

Sociological theories of poverty essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



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Poverty is an issue that many social workers are likely to address and tackle throughout practice. Cunningham & Cunningham, (2008) state that ' Social work service users are amongst the most impoverished people in Britain and for many, poverty defines their lives'. (p32) Poverty can result from a number of factors that include political, social and economic dynamics. This assignment shall be based on two sociological theories of poverty. The Individualistic theory; which blames the responsibility of being poor with the individuals themselves, and the Marxist theory which views poverty as a social problem that has been produced and reproduced by structural forces in society. This assignment shall explain why it is important for social workers to develop a sociologic approach to practice and consider how these two theoretical perspectives contribute to social workers understanding of this issue.

Poverty is measured and defined in two terms: absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is based on the basic human needs that help to sustain life, such as food, shelter and clothing. Any person living in a situation where the basic needs of human beings are not being met are said to be living in absolute poverty. Relative poverty refers to a situation in which a person lacks the necessary resources to enable them to participate in the normal and desirable patterns of life that exist in their society. People, who earn less than 50% of the median income of their society, are classed as living in relative poverty. As societies become more affluent, standards for relative poverty are gradually adjusted upwards accordingly. (O'Donnell, 1992)

The Individualistic theories of poverty hold the belief that people are poor due to their own inefficiency. Social and cultural factors are not totally disregarded, however more emphasis is placed on improper behaviours of individuals. The central ideology behind individualism is the belief that those who suffer from low incomes and poverty, do so because they are unable or reluctant to provide adequately for their own well-being. (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995) According to the 19th century sociologist Herbert Spencer, the poor were classed as 'lazy, and those who did not want to work should not be allowed to eat'. Spencer ascribed poverty to 'bad moral character', and argued that the state should intervene as little as possible. 'If the welfare system gave the poor more than an absolute, necessary minimum amount, laziness and moral decline would spread through the population.

Individuals would be attracted to the easy life and as a result society would suffer and its economy would not be successful'. Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest', supporting the view that the deserving succeed and the weak and worthless fail, since it was no more than they deserved.

([http://www. blackacademy. net/content/3252. html](http://www.blackacademy.net/content/3252.html)) The individualistic theory proposes that to reduce poverty, policies need to target individuals value systems, it holds the belief that the individual is poor because he/she has not maximized his/her true potential, it also holds the view that the poor are to blame for their own lowly position because of idleness and exploitation of the benefits system. (Giddens, 2006) Margret Thatcher adopted some of the views of individualistic theory in the 'New Right' Conservative Government in 1979, when she became Britain's first and only female Prime Minister to date. Thatcher had strong views of individualism and minimal

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state intervention, claiming that the benefits system created a 'culture of dependency'. Thatcher's visions emphasized the importance of personal and family responsibility rather than state responsibility.

Thatcher believed state welfare benefits encouraged dependency; her aim was to discourage state dependency by encouraging a free market of industries, private insurance and provisions of family support. (Goodwin, 1997) Her tough views and laissez-faire policies gave her the nickname 'The Iron Lady'. One of Thatcher's most famous quotes were 'There is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then to look after our neighbour'. (<http://www.skyminds.net/politics/inequalities-in-great-britain-in-the-19th-and-20th-centuries/the-thatcher-years-the-individual-and-society/>) Thatcher believed the only way to reduce poverty was through elimination of the dependency culture.

One of her attempts to achieve this was to 'roll back' the welfare state through a series of welfare reforms, by raising the criteria for eligibility of government benefits. (Giddens, 2006) However, during Thatcher's reign as Prime Minister, child poverty was massively increased, where by when she stood down as Prime minister in 1990, one in three children were said to be living in households with less than half the average income. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1999/04/99/thatcher_anniversary/334316.stm) The individualistic theory of poverty is still influential and accepted by some people in modern British society and many people portray those who

live off government handouts as lazy and scroungers. However, only a few sociologists' of modern Britain still accept the individualistic theories of poverty. Sociologists are now more inclined to see poverty as the result of characteristics of a social group such as a family or a community rather than that of the individual. Sociologists' also argue that it is not so much the generosity of the welfare state, but more so the inadequacy and the structure of society itself which is responsible for the existence of poverty. (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995)

The second approach of explaining poverty in a sociological context is that of Marxism. Marx viewed individuals as innately creative, but argued that their creativity had been suppressed by the harsh conditions of capitalism. The Marxist ideology is not a single concept; rather it represents a wide scope of opinions within a framework that is critical of a ' Capitalist' society. (Churton, 2000) Marxist emphasizes larger social processes such as class and inequality produce conditions of poverty that are difficult for individuals to overcome. Marx based his class theory on conflict in an economic position. He divided classes into two groups, the ruling class, who were the capitalists known as the bourgeoisie, who owned land, machines and tools etc, which were used in order to produce wealth. And the subject class, otherwise known as the proletariat who owned nothing but their ability to work.

Marx argued that the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat generation after generation, thus making it almost impossible for them to advance socio-economically and improve their life chances. (Bilton et al, 1996) Neo-Marxists altercate that a state has two functions. The first is to advance the conditions

for accumulation of capital: This creates more scope for industries to make profits, and secondly, to legitimize the capital system: This would be achieved by implementing measures, which encourage people to accept the system as it is, for example by offering pensions and health services.

Essentially the principle of the Marxist analysis of welfare is all about its exercise of power. The state is looked at in two ways, firstly as an instrument of the ruling capital class and secondly, as a complex set of systems which show the contradictions of the society it is part of. While the state might seek to reduce poverty its primary role is to uphold the power of the capitalist system and accumulation of profit. (Churton, 2000) Points argued against Marxism are its description of capitalism is false and power in society is actually divided and that states promoting the welfare of their people are more legitimate.

However, the governments' strategy, which suggests the route to overcome poverty, is to 'work for a living'; is clearly not the case for many people. As statistics in 2006 revealed that half of the children in poverty come from working class families. (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/1979.asp>)

It is important for social workers to understand the connections between individual problems such as poverty and the inequalities within society, as it seeks to understand the relationship between individuals' and society. Cree (2000) states that, 'if a social worker fails to make these connections, there is a very real risk that, by blaming individuals and families, they will perpetuate the oppression and discrimination which characterize the lives of users of social work services'.

(p5) Sociology is about people and understanding how we live together in

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social groups. By engaging in sociological theories, social workers are better able to grasp the developments and changing values that affect individuals in society. A sociological perspective empowers social workers in enhancing their understanding of social relationships.

This understanding enables social workers to have an empathic understanding in the structure and dynamics of society and their intricate connections to the patterns of human behaviour and individual life changes, as it aids in examining the ways in which the forms of social structure affect human attitudes, actions and opportunities. (Cree, 2000) In conclusion to the above findings the individualistic theories into causes of poverty, lay the blame for the situation of poverty with the individual, although it does recognize there are people, who through no fault of their own cannot avoid being poor, for example those who are disabled or pensioners etc. It does fail to accept that social, political and economic inequality is a contributing factor for much of the poverty in society.