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Kelly Turner
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ABSTRACT. Social work education, practice, and research are heavily influenced by theories developed by psychologists. A review of the literature was conducted to identify theories of poverty emerging from the field of psychology. In general, until 1980, psychological theories of poverty emphasized the role of the individual or group to explain the causes and impact of poverty. Between 1980 and 2000, psychologists began to consider the structural and societal factors that contribute to poverty and moved beyond the explanations of individual pathology. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of psychological theorists acknowledge the role of social, political, and economic factors in the creation and maintenance of poverty. Implications for social work education, practice, and future research are discussed. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_05 [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.]

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INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of individuals living in poverty in 2004 rose to 37 million, an increase of 1.1 million from 2003 (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2005). Such an alarming statistic is of par-

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ticular concern to the social work profession, whose primary mission has always included enhancing the well-being of those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (NASW, 1999). The applied field of social work incorporates the theories of a wide array of social science disciplines, including psychology. It is important, therefore, to identify and assess the various psychological theories used to explain poverty. How do these theories inform social work practice with individuals and communities struggling with poverty?

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

METHODOLOGY

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

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

PATHOLOGIZING THE POOR

Theories on the Causes of Poverty

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

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

A related theory involves the role of language development and the accumulated environmental deficits that can lead to poor academic achievement and the continuation of the cycle of poverty (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). Based on the inadequate development of the language skills poor children in comparison with their middle-class counterparts, researchers claim, have cognitive deficiencies (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). There is very little research, however, that substantiate any significant class-based differences in language abilities (Ginsburg, 1978) and this perspective has been denounced as based on middle-class arrogance, rather than science (Pearl, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). As an alternative theory, Ginsburg (1978) proposed a developmental view that acknowledges that there may be class differences in cognition but that children share cognitive potentials and similar modes of language.

Intelligence-based psychological theories of are not the only theories that suggest that individual deficiencies contribute to an individual's inferior social and economic status. For example, Carr (2003) describes

the McClelland approach, which gained popularity in the 1960s and the 1970s. This approach suggests that the poor have not developed a particular trait, called Need for Achievement (NACH), which therefore prevents them from improving their situation. This approach was embraced as a way to help the poor escape poverty, and researchers sought to test this theory on populations in third world countries (Carr, 2003). Similarly, in the 1980s psychologists viewed attribution theory as a promising explanation of poverty (Carr, 2003); namely, the poor tend to attribute their failures to internal factors, while attributing successes to external, uncontrollable factors. On the other hand, the rich take the opposite view. Both of these theories drew criticism for maintaining the status quo and failing to produce real results (Carr, 2003).

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

Many social service workers employed by public welfare agencies in the 1950s also relied on psychological theories to explain the economic dependence of the poor on the state (Curran, 2002). They subscribed to Freud's theories regarding the ego and psychosexual development by perceiving welfare recipients as victims of psychologically abusive histories resulting in character disorders that kept them in poverty. In essence, inadequate socialization and broken homes led to a poorly developed ego and low levels of self-sufficiency (Pearl, 1970). Feeling overwhelmed by sexual and aggressive drives, this theory suggests that the poor acted out this psychic conflict, much like a child (Curran, 2002). The appropriate role of the caseworker was to act as a parent

substitute, setting limits and assimilating welfare recipients into the dominant culture (Curran, 2002). This theory was embraced by a prosperous postwar America concerned with the rising numbers of African Americans on the welfare rolls, and disinclined to entertain the idea that the same society that led to their own financial success could also contribute to poverty (Curran, 2002). Looking back almost 50 years later, Fraser commented that this approach reflected “the tendency of especially feminine social welfare programs to construct gender-political and political-economic problems as individual, psychological problems” (1989, p. 155, as quoted in Curran, 2002, p. 382).

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

Theories on the Impacts of Poverty

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

One of the potential impacts of poverty is the prevalence and incidence of psychiatric disorders. Many studies have shown that psychiatric disorders, such as depression, alcoholism, anti-social personality disorder, and schizophrenia, are more common in urban, poverty-stricken neighborhoods than in more affluent communities (Murali & Oyebode, 2004).

A counter-argument to this social selection hypothesis is the social causation hypothesis, which holds that a patient's economic situation actually causes psychopathologies, rather than the other way around (Goldstein, 1973; Murali & Oyeboode, 2004). The conditions of poverty produce intolerable amounts of stress, which can lead to mental illness. For example, stress can occur when there is a wide gap between an individual's achievements and their ambitions, a situation that is familiar to those living in poverty (Goldstein, 1973). While this hypothesis places part of the blame for the plight of the poor on society (i.e., not providing sufficient opportunities for achievement), Goldstein also suggests that individuals play a role in their own psychopathology by noting that:

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

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

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

might be to acknowledge this countertransference before it becomes counterproductive in therapy (Javier & Herron, 2002).

Moreira (2003) expresses concern about what she calls the “medicalization of poverty,” a process involving psychologists and psychiatrists prescribing psychotropic drugs to treat the impacts of poverty, while ignoring other socio-political factors in the process. She accuses the psychology profession of maintaining the status quo by keeping the poor drugged and therefore docile (Moreira, 2003). Without a comprehensive view of the impacts of poverty that acknowledges external, structural factors, the poor will continue to suffer (Moreira, 2003). Psychologists in the 1980s began to embrace this view, recognizing the integral role that social, economic, and political forces play in the causes and impacts of poverty.

UNREST IN THE PROFESSION: 1980-2000

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

The psychologists of the 1980s, therefore, proposed a return to the culture of poverty theory (Lewis, 1975) that suggests that civilization itself (compared with pre-literate, tribal cultures) inevitably creates two cultures: one of wealth and one of poverty (Carr, 2003). While some psychologists in the 1980s rejected purely psychology-based theories in favor of society-based ones, they did not discount psychology entirely (Carr, 2003). Rather, they believed that psychology could make a positive

contribution toward a new understanding of poverty “if” it was used to describe the psychological processes of the “wealthy” (i.e., not the poor) and how the biases of the wealthy helped to maintain the conditions of poverty (Carr, 2003).

IMPACT OF SOCIAL FORCES

Theories of the Causes of Poverty

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lott (2002) describes two theories that examine the mechanisms behind such unfair discrimination: Moral Exclusion Theory and Dehumanizing Theory. Moral exclusion theory, developed by Opatow, suggests that upper-class citizens incorrectly assume that lower-class citizens are less moral than those in the upper classes, thereby causing or passively

allowing poverty to become more acceptable in the minds of upper-class citizens (Lott, 2002). Similarly, Bar-Tal, and Schwartz and Struch both propose that the upper classes dehumanize poor people, believing that lower-class citizens have different (i.e., unacceptable) values and emotional tendencies (Lott, 2002). This dehumanizing process makes it easier for upper-class citizens to reduce their empathy as well as discriminate against poor people (Lott, 2002).

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

Theories on the Impacts of Poverty

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

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

Lott (2002) views discrimination directed toward poor people by the upper classes as yet another negative product of a poor person's

circumstances. Lott (2002) calls this particular type of discrimination “Distancing,” which she divides into the following three subcategories:

1. *Cognitive Distancing*. Herein the upper classes hold onto negative, unjustified stereotypes about poor people’s characteristics and behavior by blaming the condition of poverty on a person’s individual failings,
2. *Institutional Distancing*. This involves “punishing members of low-status groups by erecting barriers to full societal participation” (p. 104), such as the disparity between suburban and inner city public schools.
3. *Interpersonal Distancing*. Herein the middle or upper class individuals directly ignore, insult, or discriminate against lower-class individuals to their face (e.g., a shop owner forcing poor children to wait outside the store while their mothers shopped because they might steal if allowed to enter the store).

In summary, Lott (2002) views all these forms of distancing as significant in their negative impact on people living in poverty.

Moreira (2003) has identified other negative impacts such as the loss of culture, whereby dominant Western culture obliterates regional cultures. For example, cultural rituals are disappearing from poverty-stricken areas, such as a community ceremony to grieve the death of an infant (often related to poverty and malnutrition). The loss of such cultural rituals that serve to ease the grief of the surviving mother are related to increasing rates of depression among poor women who have lost children (Moreira, 2003).

In a similar vein, Moreira blames the invasion of Western society’s consumerist ideology (i.e., assigning great value to the accumulation of material goods) for causing consumerism syndrome in poor people; namely, an unrelenting desire to own more and more material goods. Since poor people do not have the financial resources to satisfy such a desire, she believes it unnecessarily exacerbates a self-perception of being poor and can lead to mental health problems (such as depression). As Moreira (2003) explains, “it is more probable to find someone who *thinks* he is poor without really *being* poor, and who is, in fact, just the opposite” (p. 73, emphasis added). Lummis (1991) expands upon this view and notes that when consumerist ideologies dominate a society, people perceive that the only things of value are those that are purchased with money. For example, poor people from regional cultures no longer

want to plant vegetables because they prefer to buy them in grocery stores (Moreira, 2003).

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

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

Despite all of the risks and negative consequences associated with poverty, some individuals succeed despite living amidst such risks (Garmezy, 1985). According to Fraser (1997), one of the first theorists to tackle that question was E. J. Anthony, who called such individuals "psychologically invulnerable" (p. 14). Subsequent theorists criticized this label, saying it gave the false impression that the successful individuals were completely unaffected by risk factors. As an alternative, theorists such as Garmezy (1985) suggested the term "resilience," which he defined as "risk factors in combination with positive forces that contribute to adaptive outcomes" (Fraser, 1997, p. 14). Garmezy and others

went on to propose three different types of resilience: (1) success despite numerous risk factors, (2) sustained coping despite chronic stressors, and (3) recovery from a trauma (Fraser, 1997).

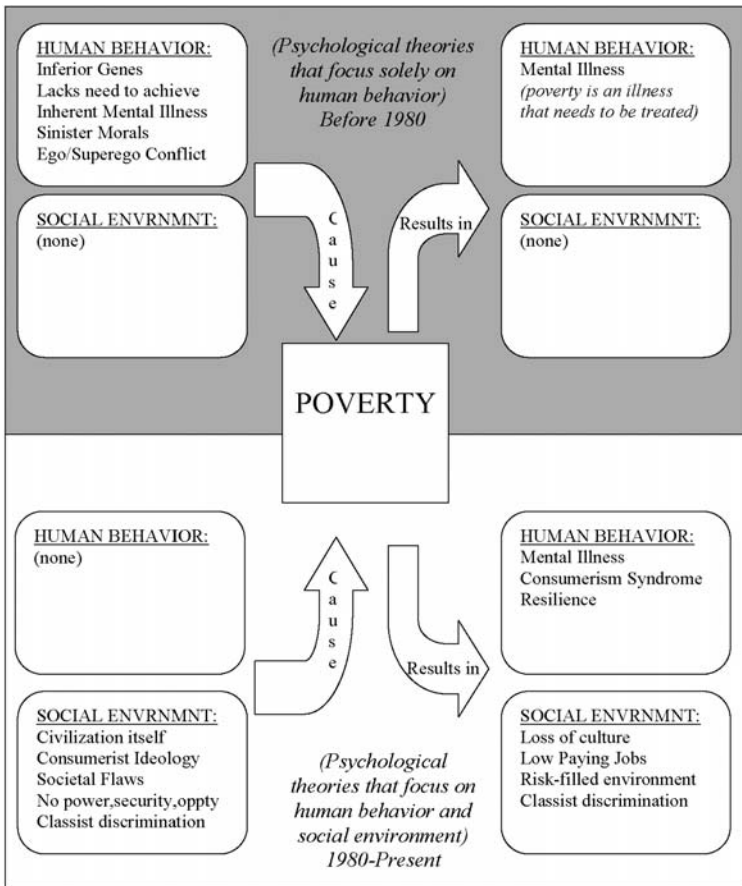
According to Garmezy (1985), a person achieves such resilience with the help of positive forces or “protective factors” which can be any internal or external force in a person’s life that helps him/her avoid risk. Garmezy (1985) divides these protective factors into three categories: (1) dispositional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

CONCLUSION

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

The conceptual map found in Figure 1 illustrates the major concepts covered by this literature review. The map is divided into two components: The top half represents psychological theories of poverty that focus solely on human behavior and the bottom half contains theories

FIGURE 1. Psychological Theories of Poverty



of poverty that address the social environment. The theories on the “causes” of poverty that focus on the individual include such personal failings as: inferior genes, the absence of a NACH, inherent mental illness, sinister morals, and/or internal ego/superego conflict stemming from an unhealthy childhood. These theories focused primarily on internal deficiencies, whereby individuals bring poverty upon themselves and contribute to their own mental illness.

The bottom half of the conceptual map illustrates an entirely different picture, where causes of poverty are attributed to aspects of the social

environment: Civilization itself, the spread of a consumerist ideology, structural forces of society (e.g., lack of living-wage jobs), lack of power, security, and opportunity for certain groups, and/or discrimination by the upper classes toward the lower classes. Such theories focus on both the behavioral impacts of poverty (mental illness, consumerism syndrome, or resilience) as well as the environmental impacts (a loss of culture, low-paying jobs, a risk-filled environment, and discrimination).

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

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