

Functionalist perspective on social problems



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When in a society people agree that there exists a condition that threatens the quality of their lives and their most cherished values, and they also agree that something should be done to remedy it, sociologists say that society has defined that state of affairs as a social problem. Sociologists ask questions about how the problem effects the collectivity rather than the individual aspects of a problem. The main sociological approaches to the study of social problems are the functionalist and conflict perspectives.

Functionalism aims at analysing the social and cultural phenomenon in terms of the functions they perform. From this perspective, the main reason for the existence of social problems is that societies are always changing and the failure to adapt successfully to change leads to social problems. Functionalist analysis was prominent in the work of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, two of the founding fathers of this discipline and was further developed and refined by Emile Durkheim and more recently by Talcott Parsons. Durkheim is the most important sociological forerunner of modern day functionalism. His description of organic solidarity focussed on the interdependence of roles and lack of self-sufficiency that held people together.

According to the functionalist perspective, each part of society is interconnected and contributes to society performing as a whole. If all goes well, the diverse parts of society produce order, equilibrium and performance. If all does not go well, then the different parts of society must adapt themselves to re-establish a new balance, equilibrium and performance. For example, during a financial recession and consequent high rates of unemployment and inflation, state spending on social programs is reduced or eliminated, Schools offer fewer educational programmes and

families spend less, so a new social order, steadfastness and productivity occurs.

The conflict perspective, which originated primarily out of Karl Marx's writings on class conflicts, presents a picture of society in a different light from the functionalist perspective. While the functionalist perspective focuses on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, the conflict perspective focuses on the antagonistic, disharmonized and ever-changing nature of society. Conflict theorists challenge the existing state of affairs, strengthen social change (even when this means social revolution) and believe affluent and authoritarian people force social order on the destitute and the weak.

Capitalism, the economic system which dominates the world today, is based on private ownership of the means of production (manufacturing industry, the raw materials and resources needed for industry and even the seeds necessary for food production) and exploitation of the labour of the working-class. The working-class, with no land or substantial inherited wealth, have no means of supporting themselves and are forced to sell their labour to survive. Capitalists buy this labour power, then get their money back and make profits by selling necessities and other products to the working-class and other classes in society.

Critics of the conflict perspective point to its exceedingly negative outlook of society. The theory ultimately accredits charitable efforts, benevolence, democracy, civil rights, and other positive aspects of society to capitalistic

motives meant to control the masses, and not to fundamental interests in sustaining society and social order.

For generations before the establishment of a welfare state, most poor people who did not earn a living somehow managed to cope. Relying on family and, if necessary, on local charities, they pooled together the resources necessary to maintain a dwelling and prevent starvation. The term Poverty has many definitions and it is often defined as a state of deprivation relative to those standards of living enjoyed by others within the same society e. g. income or consumption poverty, social preclusion, lack of basic needs and relative hardship.

The extensive sociological literature on poverty overlaps with that on race, ethnicity, subcultures, the underclass and stratification. The study of poverty is central to any examinations of social inequality, including an analysis of who is destitute and the reasons for their poverty. Although the poor have often been blamed for their poverty, which is seen as the consequence of some form of personal inadequacy such as idleness, most studies attribute the existence of poverty in terms of the social and economic structures of industrialised societies.

The Functionalist belief on poverty is based on the assumption that poverty serves a constructive use for society since functionalism is interested in large scale fundamental justifications of social life. Therefore, poverty is studied on a macro level on the basis of the benefits it provides to society as a whole, rather than for the persons who are in poverty. The most influential writer on this aspect is Herbert J. Gans (1971) who suggests that poverty

benefits the rich and powerful, who have a statutory interest in preserving poverty.

According to Gans, poverty ensures there is always someone in society who needs to perform physically dangerous, temporary, undignified and underpaid work for low wages, which is ultimately better than destitution. Furthermore, without the underpaid in society, many enterprises would be unable to operate as they rely upon under paid workers to ensure their dividend and success. The very existence of poverty provides the rest of society with benchmark against which society can measure itself.

In Britain, Peter Townsend played a leading role between 1950, and 1970s in making the public aware of the continuing existence of poverty. According to Townsend individuals, families and groups can be said to be in poverty when they lack the means to obtain the types of food, participate in the activities and have basic living conditions and facilities which are recognized, or at least widely sanctioned or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those required by the average person or family that they are, in effect, excluded from everyday living ways, customs and activities. In *Poverty in the United Kingdom* Townsend claims that the existence of class division is the major factor causing poverty; but he also acknowledges that poverty is related to lifestyles.

From a conflict perspective, poverty is imposed, reflecting unequal power among social groups, and it will continue to be imposed until those harmed by it manage to force a change. Conflict

theory argues that the explanations offered by functionalism theory is part of what sustains poverty, as they conceal its true origins and encourage the poor to accept social arrangements rather than organize to combat them.

Marxism attributes poverty to the existence of class divisions in society.

Poverty helps to maintain the domination of the bourgeoisie.

In the 19th century the recognized explanation of poverty came from Malthus's Essay on Population (1798). Malthus affirmed that population grows faster than production. Increasing poverty is therefore unavoidable; any increase in the standard of living of the poorest classes simply leads to an increase in births or decrease in death rates and the population again 'presses on' food supply. Marx held the Malthusian theory in great disdain. Under capitalism, production grows very rapidly because of continual innovation and the 'surplus' population - a group of unemployed living in poverty - is not the result of natural population increase, but of the dislocation of workers by labour-saving machinery. The surplus population could all work if the length of the working day were reduced. But employers don't want this, for various reasons.

Marxists believe that the capitalist society is constructed by the economy, and this structure needs to be completely reconfigured to be able to eliminate poverty. This would include a revolutionary eradication of capitalism because eventually the situation will progress to a small minority of the bourgeoisie (ruling class) and a pool of cheap labour. Marxists illustrated this by suggesting that institutions in the superstructure, such as the media, abuse of the proletariat, keeping them poor. A fragileness to the Marxists point of view is that it fails to explain why some groups are more

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inclined to poverty than others, e. g. women and the disabled. According to Marxists, the welfare system is an instrument of the state, which helps to maintain absolute lack of balance of prosperity that see some people living in privation with little possibility of ever really escaping from it.

Absolute poverty, also known as subsistence poverty, is the idea that it is possible to create an absolute minimum standard of living required for physical health, this is often called the poverty line. This concept is used in Drewnowski and Scott's 'level of living index' where nutrition is defined in terms of calories and protein, shelter in terms of quality of dwelling and degrees of overcrowding, and health in terms of infant mortality and the quality of available medical facilities. Some sociologists attempt to include measures of education, security, leisure and recreation as basic cultural needs to be added to the notion of subsistence.

The theory of relative poverty has mainly replaced that of absolute poverty in sociological research. Relative poverty is measured in terms of judgements by members of a particular society of what is considered as a reasonable and acceptable standard of living. This definition of poverty suggests that the poor in any given society are, in part, defined by their opposite, the rich. A society has a distinctive set of cultural values, and any definition of poverty must include the choices and interests that individuals have in their society.

Researchers have linked poverty to several key issues of child welfare. Children from families in poverty experience more emotional and behaviour problems than children from middle and upper class families. Although all

children go to school, the background of some puts them academically behind their peers from the beginning. Impoverished students are far more likely to enter school a disadvantaged because they have not had experiences that promote literacy and reading readiness.

More than one billion people in the world live on less than one dollar a day. In total, 2.7 billion struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day. Poverty in the developing world, however, goes far beyond income poverty. This entails having to walk more than one mile everyday to collect water and firewood; it means suffering diseases that were annihilated from rich countries decades ago. Every year eleven million children (mostly under the age of five) die from malnutrition and more than six million from completely preventable causes like malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia. A total of 114 million children do not get access to a basic education and 584 million women are illiterate.

Social protection systems in Europe are among the most highly developed in the world but still, 16% of Europe's population amounting to 79 million people live below the poverty line (set at 60% of their country's median income) with one European in ten living in a household where nobody has an employment. Children, are more exposed to poverty with 19% amounting to 19 million children living under the threat of poverty. For this reason the European Union has proclaimed 2010 as the European Year For Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion with four main objectives:

The fundamental right of persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to take an active part in society;

Foster commitment by all public and private actors to combat poverty and social exclusion;

Encourage cohesion;

Promote commitment and practical action of the EU and its Member States to combat poverty and social exclusion, and involve all levels of authority in the pursuit of that aim.

Malta does not live in a vacuum and new forms of poverty brought about by social progress as a result of new lifestyles have been very actual. A large number of families are living through difficult times, with children being the innocent victims of their parents and guardians, the authorities or the community at large. Problems created by gambling, usury, alcohol, drug abuse and mental health. The report by the National Family Commission states that relative poverty exists not just financially but also in cases of stigmatised illness, domestic violence and cases where a husband chooses not to work so that he can default on paying maintenance to wife and dependants.

More and more international efforts have been organized in recent decades to address the problems of the poorest among us. However, while the world has certainly seen an overall improvement in rates of poverty and poverty-related issues, success has been uneven and hampered by serious setbacks. One devastating disease, such as AIDS, can obliterate the economy of a low-income country and one violent conflict can crush any human development advances that might have been achieved.

Can we envisage a society without absolute poverty and relative poverty? In a society without absolute poverty everyone that could work would be employed, there would be little crime, just a great place to live. In a society without relative poverty people would all have the same wealth and there would be no competition to be better than anyone else. This type of society is only possible in the imagination. Poverty survives because it is useful to our society. Society's dirty work could still be carried out without poverty by paying the "dirty workers" decent wages. If the poor were more affluent they would make less willing clients for upper-class philanthropy. Poverty will only be eliminated when the poor can obtain enough power to make a change in today's society.