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Sociological Theories of Poverty in Urban America

Jennifer Price Wolf

ABSTRACT. Since the 1950s, American sociologists have developed a substantial literature on poverty in urban American communities. This literature review examines some of these sociological theories of poverty and identifies four major explanations of urban poverty: social stratification, (including segregation and racism); lack of access to social capital; cultural and value norms; and social policies. The literature review concludes with a conceptual framework that focuses on multiple relationships that link theory to practice related to the reduction of poverty in inner-city communities. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_04 [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. Theory, sociology, urban poverty

INTRODUCTION

The problem of concentrated poverty in inner-city neighborhoods is increasing and since 1970, the number of poor inner-city neighborhoods

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

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

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

METHODS

The methodology for this literature review included a keyword search looking for various forms of the word "poverty" using the Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, Social Science Citation Index, and Google Scholar databases. After a collection of recent articles was accumulated, reference lists were examined in order to uncover seminal texts and theoretical explanations. Similar keyword searches were also conducted on a university database (University of California, Berkeley Libraries) in order to scan recent issues of several journals focusing on sociological

theory using several criteria. First, the search focused on theories of urban poverty, including those related to African-Americans. Second, an emphasis was given to finding influential works that have shaped sociological debate on urban poverty. While this review includes literature that half a century, it remains far from comprehensive. Each of the studies described in this review define poverty in a slightly different way. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature refers to poverty as a dearth of financial resources.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The authors represented in this review provide four primary explanations of inner-city poverty as illustrated in Figure 1. First, the most widely cited of these theories are the structural stratification theories, which view poverty as the result of social isolation stemming from socioeconomic trends (Wilson, 1987; Harrington, 1962; Holzer, 1999; Kain, 1968; Jencks, 1992). A sub-set of the social stratification literature has also identified the effects of residential segregation of African-Americans in inner-cities as well as continuing racism as sources of persistent poverty in these communities (Massey, Gross, & Shibuya, 1994; Gould, 1999; Harrington, 1962; Jencks, 1992). Second, other sociologists have built upon the ideas of social isolation and segregation in order to examine how the lack of access to human and social capital explains intergenerational poverty (Loury, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Rankin, 2000). A third group of sociologists has focused on how a continued

FIGURE 1. Classification of Reviewed Theories and Authors

Social Stratification, Segregation & Racism	Social Capital	Culture & Values	Social Policies
Harrington, 1962 Holzer, 1999 Jencks, 1992 Kain, 1968 Wilson, 1987 Gould, 1999 Harrington, 1962 Jencks, 1992 Massey et al., 1994	Coleman, Loury, 1982 Rankin, 2000	Gould, 1999 Harrington, 1962 Jencks, 1992 Murray, 1984 Rodman, 1963 Wilson, 1987	Murray, 1984 Piven & Cloward, 1993

lack of access to resources alters behaviors, social norms, and aspirations of inner-city inhabitants (Rodman, 1963; Gould, 1999; Wilson, 1987; Harrington, 1962; Jenks, 1992; Murray, 1984). Finally, a fourth group has investigated the role of social polices designed to address urban poverty and its deleterious effects (Murray, 1984; Piven & Cloward, 1993). While some authors span several of these areas by developing multi-level theories of poverty (Wilson, 1987; Jencks, 1992; Harrington, 1962), others focus on mid-range theory related to one particular aspect of inner-city poverty (Loury, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Massey et al., 1994). Both approaches increase our understanding of those living in urban poverty neighborhoods.

Social Stratification or Social Classes

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

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

these aspirations. Describing poverty as “a way of life” (p. 17), Harrington saw low-income status as a defining characteristic of lives and a predictor of the future. Although his work presented little empirical evidence, it provided a framework for future analyses of inner-city poverty.

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

In a more recent investigation of the spatial mismatch theory, Holzer (1991), another economist building upon sociological findings, reviews the current status of empirical investigation of Kain’s ideas. Although Kain’s original study failed to elaborate on the difficulties that inner-city African-Americans experience in obtaining employment opportunities, Holzer reviews how other scholars have identified transportation issues, racial bias, and time factors as specific barriers to employment in suburban areas. Holzer concludes that while studies have varied, inner-city blacks continue to have fewer job opportunities than those who live in suburbs, and that the movement of blacks out of inner-city neighborhoods continues to be limited by financial constraints. Unlike several other theories discussed in this review, the spatial mismatch theory attributes the causes of poverty primarily to social oppression and structural forces. The theory does not address how the behaviors or social norms of the inner-city poor might adapt to or exacerbate poverty, and views poverty as the result of historical factors. Therefore, increased economic opportunities, especially in low- or semi-skilled industries,

and located near inner-city neighborhoods were seen as ways of alleviating urban poverty.

While the spatial mismatch theory focuses on racial segregation and decreased employment, it fails to examine how the confinement of the poor to inner-city neighborhoods results in many other social effects, including increased levels of crime, violence, and other social problems. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (1987) examines the relationships between chronic joblessness, the out-migration of middle-class blacks, and single-parenthood to the creation of an "underclass" cut off from opportunity and influence. Wilson argues that the "underclass" phenomena of increased crime, illegal behavior, and single parenthood are a consequence of social systems; while they represent cultural norms and values, these traits stem from inner-city social isolation, not an internalized "culture of poverty." In a view that differs slightly from Harrington's, Wilson contends that measures to address poverty should focus on social systems, not necessarily social norms and values.

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

Although Harrington and Wilson viewed social problems as fundamentally interrelated with poverty, leading to the transfer of low-income status from one generation to another in inner-city neighborhoods, Jencks (1992) argues for a completely different understanding of the idea of a social "underclass." Examining a variety of different social issues such as joblessness, crime, violence, single-parenthood, and out-of-wedlock

births, Jencks finds that the historical trends between the 1970s and 1990 reflect considerable variance among these problems, with some getting worse, others improving, and several remaining constant. Consequently, Jencks contends that these issues cannot be viewed as simple causes and effects of inner-city neighborhood poverty, but must be assessed independently of one another. Jencks believes that when a society becomes more affluent, all of its members require more resources due to changing expectations and technology. Therefore, poverty will continue as long as there is dramatic inequality between the rich and the poor; when more wealth is created, the needs of the poor become more evident and they are left further behind.

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

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

Housing Segregation and the Persistence of Racism

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

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

Support in the Form of Social Capital

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

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

Recently, Wilson's hypothesis about the social isolation of inner-city African-Americans has been connected to ideas of social networks and social capital in these communities. Rankin and Quane (2000) found that residents living in high-poverty neighborhoods have significantly reduced access to positive social capital and social contacts that could

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

Impact of Values on Behavior

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

diverse and sometimes contradictory array of values (also see Della Fave, 1974). Rodman's (1963) analysis presents an early explanation of how poverty can be perpetuated among the poor; although his focus does not extend to larger structural determinants or how socially stratified economic classes were originally created.

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

The Impact of Social Policies

A significant portion of overall poverty research has concentrated on individual characteristics of the poor as contributors to their low-income status (Rank, 2004). Murray (1984) is one of the most vocal and influential proponents of this approach, and sees African-American urban poverty as the result of social policies that provide "incentives to fail" (e.g., bestowing benefits upon the poor that eliminate their desire to work). Murray argued that by providing welfare benefits to members of these communities, government and community agencies have contributed to the dependency of poor African-Americans. Since these benefits offer a marginal quality of life, they are found to be desirable in comparison to a job with similar rewards and limited possibilities for advancement. Murray criticizes authors such as Harrington, who focused on the American socioeconomic system as the cause of poverty. He argues that the social welfare system, designed to address poverty, is actually its cause and thereby increases poverty and social problems. Much of his

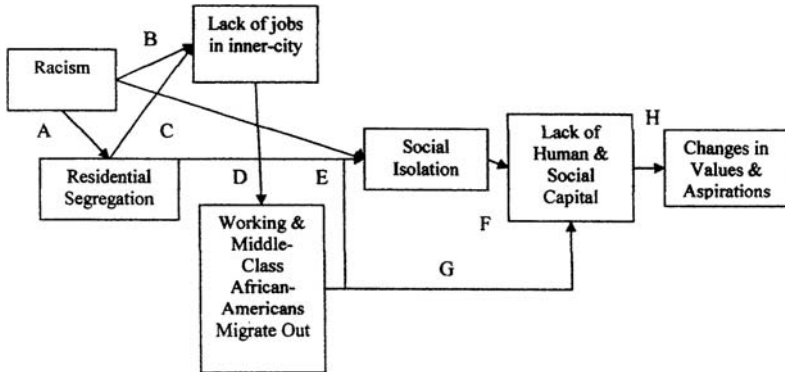
focus, however, is on the moral failings of African-Americans, whose unacceptable behavior has been “tolerated” by whites as a result of guilt for years of racial segregation (Murray, 1984, p. 223). Murray also discusses the rise of female-headed African-American families as being related to welfare benefit policies, a trend that Wilson later attributed to long-term joblessness among African-American men. Although Murray’s radical approach was highly controversial and received limited attention in the current sociological literature, his skills as a public speaker and conservative policy analyst helped to generate a wide dissemination of his views (Rank, 2004).

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

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLICATIONS

The sociological theories of poverty presented in this review reflect a variety of factors that cause or contribute to inner-city poverty (e.g., governmental policies, economic and geographic changes, racism, residential segregation, lack of social capital, and cultural values and aspirations). While each of these variables could represent a discrete theory, their explanatory value may be enhanced when understood as a combination of theories acting on different system levels. The conceptual map displayed in Figure 2 illustrates how multiple variables, each having

FIGURE 2. Conceptual Framework of Understanding Sociological Concepts of Urban Poverty



their own effect on poverty, can be combined to form a framework for understanding poverty in inner-city neighborhoods. While all of these concepts related to poverty are discussed by Wilson (1987), some of the proposed relationships are conceptualized differently.

When read from left to right, Figure 2 describes the interconnections between structural and community-level variables. Racism, a structural force inherent in U.S. systems and culture, is seen to result in residential segregation, with African-Americans living apart from whites in inner-city neighborhoods. Residential segregation can, in turn, be seen as impacting the numbers of jobs in inner-city neighborhoods; a relationship that might be partially mediated by racism (e.g., not creating jobs in primarily African-American neighborhoods). As a result of the lack of jobs available in inner-cities, working and middle-class African-Americans migrate out of these neighborhoods, causing social isolation among the poor residents who remain. The migration out of the inner-cities by working and middle-class African-Americans could also lead to a lack of human and social capital, as a lack of employed community members leads to the erosion of community agencies and organizations. This relationship is also partially mediated by the effect of social isolation, as socially isolated poor neighborhood residents lack access to other individuals or connections with human capital, resources, and influence. Finally, the lack of access to different kinds of human and social capital, such as financial resources, education, and peer role models, could result in a change in

community values and aspirations, as mainstream social norms are abandoned in favor of ideals that more accurately match the poverty-stricken neighborhood conditions. These changed values could lead to lower expectations for success and achievement in educational and employment, exacerbating and continuing poverty in inner-city communities. The result is a complex downward spiral producing very complicated social problems.

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

The aim of this brief literature review was to examine major trends in sociological theories explaining urban poverty. This review has several limitations due to its limited scope. Many important issues, including the feminization of poverty, poverty among different ethnic minority groups, and rural and suburban poverty are not discussed (Small & Newman, 2001). In addition, many qualitative sociological studies were not fully reviewed, although they have made important contributions to the field. A more comprehensive literature review would include a critical examination of these other aspects of the sociological literature.

Finally, there are other social stratification and urban poverty theorists who are not cited in this review. This brief introduction to the sociological study of poverty is intended primarily to familiarize readers with some of the influential theories in the field. Consequently, the viewpoints of many scholars working in this field are not included, and more research is necessary to understand the full complexity and breadth of the debates mentioned.

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

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

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