Sometimes, its criticality makes it a 'discomforting' subject, as it 'challenges assumptions' and 'raises hackles that other academic subjects fail to reach'. This is especially relevant when we look at poverty where myths and misconceptions dominate both popular and political discussions on the topic.
The review is organised as follows:

- Chapter 2 reviews what are commonly known as 'grand scale' theoretical ideas (O'Byrne, 2011). These are mostly concerned with explaining

society-level organisation and broader social change. Drawing on the early founding sociological theories, the review briefly outlines what such theories contributed in respect of understanding poverty and inequality more generally.

- Chapter 3 looks at the notion of the 'undeserving poor' and briefly charts the various concepts and ideas that have emerged (particularly since the post-war period) to explain poverty and, particularly, its persistence across generations.
- Chapter 4 considers the rise of individualisation, the importance of consumption and the supposed declining importance of social class.
- Chapter 5 focuses on the increasing importance of stigma and shame in understanding and explaining poverty from a sociological perspective.
- Chapter 6 explores the importance of poverty and employment, with particular attention directed towards a brief review of the theoretical accounts of Byrne (1999) and Standing (2010; 2014).
- Chapter 7 concludes the review, offering key thoughts on how we might best use sociological thinking in our efforts to better understand and tackle poverty.

Poverty and inequality: a note on terms

The terms 'poverty' and 'inequality' are frequently used together and it is often assumed that the terms mean one and the same thing. Smith (2010) argues that while 'poverty' and 'economic inequality' are closely related terms, they refer to 'distinct and different concepts'. The scope of this review precludes detailed definitions of poverty (e.g. as provided elsewhere, Goulden and D'Arcy, 2014), or debates about how poverty might best be measured. Instead, it offers a brief description of how these two concepts might be defined and how they differ.

Poverty is a term that concentrates on those who have the least money or other resources or, as Ridge and Wright (2008) argue, it is 'a situation of extreme disadvantage experienced at the bottom of the social and economic scale'. Yet poverty is more than being at the bottom of the income scale; it describes individuals and families who have inadequate resources to secure what is deemed a reasonable, or expected, standard of living within a given country. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) working definition of poverty is: 'When a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)' (Goulden and D'Arcy, 2014).

Most contemporary researchers take this relative view of poverty. Peter Townsend was instrumental in defining poverty as being about much more than simply a lack of economic resources. For Townsend, poverty was, 'the experience of lacking resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved in societies to which they belong' (1979).

Importantly, over recent decades in the UK there has been a shift away from the language of poverty (although in the very recent period there has been a partial revival of discussion with the rise of the use of food banks, for example). The general move away from the language of poverty has happened despite rising rates of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Rowlingson, *et al.*, 2010; Dorling, 2012). In part, rising general standards of living seem to have rendered the term less apt or capable of capturing the reality of economic marginalisation. Much misinformation means that not

only is poverty frequently misunderstood but also many are left questioning whether it exists at all (NatCen, 2012; Clery, *et al.*, 2013; TUC, 2013). The diminishing acceptance and use of the term poverty started in the post-war period when, as Atkinson (2000) points out, 'the dominant belief within the British political elite was that by the mid-1950s, full employment and the welfare state had eradicated the conditions that characterised the inter-war period and problems of poverty had been largely abolished'. Despite the partial 'rediscovery of poverty' in the 1960s, the concept has never really regained popularity either with the general public or with politicians and policy-makers. We return to this issue in the conclusion of the report.

Whereas poverty is about the gap between the resources of those at the bottom and the resources of the rest of society, inequality is concerned with the distribution of resources throughout society as a whole. Ridge and Wright (2008) provide the following definition: 'Inequality refers to disparities between individuals, groups and nations in access to resources, opportunities, assets and income'. Furthermore, they argue that 'economic inequality is particularly significant for people's capacity to have access to and command of resources'. Inequality – more specifically the gap between the richest and the poorest – is of particular concern in the UK, where this gap has been widening for some time. The UK has followed global trends – and particularly the US – in this respect but the levels of inequality are striking and amongst some of the highest in Europe (Dorling, 2014; Jones, 2014; Haddad, 2012).

According to Titmuss, inequality lies at the heart of how we understand poverty (1965) and there may be room to explore further how it might provide a fruitful mechanism for thinking more creatively about how to tackle poverty and impact both policy agenda and public opinion.

2 EARLY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: MARX, DURKHEIM AND WEBER

Much sociological theory is directed at understanding social change. Social theorists rarely talk about poverty per se but nonetheless their insights into the economic ordering and structure of society offer valuable ideas for how poverty might be understood.

Marx and Engels were writing in Victorian Britain, around the mid-1800s, and they deemed poverty to have a revolutionary and subversive side, believing that capitalism had the capacity to overthrow the old society. Durkheim and Weber followed slightly later, writing at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century.[1] Durkheim emphasised the functional necessity of social inequality for the well-being of society (Durkheim, 1964; Weber, 1968), whereas Weber was interested in the importance of power and prestige. To a greater or lesser degree, we can see echoes of these early theoretical ideas in sociological thinking, right up to the present day.

Auguste Comte, often considered to be the founding sociological theorist, was interested in the ways in which radical upheaval and change took place and affected society (e.g. the industrial revolution) and issues around social change and societal level conditions remain at the heart of much sociological thinking. As Charon (1998) argues, much sociology is concerned with the nature and organisation of society and a key question that unites the discipline is 'why there is inequality in society and what are its consequences?' In respect of these questions Charon asks:

> Is it (inequality) inherent in the nature of organisation? How does it arise? How is it perpetuated? What are the problems it brings, and

how does it affect the individual? Marx saw inequality as inherent in all class societies; Weber saw it inherent in the nature of lasting organisation. Some sociologists see it as contributing to order. All see it as one source of social change.
– Charon, 1998

Harman (2003) argues that Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* 'is probably the most influential political pamphlet ever written'. It also features in Seymour-Smith's 100 most influential books every written (1998). It is easy to forget that capitalism is only a little over 200 years old, and it was the inequities and inequalities it engendered that puzzled Marx and Engels, and which consumed so much of their energy and writing. For them, it was the repeated crises inherent in capitalism itself that would eventually lead to its demise as the 'history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles' (2010). Marx and Engels believed that the enduring drive for ever-greater profits within the capitalist system required the inevitable and constant exploitation of the worker (wage labourer). Where Marx's writing is most relevant for understanding poverty is in his analysis of social classes in society. For Marx, society is structured via a set of objectively defined interests which serve to create relations of exploitation, particularly in respect of production. There has been much debate over how many classes Marx identified but, most importantly, it was the division between those who owned the means of production and those who sold their labour which, for Marx, lay at the heart of capitalist exploitation. Thus, the distinction between the 'oppressor and the oppressed' (2010) – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – lies at the heart of this analysis of class inequality and exploitation. It was Marx's view that workers were more often than not paid little more than subsistence wages (to allow for ever greater profits for the owners of the means of production), and were hired and fired according to need. Hence, for Marx, poverty was an inherent feature of capitalist society (as well as the source of class antagonism which, he predicted, would ultimately lead to the demise of the capitalist system). Harman points to the writing of Marx and Engels, particularly *The Communist Manifesto*, which managed to spell out 'what was happening in the overall scheme of human history'. According to Harman, this makes the work 'just as relevant today as it was when it was written' (2003). Indeed, for Callinicos (2010) *The Communist Manifesto* remains 'a manifesto for the 21st century', with the economic crisis that emerged in 2007 being simply the latest and one of the 'most serious' sort of crises predicted by Marx.

Emile Durkheim took a very different perspective from Marx. Durkheim is often credited with developing what later became known as Functionalism. For Functionalists the class system helps to cement cohesion and does not lead to conflict. Functionalist theory has been more popular in the US than in the UK. Two influential social theorists of the 1940s, Davis and Moore, concluded that class stratification was inevitable because it offered a 'use value' or a function to society. Their view that society is a functioning mechanism led to the theoretical proposition that stratification was inevitable. Moreover, they argued that social stratification served a function because society needed to find ways to ensure that its members ended up in social positions that best suited them (and their abilities and skills).

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Inequality is an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality.
– Davis and Moore, 1945

Further, they posit that differential rewards, in the forms of payments and other benefits, thus relate to the 'importance of the social function they fulfil' and to the training and talent required (in which those in more prestigious positions will have had to invest to obtain specialised skills). Davis and Moore concluded that the universality and consensus about the most socially valuable positions across societies meant that inequality was accepted as legitimate. This legitimacy is based on an unstated assumption, however, that everyone has an equal opportunity to pursue training and develop their skills. Thus, they interpreted the class system as little cause for antagonism, discord or concern. Saunders further developed these arguments and also argued that some level of inequality was productive. Furthermore, it was Saunders' view that an egalitarian society 'could only be realised at the price of individual liberty' (1990, in Bradley, 1996). Saunders believed that, generally, unequal talents are reflected in unequal rewards.

Max Weber took a different approach again from both Durkheim and Marx. He argued that social class was about more than simple economics. He introduced the idea that social class was also fragmented along other lines of inequality: those of power and status. Thus, for Weber, class was much more complicated than it was for Marx. As Bradley points out:

Weber also introduced the notion of another form of fragmentation, when he argued that class groupings were cross cut by two other types of social grouping deriving from the unequal distribution of power in society: status groups and political parties.
– Bradley, 1996

Weber was interested in social change, and with ownership and property. He also had keen interests in bureaucracy.

Exclusion arises from the interplay of class, status and political power and serves the interests of the included. Social 'closure' is achieved when institutions and cultural distinctions not only create boundaries that keep others out against their will, but are also used to perpetuate inequality.
– Silver, 1994

So, for Weber, class and stratification was multi-dimensional. Rather than reducing inequality between groups in society to purely economic foundations he was also interested in the distribution of power. Weber believed that the use of power and status could allow some groups of individuals to get what they want, even in the face of opposition from others. Like Marx, however, he was clear that economic class positions often provided the main mechanism by which other social positions and power were ultimately determined. For Weber, individuals' life chances were related to all these issues. Thus, from Weber's perspective, those in poverty tend to lack property and the economic advantages this confers. Moreover, 'for

Marx, class relationships are grounded in exploitation and domination within *production* relations, whereas for Weber, class situations reflect differing "life chances" in the *market*' (Crompton, 1993).

All the founding theories remain relevant in contemporary sociological writing, to some degree or other. This issue is revisited in the conclusion.

3 POVERTY AND THE 'UNDESERVING POOR'

Much sociological thinking on poverty tends to revolve around the relative importance of structure and agency in explaining the prevalence and perpetuation of poverty over time.

Basically, this body of work tries to understand the balance between individual actions and the ways in which behaviours and experiences may be impacted and constrained by the broader context (Lewis, 1961; Murray, 1990).

Historically, explanations of poverty have focused on family and behavioural level explanations and debates have often revolved around the supposed distinction between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor'. It is these debates upon which this chapter concentrates.

The social and political propensity to mark out some people as being in some way culpable or responsible for their own hardship has a long history. Explanations tend to emphasise individual behaviour, fecklessness or moral failing or – particularly in more recent times – the welfare system itself, which is deemed to encourage and support claimants into accepting welfare dependency (Murray, 1990). Morris (1994) has traced the rise and fall of sociological concern with differently labelled versions of the 'undeserving poor' over the past century and before.

In the Victorian era, slum dwellers were variously labelled the 'residuum', the 'dangerous classes', the 'improvident classes' or the 'disreputable poor' (Damer, 1989). As Holman points out:

> With almost boring repetitiveness vehement efforts have been
> exercised to impose a cleavage among the poor: those who are
> poor due to socio-economic and demographic factors outside their
> control and those who are poor because of their own inadequate,
> deviant behaviour. It has been a common theme that this latter group
> of recalcitrant and wayward, pathological individuals and families
> constitutes a destabilising force.
> – Holman, 1994

Holman argues that these ideas date back at least 500 years, moving through to the 1800s, and with talk of the 'submerged tenth' deemed to

be living in poverty and squalor, identified by the social surveys of Charles Booth, followed by the 'social defectives' of the 1920s. In the 1950s there was an important shift in thinking, away from the notion of the 'social problem group' that had been influential in the 1930s to a new concept of the 'problem family' (Rutter and Madge, 1976; Welshman, 1999). Problem families were described as facing many different problems, such as 'subnormal mental capacity, adverse family influences during childhood, broken families, frequent pregnancies, chronic ill-health, husbands absent in the forces and alcoholism' but the emphasis has forever leaned more towards an 'essentially behavioural interpretation of the causes of poverty and deprivation' (Macnicol, in Welshman, 1999).

Welshman has identified six variations in the terminology used to describe disadvantaged groups: the social residuum of the 1880s; the social problem group of the 1930s; the problem family of the 1950s; the culture of poverty thesis of the 1960s; the cycle of deprivation thesis of 1970s; and the underclass debates of the 1980s (Welshman, 2013). More recently these ideas have morphed into more contemporary variants that point to cultures of worklessness, 'troubled families' or families who have never worked as key explanations for poverty. All these ideas have seeped into popular and policy discourse at various points in time, whilst also occupying academics who have often been keen to use empirical evidence to challenge these dominant individual, and often psychological, explanations for poverty.

The cycle of deprivation thesis developed by Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s was firmly in the behavioural camp of explaining poverty and drew heavily on 'underclass stereotypes' (Welshman, 1997). Joseph provided the following account of poverty:

> It seems that perhaps much deprivation and maladjustment persists from generation to generation through what I have called a 'cycle of deprivation'. Parents who themselves were deprived in one or more ways in childhood, become in turn the parents of another generation of deprived children.
> – Joseph, 1972, cited in Jordan, 1974

So, for Joseph, it was the transmission of attitudes, values and behaviours that helped to explain the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In challenging the 'cycle of deprivation' approach researchers drew attention to the environment and lack of opportunities as key to explaining the intergenerational continuity of poverty and many of its associated problems. Townsend's interventions were crucial, insofar as he drew explicit attention to the range of resources needed to 'permit participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society' (Townsend, 1979) and to the importance of these resources for the intergenerational continuity of poverty. Townsend not only was 'the first to conceptualise poverty as relative' (Bradshaw, 2011) but he also drew attention to the importance of wider resources, such as housing, diet and access to leisure activities, rather than just income, in understanding the experience of poverty. Importantly, he pointed to the structural causes of poverty and the importance of understanding 'class relations' (Townsend, 1979) and the 'allocative principles and mechanisms and developments in the pattern of social life and consumption'. In drawing attention to the distribution of resources and the power relations that were inherent in producing poverty, Townsend drew attention to themes that run through much subsequent sociological research and analysis (see later chapters of this review). In a similar way, Coffield and colleagues (1980) also rejected the idea of a 'cycle of deprivation' preferring

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instead the metaphor of a 'web of deprivation' – which, they argued, better characterised the 'dense network of psychological, social, historical and economic factors that either created or perpetuated problems' for the families they studied.

By the 1980s, in Britain, the term 'underclass' had become part of a popular vocabulary in discussions of poverty and social change (Welshman, 2013). Although the term was not new and had been used previously, it grew in popularity largely as a consequence of the interventions of Charles Murray, writing popularly in the media in the UK and also influential on the then Conservative Government on issues relating to welfare. Although Murray was not a sociologist, his views prompted sociological discussion and research, much of which engaged directly (or indirectly) with his ideas. Murray's views were firmly located in a welfare dependency framework as he posited that he was not interested only in poverty, but a 'type of poverty'. He argued that 'Britain has a growing population of work-aged, healthy people, who live in a different world from other Britons, who are raising their children to live in it, and whose values are now contaminating the values of entire neighbourhoods' (Murray, 1990).

Responses to the underclass idea were mixed. Four positions can be discerned (MacDonald, 1997; Welshman, 2013). There were those who accepted the argument put forward by Murray and agreed that an underclass existed and that the causation lay largely with individual behaviours. Then there were those who accepted that some sort of underclass may exist but saw its origins as being largely structural in nature. Others were more inclined to accept that there may be some sort of underclass developing but struggled to provide empirical evidence in support of the idea. Finally, there were those who simply rejected the idea outright (see Welshman [2013] for a review of the issues surrounding the underclass idea). MacDonald argues that:

> The underclass theory of Murray and his followers is simplistic. It cannot properly comprehend how the alleged anti-social behaviour of 'underclass' youth might be the product not of individual or subcultural pathology, but of the complicated interplay or structural forces with individual biographies.
> – MacDonald, 1997

In effect, many academic writers were as dubious about the language as much as they were unsure about the idea, deeming it dangerous and misleading in respect of the causes and consequences of poverty.

During the later 1990s the less stigmatising and pejorative term 'social exclusion' took centre stage as a way of talking about those experiencing multiple disadvantages. Sociologists were more receptive to the value of social exclusion simply because of its wider remit. Furthermore, it seemed to fit better with the notion that factors beyond individual behaviour were important in understanding poverty, to the point that by the early 2000s the idea had become part of the 'common currency of British social policy debates' (Burchardt, *et al.*, 2002). In some respects the idea echoed the emphasis that Durkheim and the later, Functionalist theories had placed on social cohesion and social integration. The Social Exclusion Unit, set up by Tony Blair's Labour Government in 1997, defined social exclusion as 'a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (1998).

Here, again, there are further parallels with Townsend's approach to poverty (1979) with an emphasis on the cumulative impact of problems in the economic, political and cultural spheres. Madanipour, *et al.* (1998) argue that social exclusion ' ... is defined as a multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural purposes'.

As Cars, *et al.* (1998) argue, in isolation, social exclusion in any one of these will seldom lead to exclusion in another but 'when combined they become a strong force pushing people into the processes of social exclusion'. The concept also allowed for an emphasis on spatial deprivation as oppose to simply individual measures. As Hills, *et al.* note, the concept of social exclusion widens the focus 'beyond individuals and households to communities and neighbourhoods' (2002). For some it offered new ways of thinking about poverty and exclusion (Sen, 2000). Different theorists of social exclusion have emphasised different facets of it, including unequal distribution of resources, social integration into the labour market, and moral and behavioural deficiencies (Levitas, 2006).

For some, the concept social exclusion, whilst potentially less stigmatising than poverty and offering a more holistic understanding of the problem, still lacked clarity of meaning. John Veit-Wilson argues that the social exclusion discourse is 'used in many different and often imprecise ways' (1998). For others, it was little more than an 'unhelpful relabeling of poverty' (Beall, 2002). Veit-Wilson argues too that it was a 'discourse deliberately chosen for closure' and to 'depoliticize poverty *as far as income distribution was concerned*' (1998). Thus, here it is argued that the concept drew attention away from the wider issues of inequality and the increasing gap between those with extensive and growing resources, and those with few and dwindling resources. Pointing to weak and strong versions of social exclusion, Veit-Wilson (1998) argues that stronger versions of the concept of social exclusion are more concerned not just with those who are excluded, but also with 'those who are doing the excluding'. This is also a concern of Byrne, who contends that the 'multidimensionality' of social exclusion represents 'considerable development beyond the passive conception of poverty as a state' (1999). In Byrne's view, the 'socially excluded' form a necessary and inevitable reserve army of labour in late capitalist economies. Welfare policies add to the problems of social exclusion by propelling those in poverty into jobs that do not take them away from their poverty and which exacerbate their social exclusion (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of these ideas).

In recent years public and political debates about poverty have become closely associated with unemployment or worklessness, with attention directed to apparent welfare dependency and 'cultures of worklessness' as contemporary explanations for poverty. This premise underpins much of the current welfare reform. A key argument is the idea that some people do not want to work. Central to this is the popular idea that young people growing up in workless families will learn to inhabit cultures of worklessness or embrace uncritically welfare dependency. Statistical evidence, however, shows that families where generations have never worked are statistically insignificant (MacMillan, 2010), although there is a correlation between young people growing up in workless households and their risk of unemployment, with unemployment obviously being a risk factor for falling into poverty. Ideas around welfare dependency are increasingly popular with governments of all stripes but have been central to many of the 2010–2015 Coalition Government's statements on welfare and their efforts

towards radical welfare reform (DWP, 2010; DWP, 2012). These sorts of ideas are also known to be popular with many of those who work with the unemployed (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012a).

Sociological evidence suggests that these ideas are largely unfounded. Empirical evidence does not support the idea that people positively embrace living on welfare benefits or that people prefer living on benefits to working. There is little evidence that all but a very small number of claimants prefer not to work or that claimants do not actively engage in job searching (Wright, 2013). Throughout more than twelve years of research in deprived neighbourhoods in Teesside, Shildrick and colleagues also found a strong commitment to work amongst people who are often described as having rejected the work ethic (Webster, *et al.*, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012a) – even when repeatedly faced with 'junk jobs' (Lash and Urry, 1994) characterised by 'gruelling, monotonous, tightly controlled and poorly rewarded' working conditions (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009) and sometimes being made substantially poorer in taking work. The work ethic of research participants remained stubbornly – and perhaps surprisingly – steadfast (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012a; Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012b). Other studies of deprived neighbourhoods have produced similar findings (Rogaly and Taylor, 2009; O'Hara, 2014). The fact that a work commitment remains strong even where jobs are scarce can be explained, at least in part, by long-standing class cultural expectations about the importance of employment within the working class. Work has moral and emotional dimensions, as well as economic ones, and it offers dignity and respect (Sennett, 2003; Chamberlayne, *et al.*, 2002). The idea that the workless inhabit cultures of worklessness or that they pass on such attitudes and values to young people has also been found wanting (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012b; 2013). In respect of unemployment and deprived areas, the Social Exclusion Unit found that there was 'no consistent evidence of a culture of worklessness in these neighbourhoods, in the sense that people have completely different values and do not want to work at all' (SEU, 2004). In their study of residents living in social housing, Fletcher, *et al.* (2008) came to exactly the same conclusion as the Social Exclusion Unit, noting that there was 'no consistent evidence for the existence of cultures of worklessness'. Similarly, Shildrick, *et al.* (2012b) conclude from their work with families with experiences of long-term worklessness across generations:

> The study concludes that the notion of three or even two generations of families where no-one has ever worked is ill-founded as an explanation for contemporary worklessness in the UK. Such families account for a vanishingly small fraction of the workless. Our research shows that the more general idea of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness' is also an unhelpful concept in trying to understand patterns of extensive worklessness in families.
> – Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012b

What the above discussion tells us is that it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle poverty and 'the poor' from a range of related issues, such as unemployment, welfare receipt and a range of social problems. This is especially the case in some of the current popular and political discourse. This despite the fact that not all of the unemployed are experiencing poverty and neither are all of those experiencing poverty out of work (in fact, statistics show that more than half of households in poverty have someone in work (MacInnes, *et al.*, 2013). The tendency to conflate poverty with other social issues such as unemployment, welfare receipt, or even problem

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substance use, relates at least in part to the propensity to disregard poverty or to see it as a problem created by those who experience it. The notion of the 'undeserving poor' is nothing new but one important consequence of this rebranding of poverty as something distasteful and to be avoided at all costs is that social problems, such as those mentioned above, become very closely bound up with explanations of poverty. So, such social problems (e.g. problematic drug use) tend to be cited as key explanations or the causes of poverty – despite the fact that only a small proportion of poverty is associated with problem substance use (e.g. DWP, 2014). This impacts negatively on public perceptions of poverty and what might be deemed appropriate policy responses to it, hence in the current period poverty – of any sort – has effectively 'been rebranded as deserved' (Tyler, 2013).

4 THE 'CULTURAL TURN', CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL CLASS

People with the same income level, or put in the old fashioned way, within the same class, can or even must choose between different lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities. From knowing one's class position one can no longer determine one's personal outlook, relations, family position, social and political ideas or identity.
– Beck, 1992

In the 1990s, sociologists began to observe changes in society, which led them to develop new theories to describe these changes as it was argued by some commentators that society had entered a post-modern phase. The development of these theories became known as the 'cultural turn' (Chaney, 1994; Du Gay and Pryke, 2003). Whilst there is no agreement as to the terminology that might be used to describe such changes, there is general agreement that radical social changes have occurred (Giddens, 2000) and produced significant changes in the way lives are lived and experienced. In particular (and of importance for this review) it has been suggested that consumption has become an increasingly important aspect of people's identity and that, in turn, lifestyles have supposedly become more reflective of individuals' own choices and decision-making practices.

Abbott and Wallace (1990) note that 'sociologists make use of social class in virtually all of their research' and, whilst sociologists might debate the relative influence and effects of social class, most are agreed that social class has an 'economic foundation', where people who share common financial situations often share similar life experiences (and life chances). For this reason, social class is important when trying to explain or understand poverty. As Crompton (1993) points out, 'The discourse of social class has become one of the key concepts through which we can begin to understand

the modern world. Class, therefore, is a major organising concept in the exploration of contemporary stratification systems.'

In recent years some have argued that social class distinctions have supposedly become more complex and fuzzy. It has been suggested that class distinctions have become less obvious and, for some, less significant for lifestyles and life experiences. There is not space in this review to cover these debates in any detail (see Roberts, 2001, for an excellent review). However, we offer an overview of those which might best help us to understand poverty. Whilst few have aligned themselves with the view that class has disappeared altogether (Pakulski and Waters, 1995) many agree that opportunities for identity formation have opened up and, to some degree or other, they are more reflective of individual choice than ever before.

Featherstone argues that 'this is the world of men and women who quest for the new and latest in relationship and experiences, who have a sense of adventure and take risks to explore life's options to the full' (1991). Importantly, it is argued that lifestyles and life choices are accorded greater individual reflection and consideration; therefore, lifestyles are supposedly more obviously determined by individual choices, behaviours and actions. This is what Giddens defines as 'reflexive biographies of the self' (Giddens, 1991) where individuals are deemed to have far greater control over their own destinies than was generally the case in the past. Beck describes it thus:

> Individualisation in this sense means that each person's biography is removed from given determinants and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. Individualisation of life's situations and processes thus meaning that biographies become self-reflexive.
> – Beck, 1992

It has been argued that it is the increased importance of consumption that has opened up opportunities for more flexible and individualised identity formation and, for some, consumption has become an increasingly important element of distinction and stratification. Hence, for Bauman, it is consumption rather than production which produces the most significant social cleavages in contemporary society (Bauman, 1992). He points to those who are 'defective consumers' (Bauman, 2013) where 'non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life unfulfilled, a mark of nonentity and good-for-nothingness' (Bauman, 2013). Those experiencing poverty often find it virtually impossible to partake in expected consumption habits and behaviours, or their attempts become markers of stigma and shame; hence we see a ratcheting up of 'inequality of social standing' (Bauman, 2013).

Research has shown how these issues play out in the lives of those experiencing poverty. Drawing on in-depth interviews with families on low incomes, Hamilton argues that 'individuals initiate strategies to avoid the social effects of stigmatisation and alleviate threats to social identity' (2012). The stigma associated with particular styles of dressing, especially amongst young people, has long been a feature of sociological research (Shildrick, 2006; McCulloch, et al., 2006). Hamilton's research shows how young single mothers' investment in buying the 'right' designer brands for their children can be understood in opposing ways. The mothers in her research placed emphasis on conspicuous consumption to avoid the social

effects of stigmatisation and, furthermore, such consumption practices (e.g. buying named-brand trainers for children) can 'have a positive impact on the self-esteem of single mothers' (2012). Yet at the same time those very same consumption habits are often demonised and stigmatised by wider society. This resonates with Bauman's reference to 'flawed consumers' where the purchasing habits of the poorest are labelled and stigmatised by others. In her research, Hamilton argues that the mothers, whilst attempting to improve the living standards of their families and provide their children with accepted trappings of the current consumer society were, at the same time, feeding into broader processes, which served to further fuel stigmatisation, exclusion and marginalisation. The families in Hamilton's research were engaged in strategies and behaviours that were an attempt to 'disguise' their poverty and were also understood as an expression of what it meant to be 'being a good mother'. Similarly, the women experiencing poverty in Shildrick and MacDonald's research were quick to label and castigate other women for food consumption practices deemed to be unhealthy (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). In respect of the mothers in her research study, Hamilton concludes that, 'those who follow a strategy of conspicuous consumption to mask poverty encounter the very stigmatisation that they set out to avoid in the first instance' (Hamilton, 2012). Skeggs' work is important in helping to understand how this sort of symbolic violence can become attached to certain behaviours, attributes and ways of being. Hamilton notes, 'What is also significant is how certain tastes become institutionalised, protected by symbolic boundaries and forms of exclusion, so that the categories used by groups to recognise and "cultivate differences" become legitimated over time' (2012).

Whilst, superficially, access to consumption might seem to open up opportunities for identity construction, this does not necessarily mean that consumption can always transcend social class differences. Furthermore, as the evidence above shows, it often seems to reinforce and support them. Class matters across a range of life activities; for example, lifestyles and leisure (Archer, *et al.*, 2007; Hamilton, 2012), and work and employment opportunities (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012a). Numerous empirical sociological studies have shown how social class impacts on people's daily lives, as well as their longer-term prospects. Walkerdine and colleagues' study of 33 girls growing up in London illustrates well how facets of social class permeated virtually every aspect of the girls' lives, with signs of class being ever present and most young people saying that they could 'spot it a mile off' (2001). Similarly, a study of young people (Ball, *et al.*, 2000) concluded that 'vestigial structures and values like family and locality' were integral to understanding young people's experiences and led to 'socio-scapes which were quite clearly classed'. Diane Reay's work (2012) shows how similar processes work for middle class young people, albeit it in very different ways and with different outcomes. They argue that middle class parents invest in their children, using whatever resources they can to try and ensure educational success. This is not just about how much money middle class parents are able to invest in their children's schooling (e.g. books and access to home computing) but also 'other, less visible benefits of affluence – confidence, entitlement, a sense of belonging in education – that comes with a family history of privilege' (2012). It is perhaps these long-standing class inequalities in education and educational achievement that are of particular relevance for this review. Evidence shows that 'educational attainment has the largest impact on the likelihood of being in poverty and severely materially deprived as an adult' (Serafino and Tonkin, 2014). Yet, research shows that, to a large extent, educational outcomes remain differentiated by social class background and that the education system continues to best

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serve those who are most economically advantaged (Ball, *et al.*, 2000; Reay, 2012). As Roberts notes:

> This is what meritocracy means when you are at the bottom. It means that education becomes a luxury, not a right. Fifty years ago, education was the magic wand, facilitating social mobility no matter how deprived a child's background. Recent research tells us this is no longer the case. On the contrary, in the unevenness of its delivery, it appears to be the cause of social exile for too many of our young.
> – Roberts, 2006

Thus, as Reay's research shows, 'class inequalities in education are not just about what students bring to the classroom; they are also about the very unequal education students receive once they are there' (2012). Current economic conditions are likely to exacerbate this situation as those in better off positions try to maintain their economic positions in tighter and more difficult economic conditions. Ken Roberts asserts:

> Parents may be angered by the low salaries that their well-qualified children are being offered, the shortage of long-term career jobs and the debts that the young are incurring and frustrated that they, the elders, lack the resources to remedy or compensate for young people's difficulties.
> – Roberts, 2012

These processes are not just the result of greater economic capacity but are also helped by other resources, which those in better financial circumstances are often able to draw upon. Bourdieu's ideas around different sorts of 'capital' are important here (1984). Using the concept of capital (social, cultural, economic and symbolic), Bourdieu offers an analysis of the complex ways in which class is much more than a simple occupational hierarchy and is located very securely within the social and material associations of everyday life. In particular, Bourdieu was interested in how different sorts of capital are used to maintain hierarchies and inequalities or how these different sorts of capital contribute to the reproduction of inequality. Power is located within different forms of capital that may either enable or disable one's ability to engage with, and negotiate, life's choices and dilemmas. One example is the importance of social networks in providing mechanisms that contribute to sustaining class divisions and, in particular, in sustaining class privilege.

There is a tendency in some quarters to portray those experiencing poverty, and the neighbourhoods in which they live, as lacking in social capital or strong social networks. Yet research shows that people living with poverty often have strong, close, supportive relationships (MacDonald, *et al.*, 2005). Forrest and Kearns (2001) claim that 'close family ties, mutual aid and voluntarism' are often strong features of deprived areas and often help people to 'cope with poverty, unemployment and wider processes of social exclusion'. However, the social capital represented by the social networks of those on lower incomes differs from the social capital inherent in the networks of more affluent groups (Putman, 1998). It is argued that those with fewer resources or living in more deprived neighbourhoods tend to possess what is termed 'bonding' social capital, characterised by local and immediate social networks (often family) that assist people in getting by, day to day. 'Bridging' social capital, however, is associated with broader, cross-cutting contacts and ties, where individuals can gain access to other groups

and individuals as a consequence of the people they know. 'Bridging' social capital is closely associated with those in more advantaged social classes, allowing access to more privileged networks that can assist, for example, in job searches. It is perhaps unsurprising that, as Power (2007) notes, 'people who start from an unequal position in society end up in places that "pull them down" and it is indeed not coincidental that "poor people, poor places, poor prospects go hand in hand"'. Social class, by its very nature, is a process of reproduction. Privilege breeds privilege, making poverty and disadvantage even harder to escape. As Midwinter (2006) suggests 'the children of the poorer do not compete fairly with the children of richer groups … there were always social equivalents of blood transfusions to infuse those from the upper echelons with reviving plasma'.

A number of different sociological concepts have been used to try and account for the ways in which life experiences are presumed (and often understood by participants in research studies) to be more individualised and reflective of individual choices, whilst simultaneously taking account of the continued importance of social structures and structures of opportunity. Roberts, *et al.* have used the concept of 'structured individualisation' to try and make sense of the ways in which young people's transitions into the labour market have become more individualised, but at the same time continue in many respects to be affected by their wider socio-economic positions. They admit that there is more scope for young people to 'construct individual transitions' (1994), but also recognise that opportunities remain unequal and progression often remains dependent 'on the familiar predictors – family, educational background, sex and place of residence'. 'Bounded agency' has been used in a similar way to describe people's structurally rooted, 'subjectively perceived frames for action and decision'. Evans argues that in respect of young people these frames have boundaries and limits, which can change over time but which also have structural foundations in ascribed characteristics such as gender and social/educational inheritance (2007). For Furlong and Cartmel (1997) this represents the 'epistemological fallacy' of late modern life where 'the greater range of opportunities available helps to obscure the extent to which existing patterns of inequality are simply being reproduced in different ways', as 'class is harder to see, but no less present' (Lawler, 2005).

5 POVERTY, STIGMA AND SHAME

Spicker claims that poverty 'is a moral concept, as well as a descriptive one' (2007) and studies have found that material deprivation and poverty are potent drivers of stigmatisation.

Goffman (1963) characterised stigma as a 'mark' of social disgrace, arising within social relations and disqualifying those who bear it from full social acceptance. Those experiencing poverty are further burdened by the psychologically disempowering effects of deprivation that also undermine their resistance to stigma (Campbell and Deacon, 2006). Markers of stigma take various forms: 'abominations of the body' such as physical deformities, alleged 'blemishes of individual character' such as mental illness or unemployment or what Goffman termed 'tribal identities', such as religion or ethnicity. People who are perceived to possess such markers are seen as having a 'spoiled identity', which is associated with various forms of social devaluation (Goffman, 1963, in Campbell and Deacon, 2006).

Researchers investigating the processes whereby stigma is mobilised have approached it on three different levels, 'individual, macro-social and multi-level' (Campbell and Deacon, 2006). Bell offers a simple overview of these three areas: 'personal stigma' (a person's own feeling of shame), 'social stigma' (the feeling that other people judge a mark or practice as shameful) and 'institutional stigma' (which arises from the process of interacting with institutions or larger social structures within society) (Bell, 2013). Thus, while stigma is 'a phenomenon rooted in the individual psyche' it is 'constantly mediated by the material, political, institutional and symbolic context' (Campbell and Deacon, 2006). This growing body of research situates 'stigmatization and discrimination within a broader social, cultural, political, and economic framework rather than as individual processes' (Parker and Aggleton, 2002), and has developed the concept of 'structural stigma' (Bos, *et al.*, 2013). By starting from the notion that stigmatisation is a process that requires some recognition of difference and that those differences relate to how different groups are located within power structures, this research helps build understanding about how stigma '… produces and reproduces social inequality. Stigmatisation, therefore, not only helps to create difference but

also plays a key role in transforming difference based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality into social inequality' (Parker and Aggleton, 2002).

According to Parker and Aggleton (2002), 'stigmatization is a social process used to create and maintain social control by differentiating between the stigmatized and the non-stigmatized, and to make these inequalities seem reasonable'. Lister's work highlights how, through language and images, the 'more powerful "non-poor" construct "the poor" as "Other"'.

> The notion of 'Othering' conveys how this is not an inherent state but an ongoing process animated by the 'non-poor.' ... It is not a neutral line, for it is imbued with negative value judgments that construct 'the poor' variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat, an 'undeserving' economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species.
> – Lister, 2004

Lister points out that this process of Othering occurs at different levels and in different sections of society, 'from everyday social relations through interaction with welfare officials and professionals to research, the media, the legal system and policy making' (Schram, 1995, in Lister, 2004). It is here that we can see the idea of institutional stigma playing out. Research has shown how those working in welfare sectors, for example, often and frequently mistakenly point to individual character traits and behaviour when explaining the key reasons for unemployment (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012a). Lister refers to this as stereotyping. She goes on to point out that, 'stereotyping is a discriminatory form of labelling, which attains a taken-for-granted quality and serves to portray particular social groups as homogenous. It is a discursive strategy that magnifies and distorts difference' (Riggins, 1997, cited in Lister, 2004).

Hastings (2009a) has shown how environmental services (such as those connected with cleanliness of streets and public services) often fail to account for differing levels of need, and concludes that 'high levels of social need and a failure within environmental service provision to compensate for these levels of need combine and interact to deepen the environmental problems encountered in many deprived neighbourhoods'. In uncovering the processes at work to further disadvantage poor neighbourhoods (and thus those who live there) Hastings highlights the importance, amongst other things, of three different but related types of rationing of public resources. These are 'political', 'reactive' and 'institutional rationing' (2009b). Institutional rationing is 'unintentional systemic bias against addressing the needs of deprived neighbourhoods in service planning and resource allocation' (2009b). Reactive rationing is the ad hoc variation of standards and practices between deprived and non-deprived places and, finally, political rationing relates to the ways in which services and resources are sensitive to political changes and pressures within neighbourhoods (Hastings, 2009b). Hastings' research shows how the different types of rationing 'feed into and feed off each other, and that this further intensifies the nature and extent to which these services are underprovided to the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods'. Further, Hastings shows how those working in these services often resort to 'cultures of poor neighbourhoods' in order to explain people's situations and circumstances, believing that residents display a 'tolerance of environmental problems' and, indeed, have the 'propensity to cause them directly'. Front-line workers often used 'colourful language' such as 'scum' and 'lazy people' to illustrate their preference for cultural rather than structural explanations of people's situations (Hastings, 2009b).

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This is in line with other research showing that front-line workers can often operate with stereotypical views of poverty and those who experience it. Walker and Walker (2011), in arguing for the creation of equality of opportunity as a means to tackle poverty, argue that social justice needs to be 'embedded in institutions'. Hence, organisations and institutions should be working towards the promotion of equality rather than adding to the problem, and exacerbating its existence.

Stigma has long been a concern of poverty research (Lister, 1994) but it has been receiving more attention of late, particularly in respect of how people experiencing poverty might engage with notions of stigma and shame. Research has shown that those experiencing poverty often subscribe to and agree with popular stereotypes about those in poverty and, at the same time, will often try and distance themselves from what they inevitably denote as a stigmatising condition (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). As Gubrium, *et al.* point out:

> Shame is the most debilitating of the emotions, causing people to retreat socially, to lose faith in themselves and to find their sense of agency eroded. While we may naively wish to encourage people in poverty to help themselves by shaming them, we are, in fact, more likely to have the opposite effect. Shame undermines people's ability to help themselves.
> – Gubrium, *et al.*, 2014

Recent work by Walker and Chase (2014) has shown how 'shame and stigma have been challenged or exaggerated in the framing, structure and delivery' of welfare policies particularly over recent decades. Lister argues that 'the emergence of the study of stigma and shame in relation to poverty is a focus on the experience of the everyday interactions people in poverty have with the wider society and from the way they are talked about by politicians, officials, and the media' (Lister, 2004). In the current context, where poverty appears to be very closely tied to shame (or shaming), it is important to better understand processes of stereotyping and stigmatisation and how these can be reduced (see Fell and Hewstone, 2015, forthcoming).

6 CAPITALISM AND THE CHANGING LABOUR MARKET: FROM THE PROLETARIAT TO THE PRECARIAT?

The issues discussed so far cannot be understood in isolation from the wider context and the range of available opportunities, particularly in respect of the labour market. The chapter briefly considers such aspects.

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 of work itself means that employment is no longer a guaranteed passport away from poverty (if indeed it ever was). The promise of paid work, as a means to alleviate or eradicate poverty, has increasingly been shown to be wanting as the majority of families in poverty have at least one family member in work (MacInnes, *et al.*, 2013). The recent economic crisis and the austerity measures that have been enacted by the current Coalition Government have worsened living conditions for many. Public sector jobs have been 'decimated' (O'Hara, 2014), unemployment and underemployment have increased, there has been a proliferation of low-paid and part-time jobs and dramatic increases in the numbers of people seeking to increase their hours but being unable to do so (ONS, 2014). Evidence is emerging that those experiencing the greatest poverty are those suffering most under austerity measures (Browne, 2012). As Reay argues 'austerity is primarily for those who already have the least, while the secure upper echelons of the middle class and our political and economic elites remains largely untouched' (2012). Yet, whilst the recession and austerity have exacerbated poor labour

market conditions (and poverty more generally) these developments must be seen as part of a much longer-term trend towards labour market inequality. Greg and Wadsworth argue that:

> Economic orthodoxy had ventured for 30 years that the only way for a country to achieve economic success was to pursue 'labour market flexibility' and the UK was sometimes held up as an exemplar of this approach. While the meaning of this phrase is, in truth, somewhat nebulous, it is sometimes taken as shorthand for weak employment protection legislation; weak union power; low level of, and short-lived, unemployment benefits; a low or non-existent minimum wage and extensive opportunities for employment at relatively low wages.
> – Greg and Wadsworth, 2011

Greg and Wadsworth argue that the picture is not all bleak, pointing to minimum wages, family-friendly work policies and in-work welfare payments, but it is hard to disagree that labour market conditions for many are poor and declining, and are far from conducive to reducing or eradicating poverty. In a round up summary of research conducted for JRF on the future of the UK labour market, Schmuecker (2014) argues that there are particular problems at the bottom end of the labour market that need to be addressed if in-work poverty is to be tackled:

> While the debate about pay has gathered some momentum, it is not the only labour market intervention that matters. As previous JRF research shows, terms and conditions, job security and progression in work must also be addressed for work to act as a more reliable route out of poverty (Goulden, 2010). 'Bad' jobs, that do not fulfil these criteria, prevent paid work acting as a route out of poverty.
> – Schmuecker, 2014

Shildrick, *et al.* (2012) have undertaken research with those who are experiencing poverty despite being in work. They highlighted the importance of making bad jobs better as one means of tackling poverty and insecurity:

> We have argued that things can be done differently ... improving the quality and pay of important and necessary jobs at the bottom of the labour market is a step in the right direction (and ladders of progression away from them for those that want that) ... certainly better paid jobs and more lasting jobs – and a welfare system that promised social security not greater insecurity – would have done much to improve interviewees' lives. They needed neither educating about the value of work, nor chiding or coercing into jobs. What they needed most was better jobs.
> – Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012

Low-paid work – or 'poor work' (Byrne, 1999) as it has become known – is now an integral and growing aspect of the contemporary labour market and is a particular problem for those countries that have followed an aggressive, free-market based economy. For Atkinson, *et al.* (2012) these processes are part of the bigger neo-liberal project and represent:

> ... a longer running articulation of state, economy and society sustaining and deepening domination – an articulation best grasped in terms of the ascent of *neoliberalism*, the economic-cum-political

The promise of paid work, as a means to alleviate or eradicate poverty, has increasingly been shown to be wanting as the majority of families in poverty have at least one family member in work.

Capitalism and the changing labour market: from the proletariat to the precariat?

29

doctrine extolling the virtues of unfettered market forces and rapid
state shrinkage.
– Atkinson, *et al.*, 2012

There are two recent, rich theoretical accounts of how we might best
understand these developments. We can see echoes of Marx and Engels'
work in the accounts of both David Byrne and Guy Standing. Byrne (1999)
provides a useful account of 'social exclusion' in the current period. Byrne
points to a group of workers engaged in 'poor work' as 'absolutely intrinsic'
to post-industrial capitalism (Byrne, 1999). Rather than being a redundant,
completely excluded group, many workers in the UK are moving repeatedly
between low-paid jobs and welfare, largely as a consequence of the lack of
better jobs. In Byrne's work this group are described as a 'stagnant reserve
army of labour' who are 'absolutely crucial' to the contemporary economy.
He suggests that the dominant discourses around work and worklessness
tend to overlook:

> … the significance of the combination of low wages, insecure
> employment and dependence on means tested supplements to low
> incomes. In other words, the [flawed] account is one of separation
> from work, not obligation to engage in poor work. Poor work is the
> big story.
> – Byrne, 1999

Thus, for Byrne, social exclusion is 'a necessary and inherent characteristic
of unequal post-industrial capitalism' supported by political elites in the UK
almost of all whom argue for the 'necessity for a "flexible" labour market in
a competitive globalised world' and who have conspired in the 'systematic
constraining of the organisational powers of workers as collective actors'.

Guy Standing has been influential in developing a related thesis, which
he calls *The Precariat* (2010). Standing's work is concerned with the social
context and the proliferation of insecurity and poverty. He is also keen
to understand the global and economic processes that underpin these
experiences:

> In the 1970s, a group of ideologically inspired economists captured
> the ears and minds of politicians. The central plank of their 'neo-
> liberal' model was that growth and development depended on market
> competitiveness; everything should be done to maximise competition
> and competitiveness, and to allow market principles to permeate all
> aspects of life. One theme was that countries should increase labour
> market flexibility, which came to mean an agenda for transferring risks
> and insecurity onto workers and their families. The result has been the
> creation of a global 'precariat', consisting of many millions around the
> world without an anchor of stability.
> – Standing, 2010

These processes are global in nature where 'increased global competition
leads employers to transfer risks onto the workforce' (Madanipour, *et al.*,
1998). The outcomes of these globalisation processes at a European level
have more recently been described by Frazer, *et al.* (2011) who argue
that these processes have produced significant 'structural changes in the
organisation of economic and social models' with 'deep changes in economic,
employment and social spheres' across many developed countries. The
growth in the knowledge based economy has been accompanied by the

growth of structural unemployment and increasing poverty and insecurity for many people. For Standing (2010; 2014) it is these conditions that give rise to a growing 'precariat'.

> One neo-liberal claim that crystallised in the 1980s was that countries needed to pursue 'labour market flexibility'. Unless labour markets were made more flexible, labour costs would rise and corporations would transfer production and investment to places where costs were lower; financial capital would be invested in those countries, rather than 'at home' … in essence, the flexibility advocated by the brash neo-classical economists meant systematically making employees more insecure, claimed to be a necessary price for retaining investment and jobs.
> – Standing, 2010

For Standing, one of the key consequences of these developments and processes that the precariat not only continues to grow but, in the current economic context and the impact of austerity measures, they 'face a tsunami of adversity' (2014).

> Around the world, more people are being turned into denizens; they are having rights associated with citizenship whittled away, often without realising it or realising the full implications. Many are joining the precariat, an emerging class characterised by chronic insecurity, detached from old norms of labour and the working class. For the first time in history, governments are reducing the rights of many of their own people while further weakening the rights of more traditional denizens, migrants.
> – Standing, 2014

One of the enduring and increasingly important aspects of these ideas is the relevance of 'poor work'. As recent evidence has shown, poverty is at the current time closely associated with work, as well as with worklessness. Despite general rises in living standards over the last five decades, increasingly we see impoverishment at the bottom and the gap between the richest and the rest becoming ever wider (Dorling, 2014). The relationship between poverty and employment is a complex and not particularly well-understood one (e.g. not all people in low-paid jobs are in poverty) but it is an increasingly crucial part of the jigsaw in the fight against poverty.

7 CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING CONTRIBUTE TO DEBATES ABOUT POVERTY?

What can be concluded from this review of sociological analysis and poverty, and how might sociological thinking and analysis help us to understand more about the issue?

The review started by briefly reviewing the founding sociological theories and whilst it was not the intention of this review to assess their contemporary relevance, a few words may be useful. We can see echoes of the more Marxist ideas in some of the later theories (particularly those of Byrne and Standing). Whilst Functionalist theories have never been overly popular (outside the US) much of the contemporary discourse around poverty relies on notions of deservingness and 'just deserts'. Moreover, the idea that poverty is deserved and the result of individual failures is as strong today, perhaps stronger than it ever has been, to the point that poverty is almost always (at least, popularly and often politically) understood as deserved (Tyler, 2013). The review has highlighted the ways in which the operation of institutions can serve to exacerbate poverty, taking us back to some of Weber's ideas around institutions and power which were outlined at the start of the review. Hence we are reminded that:

> Exclusion arises from the interplay of class, status and political power and serves the interests of the included. Social 'closure' is achieved

when institutions and cultural distinctions not only create boundaries that keep others out against their will, but are also used to perpetuate inequality.
– Silver, 1994

In the current context it seems not only that poverty needs to be rediscovered but that it needs disentangling from a range of related concepts and largely pejorative discussions about a variety of social problems. Walker and Chase (2014) contend that 'the notion that poverty stems from unemployment, or more specifically, from choosing not to work, fundamentally continues to polarise poverty discourses in the UK'. O'Hara argues that the 'skiver' mantra has been so unashamedly bandied about by politicians that is has become 'cemented in public discourse' (2014) at a time when unprecedented cuts were being wrought on public services and public sector jobs were being decimated. In her research on how people are experiencing austerity interviewees ranked the 'skiver' discourse as 'one of the most adverse and "soul-destroying" characteristics of austerity in the UK'. Walker and Chase argue that the policy focus on child poverty over recent decades was a 'pragmatic political device to circumvent negative attitudes towards a focus on tackling poverty and to build support for an anti-poverty agenda' and 'forced on government by a collective antipathy to "the poor"' (2014). In large part this general lack of sympathy or concern for those experiencing poverty comes from the way in which poverty has become closely linked to a range of social problems. Recent examples include, 'welfare dependency' (and more recently simply welfare receipt) 'family breakdown', 'single parenthood', 'crime' and 'anti-social behaviour', 'unemployment', 'worklessness', and so called 'troubled families'. As Rogaly and Taylor (2009) point out many accounts of poverty are simply 'common sense depictions of poverty' that tend to revolve around stereotypes of 'white trash' and 'chavs' and tend to portray impoverished places and people in negative ways. They go on to say that these sorts of labels are often used 'as shorthand simultaneously to describe and write off vast sections of Britain's population – often white, often living on council estates and nearly always poor'. Furthermore, as Walker and Chase point out:

> In order to shift anti-poverty policies from being shame-inducing to dignity-promoting, policy reform should start with a critical evaluation of its framing … under the current Liberal-Conservative Coalition government, these stigmatising notions are more pronounced than ever. Unless politicians, the media and the public are sensitised to the ways in which these unfounded assumptions are deployed to justify policies that fail to address the structural causes of poverty and only serve to shame and undermine the dignity of those in receipt of benefits, then we can only assume path dependency in how such policies are framed for a further 500 years.
> – Walker and Chase, 2014

Lister (2004) recognises the importance of 'political struggles at the relational/symbolic rim of the poverty wheel as well as at its core'. As she notes, those experiencing poverty are largely defined by the 'non-poor' whose discourses, attitudes and actions can have a profound impact on how poverty is experienced (2004). Researchers have long struggled over the problem of presentation in respect of poverty. One of the reasons the social exclusion idea took hold in UK social policy was that it allowed a way

Conclusions: what can sociological thinking contribute to debates about poverty?

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to continue to engage with issues of poverty in a context where poverty was increasingly not recognised (Burchardt, *et al.*, 2002).

Recently, the notion of growing inequality has been attracting attention. In 1965, Richard Titmuss argued for the importance of understanding inequality alongside poverty.

> It is poverty that has been rediscovered in the West, not inequality. To recognise inequality as the problem involves recognising the need for structural change, for sacrifices by the majority ... to distribute services according to needs and not according to productivity will help us to discover equality in our neighbours.
> – Titmuss, 1965

These arguments may be even more pertinent today. Inequality is getting more extreme, with those in the top 1 per cent growing ever richer, whilst the remainder are finding life increasingly harsh (Dorling, 2014; Jones, 2014). There also appears to be a growing public awareness around this issue.

> People in the UK are beginning to understand that the 1 per cent really are now extraordinarily rich, and very different to themselves. Most people are entirely excluded from the top 1 per cent, no matter how well they do in a career ... In short, almost all people who now have jobs that would traditionally place them within the best-off 1 per cent of society – head teachers of large schools, the local doctor – are now among the best rewarded of the 99 per cent, rather than being members of a group apart.
> – Dorling, 2014

Much of the sociological evidence discussed in this review has been concerned with the reproduction of (social class) inequalities over time. Research shows that the majority of the British public accept that wealth can buy opportunities but conversely most believe in the notion of a meritocracy. That is they also believe that 'hard work and ambition are the most important factors in getting on in life' (Gaffney and Baumberg, 2014). Yet the notion of 'meritocracy' is largely a myth. As Irwin points out: 'Britain and the United States, far from moving to be "meritocracies", where the same opportunities are open to all, have become ever more polarised societies in which equality of opportunity is a distant and receding dream' (2008).

Gaffney and Baumberg point out that levels of inequality are the 'most important' factor in explaining differing levels of social mobility. Furthermore, they argue that income inequality, particularly in childhood, is especially important (2014).

> A more equal society is much more likely to have higher social mobility. We know that pre-tax inequality in the UK rose sharply in the last decades of the twentieth century, fell slightly in the first decade of the twenty-first and rose again in the onset of the recession. We also know that countries with higher inequality tend to have lower social mobility. Moreover, there is no doubt that income inequality raises the stakes of reduced social mobility; it punishes those that fail to get ahead – including those who are unfairly disadvantaged – by opening up wide differentials between them and those who do gain advantaged social positions. Reversing the rise in inequality seems an important part of any strategy to increase equality of opportunity.
> – Gaffney and Baumberg, 2014

Much of the sociological evidence discussed in this review has been concerned with the reproduction of inequalities over time. Research shows that the majority of the British public accept that wealth can buy opportunities but conversely most believe in the notion of a meritocracy.

Peter Townsend also argued that 'any preliminary outline of available evidence about poverty must include evidence about inequality' (1979). Using a framework of inequality (and equality) allows room to think more closely about issues of class reproduction and their relationship with poverty. As this review has illustrated, the two are closely related and it is not just happenchance that countries with low poverty rates tend to have a strong focus on equality.

Sociological theory is useful in alerting us to how processes of individualisation can work to seemingly flatten out social class inequalities, producing classless narratives where the effects of class inequality appear less obvious. The concepts of 'bounded agency' and 'structured individualisation' were outlined in Chapter 4 as a means to understand the ways in which life opportunities are often understood to be the product of individual choice. Yet, simultaneously, structures of opportunity have an important role to play in explaining how life chances play out across individual lives and across generations. Dorling points out that 'life is more determined by where (and to whom) people were born than any other time in the last 651 years' (Dorling, 2007).

As Tyler highlights, economic inequalities are reaching nineteenth century levels in Britain and this impacts negatively on social cohesion and mobility. It is becoming clear that wealth at the top does not simply 'trickle down' but rather it is more likely to travel right back in the direction it came from and remain concentrated in the hands of a few. Hence, we face questions not so much about the 'production of wealth but its distribution' (Bauman, 2013). For Bauman, this means addressing the 'magic circle of the very rich uninterested and unconcerned with services to the "real economy"'. Redistributing wealth, to ensure adequate incomes for those at the bottom, is essential if poverty is to be tackled.

Schutz theorises that 'power and social class' are at the 'real crux of economic inequality' (2011); so it seems, after all, that inequality does indeed matter (Gaffney and Baumberg, 2014).

NOTES

1   Later editions of published works are cited here.

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