



Understanding Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Poverty: Multiple Social Science Perspectives

Michael J. Austin

This Special Issue has its origins in both historical and contemporary attempts to address the complex social problem of poverty in the U.S. It grew out of a doctoral seminar and therefore most of the authors are current or former doctoral students at the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. The Fall 2005 seminar began in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that blew the roof off the city of New Orleans and exposed a history of poverty, racism, and corruption. The topic of the seminar was inspired by recent research on the views of staff delivering welfare-to-work services in the counties surrounding the San Francisco Bay Area (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, in press). When asked to prioritize an array of training topics relevant to their practice, the staff members rated “poverty” high on their list.

Poverty is also an important topic in the curriculum for preparing future social workers. However, it is not always clear how and where this topic is addressed. Because of its complexity, it can be addressed throughout the curriculum (e.g., policy, practice, theory, research, diversity, and/or specialization courses) or nowhere in the curriculum, that is, “everybody’s business becomes nobody’s business.”

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The challenge of addressing poverty from a multi-disciplinary point of view grew out of several perspectives. Historically, it is interesting to note that poverty surfaces in the public consciousness every several decades; for example, urban poverty at the turn of the twentieth century related to immigration and industrialization, urban and rural poverty in the 1930s related to the stock market crash and the depression, response of the civil rights to poverty and discrimination in the 1960s (including the War on Poverty), the economic boom of the 1990s and welfare reform, and the twenty-first century focus on global poverty.

In addition to the historical ebb and flow of public interest in poverty, the shift in federal government research funding to the brain sciences over the past several decades has resulted in increased attention to the brain development of the young child and the impact of nutrition and nurturance on child development. Poverty is a major underlying theme in the development of children and youth, including the impact of poverty and substance abuse on the unborn child. For youth growing up in poverty environments, limited work and skill development opportunities are also seen as key factors in finding explanations for youth violence and drug dealing.

Given that poverty is a factor throughout the life course, its impact on adults can be seen in the high unemployment rates in poverty neighborhoods (with devastating impact on communities of color) and the hidden poverty in rural America and retirement communities. It is still a surprise to the American public that welfare reform did not reduce poverty but rather reduced caseloads, encouraging the poor to enter and advance in the job market or double-up in cramped housing as a way to survive day-to-day in the underground economy (see Hastings, Taylor, & Austin, 2006; Chow, Johnson, & Austin, 2006; Austin, Lemon, & Leer, 2006; Austin & Lemon, 2006).

The increased specialization of our various social science disciplines (the source of much of our applied theory in the social work profession) is another factor impacting our understanding of poverty. While we benefit from this specialization when students take undergraduate courses on the Sociology of Poverty and Inequality, it is not clear how many of our students enter our undergraduate or graduate programs with such an in-depth exposure to a major social problem. For that matter, there appears to be very little attention in our teaching of human behavior and the social environment to the significant role that social problems (e.g., poverty, disability, crime and delinquency, or discrimination) play when applying theories of human behavior and social environment to practice (see Mulroy & Austin, 2004; Taylor, Mulroy, & Austin, 2004; Taylor,

Austin, & Mulroy, 2004). Without a foundation of understanding about major social problems, theories of human behavior and the social environment can become disconnected from the contexts of practice. While current theories about human behavior and the social environment may provide an understanding of client populations at various stages of development over time, they are often unrelated to major social problems.

It is clear from this review of social sciences perspectives of poverty reflected in this Special Issue that there is a growing need to integrate knowledge about poverty as a social problem. For some social sciences, like economics and political science, poverty perspectives continue to emerge in their scholarly literature. This is also true, but to a lesser extent, with respect to psychology, anthropology, and sociology. The growing need to synthesize and integrate is reflected in the challenge that faculty face when seeking to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of poverty so that social science theory can inform practice and policy.

This Special Issue is designed to address some of these issues. Part I begins with a review of the leading textbooks on human behavior and the social environment used in graduate social work education programs. The purpose of this first article is to assess the degree to which the major social problem of poverty is featured in discussions of the social environment. The findings are not encouraging. Part I also features the different perspectives of poverty utilized by the major social science disciplines. Each one of the literature reviews was designed to identify the major themes of each discipline's approach to poverty. They are relatively brief reviews. To address their limitations, more space and expertise would be required to capture the nuanced perspectives of each discipline. However, the reviews provide faculty and students with a valuable foundation for increasing their multi-disciplinary understanding of poverty. The literature reviews relate to Economics, Sociology, Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology, and an inter-disciplinary view of global poverty.

Part II of this Special Issue focuses on theory integration and practitioner perceptions of poverty. The first article in this section features theories related to social capital and the multi-disciplinary effects of poverty on neighborhoods and networking. The second article represents one of the few empirical attempts to document the views of poverty held by social work students as they entered and exited graduate social work programs. And finally, the third article is a teaching case on the culture of poverty which captures some of the experiences of a public social

service agency as it sought to address the issue of poverty in a staff training program following the implementation of welfare reform.

The purpose of compiling this Special Issue is to re-ignite the discussion and debate about the impact of poverty on a wide variety of human service agency clients. It features a complex social problem from the perspective of our major social science disciplines. Another purpose is to continue the search for ways to demonstrate how theories can inform practice. We hope that we have helped to jump-start the dialogue and curriculum development needed in our social work education programs.

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