

Applying Social Theory to Global Poverty

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By Joshua Doucet

Introduction

Research from 2013 has found that the wealthiest 1% of people own 46% of the Earth's wealth, and the wealthiest 10% of individuals in the world own 86% of the Earth's wealth (Henslin, 2017, p. 237). What about the other side of the spectrum, or the people in poverty? The poorest 10% of people worldwide live on less than \$1.90 a day, and many people living in absolute poverty live in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Middle East (World Bank, 2016). However, this does not mean that poverty exists only in these places. Poverty exists worldwide, but the level of severity varies from country to country. So, if there is such an enormous gap in wealth between the rich and the poor, then how did this happen, and what can be done to resolve the issue? To understand the complexities of poverty, a basic understanding of sociological concepts such as cultural relativism, and social theory is necessary to analyze this global epidemic.

Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

Individuals from different cultures have substantially different views of the world, and these differing views reflect the way that global poverty is understood. I have lived in the middle-class United States my entire life, and when I was younger I thought poverty was the family sitting on a street corner with a cardboard sign eating hamburgers from *McDonalds*. Also, I believed that these people were poor because they had made bad decision in life, and were not trying hard enough to find work. In hindsight, I realize that there are many other factors that these people may have had no control over. Also, I now know that the reality of poverty goes far beyond the family on the street corner. There are other people across the world that are in more extreme poverty than the family I had observed.

If one is to understand the breadth and depth of global poverty, they must remove themselves from the narrow-minded perspectives instilled by their own culture and society. It is necessary that ethnocentrism and cultural relativism be defined. Ethnocentrism is using one's values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of their own group to judge another individual or group by comparing their cultural attributes to their own. In other words, using the attributes of one's own culture as a measuring stick to judge someone else's cultural traits. (Henslin, 2017). Cultural Relativism is a behavior where individuals set aside the biases of their own culture to try to understand someone else's culture from their perspective (Henslin, 2017). Cultural relativism is an attempt to put yourself in someone else's sociological perspective, or the lens in which they perceive life based off their social environment. Cultural relativism is the behavior of not judging another culture by the traits of your own, and is a necessary behavior if one is to analyze worldly issues such as poverty.

Social Theory

The study of Sociology focuses on three main social theories that are divided into macrosociology or microsociology. Macro focusses on the big picture, while micro focuses on intimate interactions. The three theories are symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a branch of microsociology, and focusses on the symbols humans attach meaning to (Henslin, 2017). This theory explains how humans understand the world and communicate with each other. Symbols explain how things are related to each other. A few examples are the relations between mother and daughter as well as teacher and student. Also, language is an important piece of symbolic interaction, and is the reason humans can pass information between generations of people. Lastly, make note that symbols change over time, and people from different culture apply different meanings to the same symbols (Henslin, 2017).

Functional Analysis

Functional Analysis or functionalism is a branch of macrosociology that tries to explain how the different pieces of society work together. The different parts of society are known as institutions such as education, government, medicine, prisons, money, corporations, etc. (Henslin, 2017). When one institution fails or begins to dysfunction, society becomes less stable and more fragile. Functional analysis can be compared to the anatomy of complex life. If one organ begins to fail, then so do the other organs in the body. The same is true about societies. If the education system begins to fail, then societies will no longer have workers with the knowledge to work in medicine or government for example (Henslin, 2017).

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is the second branch of macrosociology that observes that people are constantly competing for resources such as food, materials, labor, and money (Henslin, 2017). Also, conflict theory asserts that different groups of people will have different interests. In the larger perspective these opposing groups are members of different classes, estates, or castes. The people with more power want to keep their power from those who do not have power and property. In a capitalistic society the people with power, property, and prestige are known as the bourgeoisie, and the poor are known as the proletariat. These are terms coined by the well-known sociologist Karl Marx (Henslin, 2017). In a caste system such as India the people in power would be the members of the Brahman caste, the priests and scholars, and the Kshatriya caste, the rulers and soldiers. Their competition would be those in lower castes such as the Dalit caste also known as untouchables. In essence, conflict theory explains the battle for power and control. With these concepts in mind, let us explore what it means to live in poverty.

An Overview of Global Poverty

Most people are aware that being poor is not a glamorous way to live, but how did people end up in this situation, and what does it mean for their way of life? To begin, it is worth mentioning that poverty is a continuum of severity. There is absolute poverty and relative poverty. For example, most people who are poor in the most-industrialized countries are likely struggling compared to other people in their country, but are not likely to be starving to death. This is relative poverty. Whereas people in the least-industrialized countries are dying due to conditions associated with poverty such as lack of nutrition, poor sanitation, and the lack of access to clean drinking water (United Nations Children's Fund, 2009). These are examples of absolute poverty.

Origins of Poverty

Next, how do entire groups of people become trapped in poverty? Among sociologists there are three prominent theories which are colonialism, world systems theory, and the culture of poverty.

Colonialism is the process of one nation conquering another for the purposes of exploiting that nation's assets such as labor and natural resources (Henslin, 2017). An example of this would be an international corporation setting up shop in a lesser-industrialized country to take advantage of laborers and then send most of the corporation's profits back to their home country.

World System Theory is a theory in which the economic and political connections between countries across the world have left out many countries which are now in poverty (Henslin, 2017). This theory explains that countries such as Britain, France, and Holland were the origin of capitalism, and that their surrounding countries became prosperous. The countries that were farther from the origin of global trade were left out and did not begin to accumulate any wealth.

Finally, the third theory is called the culture of poverty. Culture of poverty is an assumption that people make in which they believe the values and behaviors of the poor make them fundamentally different from those who are not poor, which is the reason for why they remain in poverty (Henslin, 2017). Often those in industrialized countries believe that the poor cannot help themselves, and to an extent believe that they are lesser people. This assumption is outright false, because people in poverty are not fundamentally different than rich people. The people in poverty are dealt a bad hand, and are taken advantage of because people think less of them. Overall, colonialism, world systems theory, and the culture of poverty are the three prominent theories sociologists use to explain the origins of poverty.

Implications of Poverty

So, what are the implications of poverty? To begin, poverty often comes with illiteracy. There are 750 million people worldwide who cannot read or write their own name (Henslin, 2017, p. 304). Many of the people who are illiterate reside in poverty stricken countries, and because of the inability to read and write, they will have difficulty preserving knowledge between future generations according to symbolic interaction theory. Next, people in poverty often are not given the legal system that people in the most-industrialized countries take for granted. In many countries in Africa, citizens do not have the right to own their own land, so they are fearful to invest in a business of some kind because of the possibility that their land and property will be taken from them (Miller, 2014). World systems theory could explain the lack of government structure in these countries. Also, according to world systems theory, the poor lack the means to participate in global trade. Lastly, those in poverty are more susceptible to slavery and bonded labor, because their number of opportunities are limited (VICE, 2012). Conflict theorist could argue that the poor are being taken advantage of by the wealthy, because the wealthy have more power, property, and prestige. Overall, these are a few implications that people in poverty face on a regular basis, but this is by no means a complete list of troubles that poverty causes.

Applying Social Theory to Global Poverty

To paint a better picture of poverty let us explore a few case studies of individuals and groups who are living in poverty.

The first example is the town of Lake Providence in Louisiana near the Mississippi river. This is a place of wealth if you live on the North side of the lake, but if you live on the South, then you are lucky if you find a job and have enough money to sustain a family. In East Carroll Parish, the county surrounding the lake, the poorest one-fifth of people make \$6,800 a year, while the top 5% makes over \$600,000 a year according to a 2011 survey. This massive inequality begins in the 1800's due to slavery. Today, slavery has ended, but the white folk still own the land and live on the north side of the lake, while the descendants of slaves live on the south with little property, and opportunity to get ahead in life (CNN, 2013). The people of this town probably see the lake as a symbol of inequality. Jobs on the south side of the lake are scarce, and a job at a fast-food restaurant 15 miles away is highly valued. Overall, the inequality in Lake providence is vast, and people lucky enough to have a job will most-likely never find their way out of poverty (CNN, 2013). These people will work very hard, but will not find an opportunity to climb the social class ladder due to the reality known as conflict theory.

The next example of poverty studies the slave workers of Dubai. Dubai is full of wealth, and it is also full of glamorous high-rise skyscrapers. Many people assume that these buildings are built by well-compensated workers, but this is not the reality. These buildings are built by bonded-laborers sent from surrounding countries such as India (Vice, 2012). Bonded labor is a contract where a laborer sells their body for a set period time (Henslin, 2017). These bonded laborers from India are struggling to provide for their families back home, so they have decided to go to Dubai to look for wealth. They are told that if they take out a loan of a large sum of money and send it to the construction executives, then they will be given a spot on the construction team where they will be well compensated for their work to pay off their initial loan. Once in Dubai, the passports of these workers are taken so they cannot return home until the end of their contract. However, the sad reality is that these workers are not compensated well at all, and live in less than human conditions. They work in unsafe temperatures for extended periods of time, and live in shelters that barely look suitable for cattle. They eat very little, and have no way to return to their families. These people were poor in India, and now they are slaves in Dubai (VICE, 2012). Overall, the slaves of Dubai are another example of conflict theory where the people in power exploit those who do not have it. The workers from India are desperate for money, and the executives in Dubai are hungry for even more, and will do anything to obtain it

The last example of poverty will explore the failing economy of Haiti. Haiti is the poster-child of charity organizations across the most-industrialized countries. In countries such as the United States people collect donations, of rice, eggs, shoes, and clothing and send them to Haiti, because people believe that they are helping people who are struggling to make ends meet. However, these charitable donations hurt the economy in Haiti, and they remain poor because of free handouts (Miller, 2014). Functional analysis explains the effect that these donations have on their economy. Suppose a local shop owner in Haiti has a shoe store. This store owner provides a service to the community, and grows the economy, because shoes are something people need and will buy. When foreign aid comes into Haiti with a truck load of shoes, they become free and people stop paying for shoes. This causes the store owner to sell their shoe business because they cannot make a profit. As time goes on more people need shoes, but the trucks of free shoes have stopped arriving, and the local shoe store no longer exists; therefore, there is now a dysfunction in the Haitian society. No one has access to shoes, because people from other countries bellied that they were being charitable. In the end, shoes are just one example of the problem. The same concept applies to other industries as well.

Conclusion

Global poverty is a complicated issue in which there should be serious concern, because poverty has a plethora of problems associated with it. Poverty is when individuals and groups lack the resources necessary to survive and thrive in a society. Poverty is caused by factors such as colonialism, world systems theory, and the culture of poverty, and the problem continues today because of societal dysfunctions, and the conflict that arises when people compete for wealth. Poverty exists on a continuum of severity, but exists in every country whether they are one of the more-industrialized nations or one of the least industrialized nations. In conclusion, by understanding cultural relativism and social theory, humanity can make progress towards a future in which people may not have to worry about where they will sleep, or if their children will die from hunger. Humans are creatures of intelligence and compassion, and together we can work towards a future without extreme poverty.

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