An Anthropological View of Poverty

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ABSTRACT. The anthropological view of poverty incorporates various social science disciplines as it seeks to explain the relationship between human behavior and the social environment as well as the relationships between human beings. The anthropological views are rooted in comparative perspectives across cultures as well as in the analysis of local cultures. This literature review of poverty from an anthropological perspective includes theoretical perspective utilized contemporary anthropologists. It concludes with a discussion of the major challenges inherent in the anthropological study of poverty. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_06 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Poverty, anthropology, ethnography, culture and class

INTRODUCTION

The field of anthropology holds a unique position in the social sciences based on its methodology of participant observation, cross-cultural comparison, and ethnographic research depicting human experiences

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from the point of view of its subjects. Using anthropological concepts, these studies often focus on human behavior in the context of the social environment. This is an important perspective when it comes to increasing our understanding of poverty. The purpose of this literature review on theories of poverty from an anthropological point of view is to provide another social science perspective on understanding poverty.

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

Embedded in the anthropological perspective is the concept of culture. Theories of culture attempt to reconcile ideas of human uniqueness with human diversity based on exploring beliefs and customs (Winthrop, 1991). Major developments in cultural theory have come from evolutionary and ecological approaches that view cultures as adaptive systems. Keesing (1974) identified four broad assumptions for cultures as adaptive systems:

1. Cultures are systems that serve to relate human communities (such as technologies, economic systems and social grouping) to larger ecological settings.
2. Cultural change is a process of adaptation, much like the process of natural selection.
3. The most adaptive aspects of culture related to the ways that technology, the economy, and social organizations lead to production.
4. Cultural systems have adaptive consequences, especially when they control populations and contribute to survival.

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

SEARCH PROCESS

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

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

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

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

Interest in the culture of poverty gained momentum in the early 1960s when several anthropologists sought to investigate and define poverty as a distinct and separate entity. Theorists attempted to explain the poverty construct as an adaptive, self-sustaining system with a unique language and organization that sustains and perpetuates the condition. In his seminal book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Oscar Lewis (1959) presents vivid images of poor Mexican families using ethnographic methods. It is here that the term "culture of

poverty" was first coined. Lewis suggested that behaviors and beliefs are learned in early childhood and can contribute to multigenerational poverty. Some of the behaviors included sexual promiscuity resulting in out-of-wedlock births, strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, and dependency, a lack of clear judgment, and experiences that reflect limited knowledge of personal troubles, local conditions, and their own way of life (Lewis, 1959). Many of those living within a culture of poverty can also feel marginalized by the provision of services that are perceived to be irrelevant to their interests and needs. Lewis observed that by the time children were six or seven, the culture of poverty was so ingrained in them that they were more than likely to live the same impoverished lives as their parents. Although Lewis uses five Mexican families as examples, he theorizes that the culture of poverty is not just limited to Mexicans. The attitudes and beliefs underlying the culture of poverty transcend both ethnicity and geography (Lewis, 1959).

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

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

theory as proposed by Lewis, citing examples of learned behaviors of those living in poverty that are passed on from generation to generation.

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

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

NEW DIRECTIONS

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

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

Globalization

Contemporary anthropologists have combined cultural theories with critical theories, such as globalization, in an effort to identify the forces and effects of the global economy on the urban poor. While theorists are in disagreement about the precise nature of the causal forces (one group favors a Marxist view and the other questions the predominantly economic viewpoint), Scheuerman (2006) contends that four core assumptions need to be stipulated. First, the concept of de-territorialization refers to the assumption that territory (in the sense of the traditional concept of geographically identifiable location) no longer constitutes the whole of 'social space' in which human activity takes place. Mainly due to enhanced telecommunication access, events occur simultaneously around the world. Thus, globalization includes the spread of new forms of nonterritorial social activity. Second, the concept of interconnectedness investigates the way any given social activity might influence events across the world. Even though some activities seem connected, others may solely be regional or local phenomena. Third, de-territorialization and interconnectedness are intimately tied to the acceleration of the pace of social life across geographic locations. Finally, although each facet of globalization is linked to the other three assumptions noted above, each process is different and needs to be assessed separately.

In the context of globalization due primarily to the use of ethnographies, narrative analysis, and participant observations as principle research tools, the anthropological perspective differs from other social science disciplines. Anthropologists are able to describe the complex bonds of human and social relations within a society through descriptive studies of living cultures and are thereby equipped to interpret the effects of globalization on a given culture or community. Anthropologists

are able to link individual experiences to larger local and global processes to describe the many facets of poverty.

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

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

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

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

Materialism

The concepts of inequality and risk have become a major part of the general poverty discussion. From an anthropological perspective, societies are structured in hierarchically ranked social groups that have different amounts of political power and control over resources (Winthrop, 1991). Theories of materialism, which include cultural and Marxist perspectives, view the material constraints of the environment as central to the process of adaptation. The concept of materialism seeks to explain events and behaviors in terms of such material factors as the environment, technology, and the economy rather than on the basis of

non-material factors such as belief or custom (Winthrop, 1991). Social inequality, a concept prevalent in the discussion of the poor, is seen as a reflection of the differences between groups in the organization of production and the ownership of property, where the interaction creates a consistent hierarchy of wealth, power, and prestige (Winthrop, 1991; Keesing, 1974). The social groups are separated by distances that are culturally based; inequality is used to describe the distance between the social groups or the "haves and have-nots."

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

Morgen and Maskovsky (2003) suggest that current levels of poverty can be attributed to the new global economy and the need to reform welfare systems. They describe four perspectives that anthropologists use to explain the recent welfare reform process in the U.S. First, the Marxist view of urban poverty focuses on new forms of worker susceptibilities that are related to the outsourcing of jobs to the global market. Based on Keynesian theory, Marx argued that capitalists used the labor market as a mechanism to keep the lower classes poor by increasing the demand for labor and creating higher wages for those who are employed. The second perspective emphasizes the new global information economy where the use of information technology has reduced the need for industrialized labor. The third perspective involves the neo-liberalist point of view that is characterized by privatization, marketization, and the reduction of the welfare state, all economic mechanisms designed to encourage self-sufficiency of the poor. This perspective illustrates how political, economic, and ideological policies generate and preserve urban poverty. The fourth and final perspective focuses on race and gender as explanatory factors in understanding how welfare reform relates to poverty. For example, with respect to gender, welfare states across the globe are viewed as historically biased; namely, treating men as eco-

nomically productive workers and allowing them to receive social insurance, while women have been cast in the traditional role of care-taker and only eligible for minimal welfare benefits. From this point of view, gender-bias in welfare states places less value on women's work in the home and its contribution to society, whereas men's work has been rewarded with higher social value.

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

Feminism

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

The tenets of feminist theory are also embedded within the critical theory perspective. According to Benton and Craib (2001), feminist theory posits that women may have a very specific understanding of

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

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

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

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the anthropological view of poverty originated primarily with Lewis's (1959) concept of the culture of poverty, it has been greatly

expanded by critical theorists to encompass the global challenges emerging in the twenty-first century discourse on poverty. Lewis's culture of poverty theory stimulated considerable debate within the anthropological community as well as in other social science disciplines. However, the main thrust of contemporary anthropology has moved the debate away from investigating the poor in isolation to the exploration and integration of individual communities within a global perspective.
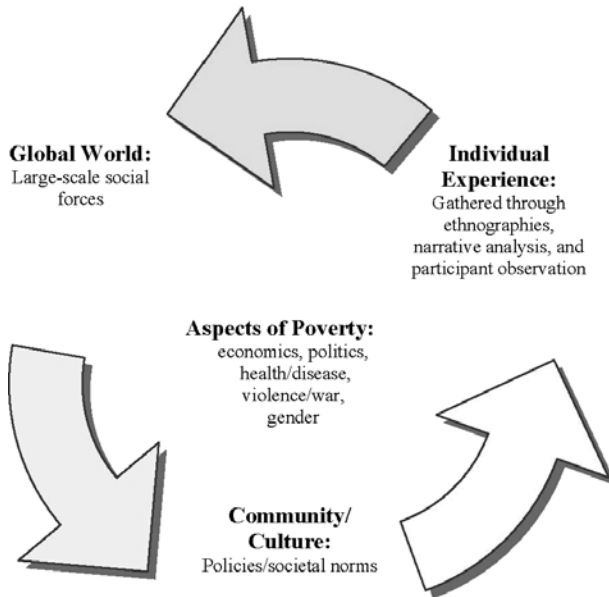
By fusing cultural and critical theories with globalization theories, anthropologists have begun to document the way in which local processes are linked and integrated with global changes. Global and national structures and forces are investigated to determine their effects on local environments, and in turn, how these processes interact with individual experiences.

The cyclical relationships between poverty and health conditions at the individual and local level are now being addressed in a way that incorporates the impact of global processes on the shape of the social environments. Similarly, the dynamic interaction of social policy, ideology, and political forces that shapes the environment are also being evaluated in terms of their relationship to the experiences of individuals. The ways in which the global workforce has affected employment at local levels and in turn, how cultural beliefs regarding gender affect individuals are also being addressed. The interaction of all these perspectives is illustrated in Figure 1.

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

Anthropologists possess a unique ability to document and explain the individual experiences of people in poverty through their use of in-depth ethnographies, narrative analysis and participant observation. They are able to vividly tell the story of individual experiences within a particular group and culture. By investigating global phenomenon at the individual level they are able to document the interconnectedness between local environments and global processes and compare similar

FIGURE 1. An Anthropological View of Poverty

Global World:
Large-scale social
forces

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

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

**Community/
Culture:**
Policies/societal norms

and contrasting dynamics across diverse populations. These capacities can expand our current knowledge of poverty and our understanding of the impact of global processes on local environments and persons. By uncovering unrecognized trends, the anthropological perspective may prove to be a powerful force in promoting change at the national and international levels of policy-making which may support national changes.

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