

Theoretical perspectives

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



Theoretical Perspectives The three main theoretical perspectives in sociology--structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism--offer insights into the nature, causes, and consequences of poverty and economic inequality. Structural-Functionalist Perspective According to the structural-functionalist perspective, poverty and economic inequality serve a number of positive functions for society. Decades ago, Davis and Moore (1945) argued that because the various occupational roles in society require different levels of ability, expertise, and knowledge, an unequal economic reward system helps to assure that the person who performs a particular role is the most qualified. As people acquire certain levels of expertise (e. g., B. A., M. A., Ph. D., M. D.), they are progressively rewarded. Such a system, argued Davis and Moore (1945), motivates people to achieve by offering higher rewards for higher achievements. If physicians were not offered high salaries, for example, who would want to endure the arduous years of medical training and long, stressful hours at a hospital? The structural-functionalist view of poverty suggest that a certain amount of poverty has positive functions for society. Although poor people are often viewed as a burden to society, having a pool of low-paid, impoverished workers ensures that there will be people willing to do dirty, dangerous, and difficult work that others refuse to do. Poverty also provides employment for those who work in the " poverty industry" (such as welfare workers) and supplies a market for inferior goods such as older, dilapidated homes and automobiles (Gans, 1972). The structural-functionalist view of poverty and economic inequality has received a great deal of criticism from contemporary sociologists, who point out that many important occupational

roles (such as child care workers) are poorly paid, whereas many individuals in nonessential roles (such as professional sports stars and entertainers) earn astronomical sums of money. Functionalism also accepts poverty as a necessary evil and ignores the roles of inheritance in the distribution of rewards. Conflict Perspective Conflict theorists regard economic inequality as resulting from the domination of the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) over the proletariat (workers). The bourgeoisie accumulate wealth as they profit from the labor of the proletariat, who earn wages far below the earnings of the bourgeoisie. The U. S. educational institution further the ideals of capitalism by perpetuating the belief in equal opportunity, the " American Dream," and the value of the work ethic. The proletariat, dependent on the capitalistic system, continue to be exploited by the wealthy and accept the belief that poverty is a consequence of personal failure rather than a flawed economic structure. Conflict theorists pay attention to how laws and policies benefit the wealthy and contribute to the gap between the have and the have not. Laws and policies that favor the rich--sometimes referred to as wealthfare or corporate welfare--include low-interest government loans to failing businesses, special subsidies and tax breaks to corporations, and other laws and policies can deduct up to \$1 million in mortgage interest. Lowering this ceiling to \$250, 000 would affect the wealthiest 5 percent of Americans, but would save taxpayers \$10 billion a year (reported in Albelda & Tilly, 1997). A 1998 Time magazine series of special reports on corporate welfare programs gave national visibility on the issue. In one report, Time revealed that between 1990 and 1997, Seaboard Corporation, an agribusiness corporate giant, received at least \$150 million

in economic incentives from federal, state, and local governments to build and staff poultry- and hog-processing plants in the United States, support its operations in foreign countries, and sell its products (Barlett & Steele, 1998). Taxpayers picked up the tab not just for the corporate welfare, but also for the costs of new classrooms and teachers (for schooling the children of Seaboard's employees, many of whom are immigrants), homelessness (due to the inability of Seaboard's low-paid employees to afford housing), and dwindling property values resulting from smells of hog waste and rotting hog carcasses in areas surrounding Seaboard's hog plants. Meanwhile, wealthy investors in Seaboard have earned millions in increased stock values.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective Symbolic interactionism focuses on how meanings, labels, and definitions affect and are affected by social life. This view calls attention to ways in which wealth and poverty are defined and the consequences of being labeled as "poor." Individuals who are viewed as poor--especially those receiving public assistance (i. e., welfare)--are often stigmatized as lazy; irresponsible; and lacking in abilities, motivation, and moral values. Wealthy individuals, on the other hand, tend to be viewed as capable, motivated, hard-working, and deserving of their wealth. Definitions of wealth and poverty vary across societies and across time. For example, the Dinka are the largest ethnic group in the sub-Saharan African country of Sudan. By global standards, the Dinka are among the poorest of the poor, being among the least modernized people of the world. In the Dinka culture, wealth is measured in large part according to how many cattle a person owns. But, to the Dinka, cattle have a social, mortal, and spiritual value as an economic value. In Dinka culture, a man pays an average "bridewealth"

of 50 cows to the family of his bride. Thus, men use cattle to obtain a wife to beget children, especially sons, to ensure continuity of their ancestral lineage and, according to Dinka religious beliefs, their linkage with God. Although modernized populations might label the Dinka as poor, the Dinka view themselves as wealthy. As one Dinka elder explained, " It is for cattle that we are admired, we, the Dinka... All over the world, people look to us because of cattle... because of our great wealth; and our wealth is cattle" (Deng, 1998, p. 107). Deng (1998) notes that many African people who are poor by U. S. standards resist being labeled as poor. The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that norms, values, and beliefs are learned through social interaction. Social interaction also influences the development of one's self-concept. Lewis (1966) argued that, over time, the poor develop norms, values, and beliefs and self-concepts that contribute to their own plight. According to Lewis, the culture of poverty is characterized by female-centered households, an emphasis on gratification in the present rather than in the future, and a relative lack of participation in society's major institutions. " The people of the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging... Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness" (Lewis, 1998, p. 7). Early sexual activity, early marriage, and unmarried parenthood are considered normal and acceptable among individuals living in a culture of poverty. Certain groups, according to this view, remain poor over time as the culture of poverty is transmitted from one generation to the next. Critics of the culture of poverty approach argue

that it blames the victim rather than the structure of society for poverty, justifies the status quo, and perpetuates inequality (Ryan, 19