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# **The Influence of Social Science Theories on the Conceptualization of Poverty in Social Welfare**

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*Poverty has been a widely explored issue that has been debated across many social science academic disciplines. Due to its multi-dimensional nature, different interpretations of the causes of poverty have been put forth. This analysis examines the theories of poverty from five social science disciplines: psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science. While some of these ideas have evolved since they were originally conceived, these theories have significantly contributed to the conceptualization of poverty in social welfare. Since social welfare does not have a common theory of poverty, future directions should involve an attempt to develop a unifying theory of poverty for clarification on shared discussions because of its impact all areas in the field of social welfare and social work practice.*

*KEYWORDS* Poverty theories, social sciences, interdisciplinary perspective, social welfare

## INTRODUCTION

Poverty has become an increasingly debated topic in the United States. The issue of poverty has been a concern across most academic disciplines, and its multi-dimensional nature has invoked different interpretations in terms of its causes, depending on the perspective of the discipline. For example, psychology, a discipline that focuses on the individual, historically attributes poverty to personal characteristics and as a pathological deficiency among

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the poor (Pearl, 1970; Goldstein, 1973; Carr, 2003). Similarly, sociology, which is rooted in the study of society and social relationships, views poverty as a result of structural inadequacies such as segregation and racism (Wilson, 1987; Jencks, 1992) and lack of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Academic traditions such as these have established theories that they assert to hold true through time and space.

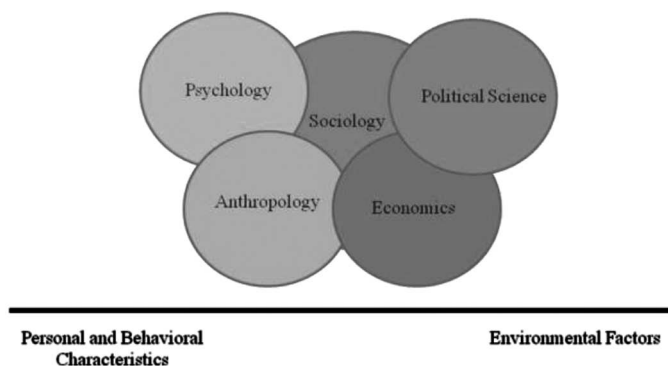
The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate the influences of social science disciplines on the conceptualization of poverty. It provides a theoretical analysis of the causes of poverty from five social science disciplines: psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science. A theory is defined as “a systematic set of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life or enrich our sense of how people conduct and find meaning in their daily lives” (Rubin & Babbie, 1997, p. 41). Whereas other academic disciplines also address the issue of poverty, these five were chosen because of their traditional role as “human sciences” among the social sciences (Tucker, Garvin, & Sarri, 1997) and their significant influence on social welfare. The analysis provides a broad overview of the core perspective that each discipline holds with regard to the causes of poverty and demonstrates their application to social welfare.

The analysis is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of theories of poverty from the perspective of each of the five disciplines. The evolution of theories of poverty from each discipline is explored in terms of similarities and differences. The second section describes how each of the disciplines has influenced social welfare perspectives of poverty, especially how people behave/interact in those environments and how these perspectives inform both micro- and macro-level interventions. The concluding section includes implications for conceptualizing poverty from a social welfare perspective.

In this analysis, poverty is defined as the fundamental lack of necessary resources that are needed for survival in contrast to the concept of well-being that often incorporates physical, emotional, and mental health and functionality (MacPherson & Silburn, 1998). Although the United States uses an absolute measure of poverty as defined by an income level under which people are categorized as poor, the broader definition was chosen to accommodate theoretical perspectives that do not consider specific measures of poverty. Though poverty is a multi-faceted issue that has implications for people, society, and policy, this analysis focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the causes of poverty from the five academic disciplines and not on the issues of poverty outcomes, alleviation strategies, and measurement.

## SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORIES OF POVERTY

Poverty is a complex social problem with varying causes. The social sciences offer different, and sometimes similar, theories for the causes of poverty. This



**FIGURE 1** Overview of social science theories of poverty.

section provides an overview of the theories of poverty from five social science disciplines (psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science) and the historic evolution of the different theories of poverty.

The order of the disciplines presented reflects a focus on individual behaviors and then environmental factors. Psychological theories of poverty are presented first owing to the discipline's historical emphasis on individuals and its attribution of individual behaviors to poverty and are placed on the far left-hand side of the spectrum as noted in Figure 1. The anthropological view of poverty is then discussed because of its past attribution of poverty to cultural characteristics found within groups, a variant of the idea that personal behaviors cause poverty. Sociological theories of poverty represent a shift from personal characteristics and behaviors to theories that underscore environmental and contextual impacts on poverty. This is followed by theories of poverty from economics and political science, both of which highlight structural causes of poverty. Though Figure 1 illustrates the overlapping concepts of poverty reflected in each discipline's theories, contemporary theories of poverty now focus on environmental factors and their significant impact on poverty.

## Psychology

Psychology, the study of the mind and behavior, focuses on the functionality of individuals. Historically, psychological theories that seek to explain the causes of poverty emphasize the shortcomings within individuals that lead to poverty (sometimes referred to as "blaming the victim"). These theories include the lack of intelligence, little or no sense of achievement or motivation, moral deficiencies, and undeveloped ego and psychosexual characteristics (Turner & Lehning, 2007).

In the 1970s, some psychologists began to make the causal claim that poverty is a result of individual deficiencies or pathologies that prevented people from becoming economically self-sufficient (Pearl, 1970; Goldstein,

1973; Carr, 2003). For example, a lack of intelligence, as measured by a battery of examinations including the IQ test, was thought to contribute to poverty (Rainwater, 1970; Ginsburg, 1978). Though this idea has become outdated and no longer holds significance in the psychological community, the idea of intellectual inadequacies leading to poverty did resurface again in the 1990s with the controversial book *The Bell Curve*, which argued that intelligence can be used as a strong predictor for poverty-related outcomes such as single parenthood, job performance, and crime (Hernstein & Murray, 1994).

Another psychological theory of poverty is related to achievement motivation. The McClelland approach argues that poor people have an undeveloped inherent trait called the need for achievement characteristic, which prevents them from leaving poverty (Carr, 2003). Low levels of the need for achievement characteristic causes the poor to be lazy and unmotivated, leading them to seek easy and unchallenging tasks or work that results in the inability to compete for economic gain. This theory gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s to explain why the poor did not and could not help themselves get out of poverty. Though this theory may overlap with biology or neurology, it is considered to be a psychological theory of poverty because of its emphasis on motivation, which is not genetic but rather behavioral.

Other psychological theories attribute poverty to low moral standards or psychological illness, which are premised on the assertion that the poor or “disinherited” live in a way that is deviant from the norms of a culture (Rainwater, 1970). Under this theory, the poor are unable to improve their economic position because of their lack of morality or psychopathologies, both of which are viewed as being related because mental illness was seen as punishment for sinful behavior.<sup>1</sup> These assertions are based on the observations that schizophrenics and others with severe mental illness made up a significant proportion of the poor (Goldstein, 1973; Murali & Oyebode, 2004), despite the fact that they may have come from upper- and middle-class families. Though this view was held by only a few psychologists during the 1970s, it nevertheless contributes to the idea that poverty was a result of intrinsic characteristics.

Similarly, another school of psychological thought holds that poverty is a result of undeveloped ego and psychosexual development. Rooted in Freud's theories, the poor are seen as having weak control of aggressive impulses and sexual desires that lead to the need for immediate gratification (Curran, 2002). Again, this theory of poverty attributes the economic conditions of the poor to personal character deficiencies. Though the emphasis on the individual reflects the nature of study in the discipline of psychology, many contemporary psychologists have shifted their view of the etiology of poverty to acknowledge that environmental factors also play a role in poverty status (American Psychological Association [APA], 2000).

In 1979, the late developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, developed the ecological theory that social systems, including family, friends, community, and society, are continuously interacting to influence an individual's life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological theory has modified the discipline's theory of poverty from being one that focuses on the individual to one that recognizes the environment factors that contribute to an individual's poverty status. It has been applied to the problem of poverty and used to explain its existence in the lives of individuals and families. For example, whereas some psychologists attributed poverty to the lack of intelligence, most psychologists today agree that environmental factors such as neighborhood and quality of schools can have an impact on academic performance (Fraser, 1997). Consequently, contemporary psychologists have shifted their view of poverty from one that emphasizes individual deficiencies to one that acknowledges the effect of social systems on poverty.

The recognition of the influence of environmental factors on poverty can be seen in the *Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status* adopted by the APA (2000) as follows:

... will advocate for more research that examines the causes and impact of poverty, economic disparity, and related issues such as socioeconomic status, classism, ageism, unintended pregnancy, environmental factors, ethnic strife and war, stereotypes, the stigma and feelings of shame associated with poverty, and mental and physical health problems, including depression, substance abuse, intimate violence, child sexual abuse, and elder abuse, as well as advocate for the broader dissemination of these research findings (2000).

This resolution is a sign of psychology's commitment to understanding poverty with both a behavioral and a systems perspective that incorporates environmental factors.

Similar to the psychological evolution of the theory of poverty, the discipline of anthropology also experienced a historical shift in its theories of poverty from perceiving the poor as trapped in a culture of poverty to a recognition of the environmental impact of social class.

## Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of human beings through time and space within their social, environmental, and cultural contexts. It is similar to the study of psychology in that the unit of analysis is usually the individual or groups. The difference between the two disciplines is that anthropology places an emphasis on the individual *with respect to* his or her culture and society. Anthropology holds a unique position in the social sciences owing to its methodological contribution, specifically in the form of participant observation, narrative analysis, cross-cultural comparison, and ethnographic research

that seeks to capture complex bonds of human and social experiences within societies from the perspective of the subjects (Frerer & Vu, 2007). This makes anthropology an appropriate discipline to study poverty. As Oscar Lewis (1959) states: "To understand the culture of the poor, it is necessary to live with them, learn their language and customs, and to identify with their problems and aspirations" (p. 3). This idea of a *culture of poverty* was widely accepted in the second half of the twentieth century as the cause for poverty from an anthropological perspective and had great influence on and other academic disciplines as well.

Interest in the culture of poverty gained momentum in anthropology during the mid-twentieth century when anthropologists sought to investigate and define poverty as a distinct and separate entity from the norms of human culture. Theorists attempted to explain the poverty construct as an adaptive, self-sustaining system with a unique language and organization that perpetuates the condition. In his seminal book, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Lewis (1959) presents vivid images of poor Mexican families using ethnographic methods. He was the first social scientist to coin the term *culture of poverty* by suggesting that behaviors and beliefs are learned in early childhood and can contribute to multigenerational poverty. Some of the behaviors in the culture of poverty include sexual promiscuity resulting in out-of-wedlock births, strong feelings of marginality, helplessness and dependency, a lack of clear judgment, and experiences that reflect limited knowledge of personal troubles, local conditions, and their own way of life (Lewis). Although Lewis uses five Mexican families as examples, he theorizes that the culture of poverty is not just limited to Mexicans but that the attitudes and beliefs underlying the culture of poverty transcend both ethnicity and geography (Lewis).

Lewis's findings and interpretations sparked considerable controversy among anthropologists about the distinction between the culture of poverty and socioeconomic poverty rooted in social class differences. The *culture of poverty* school of thought asserted that poverty is caused by the generational transmission of beliefs, values, and skills. Thus, individuals are not necessarily to blame because they are subjected to deviant cultures that are socially generated (James, 1972; Bradshaw, 2006). These cultures have a distinct set of behaviors that diverge from the social norm. Studies identifying deviant behaviors such as promiscuity (Frazier, 1965) and matriarchal families (Moynihan, 1965) added fuel to the culture-of-poverty argument.

In contrast, the school of thought about the importance of social class holds that the behaviors exhibited by the poor are adaptations to their impoverished environments that emerge from failures in the social, political, and economic structures of society. Though these anthropologists maintain that a culture of poverty exists, they argue that a subculture of poverty develops as a *response* to the environment. This theory is slightly different from the culture-of-poverty theory because it asserts that the poor continue

to hold values similar to those held by other segments of society despite the fact that they live in poverty. Parker and Kleiner (1970) hypothesized that “attitudes characterizing the ‘culture of poverty’ help people living in poverty to maintain their sanity. They reflect a ‘realistic’ appraisal of the constraints of their social situation” (Parker and Kleiner, p. 519). In addition, Valentine (1968) criticized Lewis’s conceptualization of poverty by asserting that culture is a structural phenomenon of its own that influences the behavior of the people it encompasses. By applying the concept of culture to the poor, researchers ignore the significant norms that the poor share with the rest of society. The class-poverty school of thought overlaps with sociological theories of poverty that will be discussed later in this analysis.

The culture-of-poverty theory put forth by Lewis had a significant impact on anthropological views of poverty. Whereas the culture-of-poverty school of thought ascribed poverty to personal characteristics and individual behaviors (much like psychologists during the 1960s and 1970s), the class-poverty school of thought attributed poverty to environmental factors that created a subculture of behaviors and norms as a response to poverty. This schism is now moot as it is generally accepted in anthropology and other social science disciplines that the culture-of-poverty school of thought has lost prominence owing to the lack of explanatory power and generalizability (Goode and Eames, 1996), although the concept may still be relevant in popular culture and society.

The current direction for anthropological research on poverty moves beyond the study of isolated cultures to broader perspectives on the discourse of poverty that includes globalization, materialism, and feminism. Anthropologists incorporate ideas from other social sciences and use globalization theories to document the ways in which local processes are linked and integrated with global changes to then interpret the poverty effects of globalization on a given culture or community. For example, Farmer (1997) explains the causes of poverty as being the result of social and political forces that cause suffering. Using traditional ethnographic methods, he describes the life stories of two impoverished individuals in different circumstances from Haiti: One is a woman who unknowingly contracts AIDS from a soldier, and the other is a civilian man who was jailed and tortured by military personnel. Farmer suggests that global and national social and economic forces impacting the local community can shape the forms of structural violence (in this case disease and oppressive government) that contribute to poverty.

Theories of materialism, which include cultural and Marxist perspectives, view the material constraints of the environment as central to the process of adaptation and as a contributing factor to poverty. The concept of materialism seeks to explain events and behaviors in terms of material factors such as the environment, technology, and the economy rather than on the basis of non-material factors such as belief or custom (Winthrop, 1991). Social inequality,



a concept prevalent in the discussion of the poor, is seen as a reflection of the differences between groups in the organization of production and the ownership of property, whereby the interaction creates a consistent hierarchy of wealth, power, and prestige (Keesing, 1974; Winthrop). Although social groups are separated by distances that are culturally based, inequality is used to describe the distance between the social groups that separate those who are poor from those who are not.

The concept of the feminization of poverty in anthropology incorporates cultural, feminist, and globalization theory when exploring the effects of poverty on women. Gunewardena (2002) contends that though the elimination of poverty primarily relies on macro-economic factors and market regulation, the reasons why women live in poverty are less related to economics and more associated with gender discrimination. The economic position of women makes them more vulnerable to poverty owing to the intersection of race, gender, and class. Similarly, Mills (2003) explains the processes through which gender and labor inequalities shape the global economy, asserting that hierarchical gender ideologies serve to minimize the costs of labor by using children, women, and immigrants as supplementary or devalued workers. Thus, the feminization of poverty occurs because of societal gender roles that discriminate against women and undervalue women's labor, thereby contributing to their gendered poverty status.

Similar to the discipline of psychology, anthropological views on poverty have evolved from the culture of poverty that described the individual as a victim of deviant cultures in the 1960s and 1970s to recognize that poverty is impacted by environmental factors. Anthropological theories of poverty contribute to social science knowledge in two unique ways. First, the methodology used by anthropologists to understand poverty allows for a qualitative understanding of individual and group experiences of people in poverty that is difficult to achieve in other disciplines. Second, by investigating global phenomena (such as globalization, materialism, and feminism) at the individual level, anthropologists are able to document the interconnectedness between local environments and global processes and compare similar and contrasting dynamics across diverse populations. These abilities can expand current knowledge and understanding of the impact of global processes on local environments and persons.

## Sociology

Sociology provides other social sciences with an understanding of poverty and its relationship to both behavioral and environmental contexts. Unlike the other social sciences, sociology has consistently held the view that individual factors have a limited role in explaining the cause of poverty (Rank, 2004). Instead, poverty is caused by economic, political, and social failings that create the social problem. In the United States, sociologists have primar-

ily focused on the urban poverty of ethnic minorities, particularly African-Americans. Though rural poverty is a significant social problem studied by sociologists (Duncan, 1999; Weber & Jensen, 2004; Allard, 2009), most theories of poverty are derived from urban areas and, as a result, play a primary role in this analysis. Sociological theories of poverty can be classified into two categories: (1) social stratification, segregation/racism, and spatial mismatch and (2) lack of social capital.

Social stratification is perhaps the most studied sociological theory that explains the cause of poverty. Social stratification theory argues that poverty is a result of social isolation that is caused by socioeconomic and political trends. Harrington (1962), though not a sociologist, laid the foundational groundwork on which social stratification theories are based. He hypothesized that racial segregation in urban city neighborhoods, a result of racism and discrimination, contributed to the intergenerational transfer of poverty among African-Americans. Combining concepts from psychology, he also observed that African-Americans living in urban poverty developed a sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation that prevented them from meeting their economic needs. These attitudes were not, as other social scientists contended, a result of personal deficiencies or characteristic traits but instead were caused by the environment in which they lived, namely disorganized and impoverished communities. Although Harrington's arguments lacked an empirical basis, he nonetheless created a framework for the sociological study of poverty.

Harrington's ideas had great influence in the conceptualization of the spatial mismatch theory. Originally put forth by Kain (1968), spatial-mismatch theory contends that the transition of low-skilled jobs from inner-cities to suburbs, combined with residential segregation, reduce the accessibility to jobs for urban residents owing to the high costs of transportation and housing markets in suburban areas. This isolates poverty within urban cities and keeps the poor from the economic and cultural mainstream (Teitz & Chapple, 1998). Kain's analysis provided a logical link between racism (in the form of residential segregation) and changes in the structural economy (the movement of jobs from inner-cities to suburban areas) that resulted in chronic unemployment and persistent poverty for the urban poor.

As laid out by Harrington and Kain, the spatial mismatch theory argues that two interacting components cause poverty: Residential segregation and lack of jobs in inner-cities. The issue of residential segregation has been studied by many sociologists, including Massey and Denton (1993) in their seminal book, *American Apartheid*. In it, they argue that residential segregation keeps both poor and non-poor African-Americans from moving out of poor neighborhoods with high crime rates and limited resources into areas that would enhance their social and economic mobility. As a result, African-Americans are forced to live in areas with a high density of poverty, thereby becoming an important cause of poverty through nega-

tive neighborhood effects and social and economic isolation of segregated communities.

Similar to Massey and Denton's focus on economic and structural causes of poverty, Wilson (1987) also argues that the migration of employment from inner-cities to suburban areas takes with it upwardly mobile middle-class African-Americans who are able to move and leaving behind an "underclass" of African-Americans who are left with unstable communities bereft of supportive churches, school, and other institutions. This underclass slowly deteriorates as crime, single female-headed households, and chronic unemployment increases in concentrated neighborhoods. In addition, Wilson's theory includes the concepts of class poverty from anthropology, arguing that the norms of the underclass create a subculture that stems from urban social isolation, not as internalized characteristics as the culture of poverty argument holds.

Consistent with spatial-mismatch theorists, Jenks (1992), like Wilson, focuses on shifts in the labor market and the impacts of neighborhood effects in the development of an underclass. However, Jencks emphasizes the role of personal choice and cultural changes in contributing to urban poverty. For example, he argues that when low-skilled jobs are available in inner-cities, many residents do not take them, instead choosing involvement in criminal or risky activity as a means for income. In addition, Jencks argues that acceptance in changes of cultural norms, such as out-of-wedlock births and "ghetto culture," desensitizes their negative impacts and increases tolerance for such behaviors. Like Wilson, Jencks does not attribute these phenomena as coming from a culture made up of individual deficiencies but as a result of increasing social acceptance.

Sociological theories have attributed the lack of social capital not to the cause of poverty but a contributing factor that exasperates it. Social capital is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). This is different from human capital, which consists of education, financial wealth, or acquired skills (Coleman, 1988). Sociologists such as Coleman believe that the lack of social capital contributes to the incidence of poverty. For example, the strength and trust of interpersonal relationships between family and community members act as protective factors against poverty by providing support (i.e., financial, emotional, or in the form of services) to those who are impoverished and preclude the transfer of intergenerational poverty. As such, theories of social capital have been used to argue that social problems such as poverty have negative impacts on social capital, thereby contributing to the transmission of generational poverty (Portes, 1998).

Though sociological theories of poverty focus primarily on environmental explanations as the causes of poverty, there is less attention to individual behavioral factors. Sociological theories of poverty have been influenced by

other disciplines as well. This is demonstrated by the cross-pollination of poverty theories described as sociological concepts but developed by academics trained outside of sociology. For example, Kain and Harrington, both credited as being the original theorists behind the spatial-mismatch theory, come from the disciplines of economics and political science, respectively. Theories of poverty from these disciplines are the topic of the following sections.

## Economics

The discipline of economics views poverty in terms of economic deprivation that leads to the inability to obtain basic necessities for survival and the inability to accumulate wealth. The discipline of economics primarily considers poverty to be a result of structural and institutional barriers that are detrimental to accumulating wealth. As such, economic theories of poverty appear on the right hand side of Figure 1 to reflect its traditional emphasis on environmental causes of poverty.

According to Blank (2003), there are six economic theories for the causes of poverty: (1) economic underdevelopment, (2) lack of skills and resources, (3) market dysfunction, (4) social and political processes, (5) social welfare programs, and (6) individual behavioral characteristics and choices. These theories combine both individual behavioral characteristics and environmental factors to explain the causes of poverty.

The lack of economic markets, particularly in rural areas and Indian reservations in the United States, can greatly contribute to poverty. For example, rural farming economies, which tend to have a surplus in labor as few other industries are available, may have access only to small local markets, providing narrow margins of profit, which in turn limit opportunities for long-term investments. Similarly, the limited diversification of industries may make some geographic areas less competitive in larger market economies. Lack of individual and community resources in these areas translates in poorly funded local programs that can reinforce regional poverty. Therefore, a lack of economic organization and development can lead to poverty.

The lack of skills and resources that prevent individuals from participating in the market can also contribute to poverty. Individuals receiving a poor education may be unable to compete with those who are better prepared for market and industry competition. Compounding their lack of skills may be the lack of resources necessary to gain skills such as the absence of affordable post-secondary education or training programs that would enhance abilities. This problem is often exacerbated when low-skilled workers find low-wage work (or find themselves persistently unemployed) and are unable to meet their economic needs. The wage problem is often linked to structural barriers that prevent the poor from obtaining better employment while being complicated by the inadequate number of low-

skilled and/or high-wage jobs that are geographically accessible to workers (Tobin, 1994). This explanation of poverty does not attribute lack of skills and resources to individual intellectual deficiencies but instead to structural factors.

The third economic explanation for poverty is attributed to market dysfunction. This Marxist perspective asserts that under capitalism, employers undervalue the cost of labor with the threat of unemployment, which makes them wealthier at the cost of low-wage workers (Jung & Smith, 2007). A variant of market dysfunction is the theory that the economy is composed of a primary and secondary market wherein workers in the primary market have greater economic and political power that allows them to weather market fluctuations, whereas secondary market workers must deal with economic uncertainty owing to their lack of economic and political power (Blank, 2003). Related to market dysfunction explanations of poverty is Schumpeter's (1950) idea of "creative destruction" where rapidly changing economies (due to innovation) can result in displacement and unemployment. Employment in the new economy may not be available to those without updated skills necessary to meet the demand for work (Davis, Haltiwanger, & Schuh, 1996). The theories of market dysfunction embody Marxist ideas whereby those with capital and resources will prevail in capitalist societies whereas the poor will fall further into poverty.

Another economic theory ascribes the sources of poverty to political and social processes outside the control of the market. Here, it is argued, the economic market is the vehicle through which political and social problems are reflected. Blank (2003) argues that even though social and political problems may be the cause of poverty, these issues are likely to be rooted in economics. For example, she contends that political partiality and corruption may bias market outcomes and reduce economic opportunities for those who are not in power. Racism and discrimination have also been shown to have an impact on lack of employment, social status, and political participation, all of which are tied to poverty. This is an argument similar to the feminization of poverty previously mentioned from an anthropological perspective. Political causes of poverty will be further discussed in a later section.

Economic theories of poverty are also used to support the argument that social welfare programs cause poverty. This theory suggests that social welfare programs create a moral hazard in which welfare provides a disincentive for the poor to work and to instead remain poor and on welfare. For example, Kasarda and Ting (1996) view cash assistance as a trap that keeps people in poverty because they rationally choose welfare subsidies that they perceive to have a higher return over employment, suggesting that welfare can lead to unemployment and persistent poverty. Indeed, Moffitt (1992) provides evidence in the literature that shows that the participation rate in Aid to Families with Dependent Children increased 270% between 1965 and 1985. Murray (1984) uses these data to argue that welfare dependency

increases out-of-wedlock births, female-headed households, and persistent poverty, which are passed on generationally as children of welfare recipients adopt their parents' behaviors and choose welfare incentives over employment, incorporating the anthropological view of poverty with an economic perspective. Though this is the minority viewpoint of most economists, it nonetheless provides a possible explanation of the cause of poverty.

As Bradshaw (2006) explains, neoclassical economic theories present another explanation for the cause of poverty: individual choices and behaviors.

The core premise of this dominant paradigm for the study of the conditions leading to poverty is that individuals seek to maximize their own well-being by making choices and investments, and that (assuming that they have perfect information) they seek to maximize their well-being. When some people choose short term and low-payoff returns, economic theory holds the individual largely responsible for their individual choices—for example to forego college education or other training that will lead to better paying jobs in the future. (p. 6)

Behavioral economics maintains that, given the choices that would lead to greater economic stability, individuals choose alternative lifestyles that put them at risk for poverty (Blank, 2003). Similar to the culture-of-poverty argument, these lifestyles include lack of education (Gottschalk & Danziger, 1993) and becoming a single-mother (Biosjoly, Harris, and Duncan, 1998), both of which can lead to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. This economic theory of poverty purports that individuals are rational actors who choose these lifestyles as opposed to being acted upon. In other words, individuals knowingly decide to limit their economic gains despite the fact that they are given more economically sound alternatives.

The interesting aspect about the evolution of economic poverty theories is that there seems to have been no mention of the causes of poverty from the inception of the discipline. Instead, there was only recognition that poverty existed and that it had implications. Adam Smith, arguably the first and most famous economist, did not provide a theory of poverty but instead described the *consequences* of poverty that include shame, social seclusion, and psychological anxiety. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759), Smith writes:

The poor man ... is ashamed of his poverty. He feels that it either places him out of the sight of mankind, or, that if they take any notice of him, they have, however, scarce any fellow-feeling with the misery and distress which he suffers. He is mortified upon both accounts; for though to be overlooked, and to be disapproved of, are things entirely different, yet as obscurity covers us from the daylight of honour and approbation, to feel that we are taken no notice of, necessarily damps the most agreeable hope, and disappoints the most ardent desire, of

human nature. The poor man goes out and comes in unheeded, and when in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel.

Economic theories of poverty provide explanations that are rooted in both behavioral characteristics and structural influences. Though economic theories of poverty are similar to those of psychology, anthropology, and sociology (particularly in terms of environmental influences), the main difference is that economics assumes individuals are rational actors who make informed choices given their alternatives. For example, whereas psychologists would argue that poverty may be the result of intellectual deficits, economists would argue that poverty is the result of poor decisions made by individuals who do not maximize their benefits, given that they have perfect information. This can be seen as a variation of the “blaming-the-victim” mentality that is similar to psychology and anthropology. Theories of poverty from the political science perspective differ from theories in psychology, anthropology, and economics in that they do not attribute poverty to behavioral characteristics but rather focus on environmental influences.

### Political Science

The discipline of political science includes the academic study of interrelationships between governments and the relationship of governments and their constituents. This includes the analysis of institutions and political processes and of power and control as regulated by institutions and political processes. In terms of the causes of poverty, no unifying theory has emerged from political scientists who have developed only a limited number of poverty theories (Lehning, 2007).

Current discussion about the causes of poverty among political scientists focuses on class structure and the lack of political participation among the poor. This may be related to the sociological theories of racial discrimination and segregation. Similar to the economic theory of social welfare programs contributing to poverty, Piven and Cloward (1993) take a Marxist view of social welfare programs by arguing that these programs contribute to class structures, ensuring the availability of low-wage workers for low-skilled jobs by adjusting welfare benefits in accordance with the need for low-wage workers. This guarantees that undesirable, low-skill jobs that are necessary for economic progress will always be filled. However, because neither cash assistance nor low-wage employment are enough for economic self-sufficiency, those working low-wage jobs will continue to live in poverty.

In contrast to Marxist theories of capitalist oppression of the proletariat, some political scientists argue that modern class structures do not involve material exploitation but instead are caused by technology and globalization

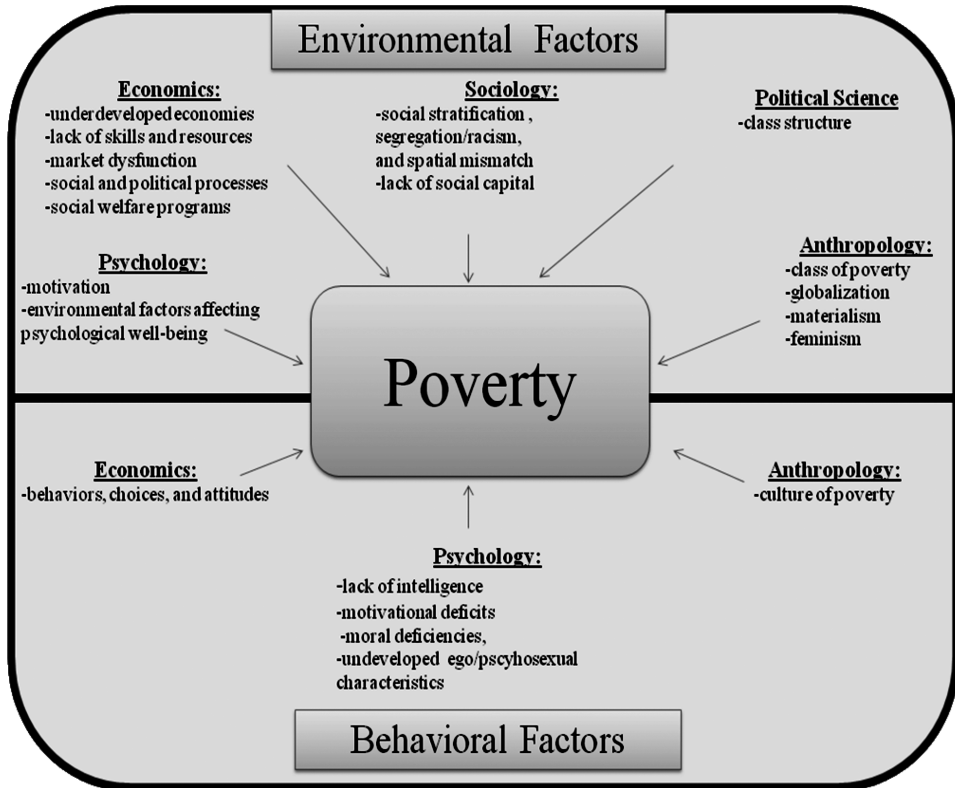
based on a denial of access to resources by those who hold political power (Wright, 2003). The only power available to the poor is through crime and violence, which they use as a proxy for political power. As a result, contemporary class structures are characterized by those who have political power and are able to advocate for their own advancement and those who do not have political power.

Class structure, racial discrimination, and segregation of the poor are directly related to their lack of political power, which silences the poor from having a voice in the political process that could change their poverty status. Empirical evidence shows how the poor are less involved in political activity that under-represents their interests and perpetuates their exclusion from society (Bradshaw, 2006). Compounded by racial discrimination, the poor are unable to mobilize for economic security and justice under the political system. For example, though an economist, Sen provides important insight into how the political process and lack of political power influences poverty. In his seminal book, *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) argues that poverty goes beyond the economic definition of income because of the lack of political and psychological power. Poverty, he claims, is a result of oppression that denies to those who are oppressed the power and control to overcome the barriers to resources. For the poor to escape poverty, society and governments must ensure (1) political, economic, and social freedom; (2) safety and protection against violence and discrimination; and (3) transparent government actions (Sen).

Political science has generated few theories of poverty. Those that have been put forth generally encompass ideas from the other social sciences. The contribution of political science to theories of poverty is the idea that lack of power and political participation contribute to poverty by suppressing the voices of the poor to be heard for change to occur.

The social sciences have contributed various theories to explain the causes of poverty. From a historical and contemporary perspective of poverty, social science explanations can be classified into two categories: Poverty is the result of environmental factors, and poverty is the result of behavioral factors related to individual characteristics and choices. Figure 2 is a conceptual map that describes the relationship between theories of poverty from each of the social sciences. It is divided into two segments by the solid horizontal line wherein the top half contains mainly environmental factors that influence the existence of poverty and the lower half includes behavioral factors contributing to poverty. Environmental factors are large-scale influences that may contribute to poverty and are outside of the individual's control. This includes market economies, globalization, social stratification, and class structures. The horizontal line also separates older social science theories that attributed poverty to individual characteristics below the line from the contemporary theories of poverty that incorporate environmental factors above the line.





**FIGURE 2** Interdisciplinary perspectives of factors influencing poverty.

The behavioral factors include the characteristics and behaviors of individuals that cause them to live in poverty. Psychologists at one time used theories that attributed poverty to personal traits (i.e., intellectual, motivational, moral, and cognitive deficiencies) rather than focusing on the larger environmental or societal impacts on poverty. Though motivation is still considered a factor contributing to poverty, most psychologists agree that environmental factors have an impact on psychological well-being that can lead to poverty. Some economists explained poverty in terms of individual choices, suggesting that individuals choose lifestyles that go against social norms, which leads them to poverty. In a similar way, older anthropological theories attributed poverty to cultures subscribing to behaviors that went against social norms that led to intergenerational poverty. It became clear over time that these older theories explain poverty in terms of intrinsic characteristics by “blaming the victim” for being poor owing to their personal and cultural deficiencies. Contemporary social scientists now recognize that environmental factors have a much larger role in causing poverty.

Though each academic discipline provides its own interpretation of the causes of poverty, contemporary theories from all the disciplines incorporate concepts from one another, suggesting that poverty is a multi-faceted problem that can be explained in terms of both environmental and behavioral perspectives. Being an interdisciplinary field of study itself, social welfare has adopted different aspects of each discipline's theory of poverty that it has combined into a dynamic view of poverty that considers both environmental and behavioral causes of poverty.

### IMPLICATIONS

In summary, Table 1 provides an overview of the social science theories of poverty and the level at which interventions should occur based on their theories. The figure shows that though contemporary theories of poverty from psychology and economics propose some interventions at the individual level, the majority of the interventions need to be focused on macro-level changes based on the social science theories of poverty.

Social workers assume that poverty and its impacts are undesirable to most individuals and therefore focus on trying to alleviate those impacts by changing the immediate systems in which poverty occurs instead of trying to understand and address the larger macro-causes of poverty. For example, if immigration status prevents undocumented immigrants from working, thereby causing them to live in poverty, social workers may concentrate on getting resources for immigrants to meet their basic needs or to help them gain citizenship, English proficiency, and job skills so that they can be gainfully employed, thereby alleviating their poverty situation.

**TABLE 1** Social Science Theories of Poverty and Level of Interventions

Social Science	Theory of Poverty	Focus Change on ...
Psychology	Motivation	Person
	Environmental factors affecting well-being	Environment
Anthropology	Class structure	Environment
	Globalization	Environment
	Materialism	Environment
	Feminization of poverty	Environment
Sociology	Social stratification/segregation/racism	Environment
	Spatial mismatch	Environment
	Lack of social capital	Environment
Economics	Under-developed economies	Environment
	Lack of skills and resources	Person
	Market dysfunction	Environment
	Social and political processes	Environment
Political Science	Social welfare programs	Environment
	Class structure	Environment

This is consistent with the evolution of the social work profession that has traditionally focused on the solution to social problems instead of the causes of these problems (Trattner, 1999).

To conceptualize poverty more broadly and provide appropriate interventions, social workers need to more fully incorporate all social science theories of poverty into their understanding of the causes of poverty. Though it is not the purpose of this analysis to engage in theory development, it is proposed that a theory of poverty that is unique to social welfare is necessary to conceptualize poverty at the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels to inform interventions that are appropriate to their respective systems. A theory of poverty from the field of social welfare is fitting because the problems and issues with which social work and social welfare are concerned primarily revolve around the poor. Not only would it give social workers a common understanding that would inform all levels of interventions but a social welfare theory of poverty would be a true reflection of the integration and development phase described by Tucker and his colleagues wherein the social welfare could contribute its own interpretation of poverty, potentially legitimizing the field of social welfare into a social science discipline.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of social science theories of poverty describes the poverty theories put forth by each of the social science disciplines. The development of theories of poverty in the social sciences shows that causes were attributed to both environmental factors (which included structural and institutional influences) and individual behavioral factors (which placed the blame on the victims of poverty). Though most social sciences now agree that poverty involves aspects of both environmental and behavioral factors, some theories such as the culture of poverty have left its lasting mark on the evolution and conceptualization of poverty.

The development of theories of poverty in the social sciences demonstrates the significant degree of interdisciplinary work among the social sciences. For example, Sen (1999), an economist, writes about poverty as a result of lack of political power, which overlaps with political science theories. Similarly, Hernstein, a psychologist, and Murray, a political scientist, collaborated together on *The Bell Curve* to develop a psychological theory of poverty. The cross-pollination of ideas, however, seems to have occurred only within the social sciences and has contributed little to social welfare's understanding of poverty.

Social welfare does not have a common theory that informs the broad issues about poverty. Future directions should involve an attempt to develop a unifying theory of poverty for clarification on shared discussions as poverty impacts all areas in the field of social welfare and social work practice.

Indeed, a review of widely used social welfare textbooks used in the human behavior and social environment component of social work programs found little or no discussion of poverty or poverty theories (Lehning, Vu, & Pintak, 2007). Though social work's dependence on social science for its foundation on formal knowledge and research methods may "constrain it to resemble social science in the frameworks it applies to its own internal knowledge development activities" (Tucker, Garvin, & Sarri, p. 14), a social welfare theory of poverty could be a first step in exploring more complex derivations of social work theory that could encapsulate the broader goals of social welfare research and social work practice.

## NOTE

1. The concept of sin and punishment for sins, though having theological underpinnings, was understood by psychologists as a motivation for behavior.

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