Southern Adventist University

School of Social Work

Why Poverty

By

Samir Khalil

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Nina Nelson

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Part A: Background

Causes of Poverty

Over the years, poverty has been an increasing problem all over the world. Many people have tried to pin down the exact cause of poverty, but, unfortunately, that task is not simple. There are many theories of what causes poverty, some of which include the culture of poverty (COP), eugenics, and the socialist perspective of poverty.

Culture of poverty. A popular philosophy is the culture of poverty. Paul Gorski (2008) explains the origin of the COP theory in his article when Oscar Lewis "uncovered approximately 50 attributes shared within these [small Mexican] communities." In other words, Lewis discovered certain attributes and mentalities that were shared in small Mexican communities where poverty was prevalent. This discovery led to the COP becoming a generalization of the poor based on these shared attributes and mentalities. As Karger & Stoesz (2013) explain in their book, "poverty traits are transmitted intergenerationally in a self-perpetuating cycle" (p. 96). This cycle is passed from generation to generation since morals, beliefs, and habits are shared from parents to children. These shared attributes and the continuous cycle people get into are what the COP states are the causes of poverty.

Eugenics. Another theory that was widely adopted in the early 20th century was eugenics (What is eugenics?, n.d.). This theory is "based on genetic inferiority" between people, which causes people to be either rich or poor (Karger & Stoesz, 2013, p. 97). The general concept of eugenics is that people with superior genes are more likely to be in higher-earning jobs, have better opportunities, and have more wealth. On the other hand, those with inferior genes are going to be those in poverty; have low-earning jobs; and have more social, physical, and emotional problems. Adherents to this theory believe that "spending money on

the poor is wasteful given their innate deficiencies" since there is no way to prevent their genetics from interfering (Karger & Stoesz, 2013, p. 97). However, "[a]fter World War II and the Holocaust, the American eugenics movement was widely condemned" (What is eugenics?, n.d.). Hitler used eugenics as a reason to kill so many people because they did not have the "'positive' eugenics" that the Aryan race supposedly possessed (What is eugenics?, n.d.). This idea is the backbone of the eugenics theory.

Socialist/Radical Perspective. Another interesting theory regarding poverty is the socialist perspective. In this theory, socialists argue that "poverty results from exploitation by the ruling capitalistic class" (Karger & Stoesz, 2013, p. 97). The capitalistic mentality is to make a significant profit and to reduce expenses. Unfortunately, with so many people in poverty today, "poverty provides capitalists an army of surplus laborers which depress the wages of other workers" (Karger & Stoesz, 2013, p. 97). The lack of work makes minimum-wage jobs more appealing to those in poverty since those jobs are a better option than not making a salary at all. However, with the need of employment so high, businesses can control wages for employees since the demand for work is so high. Instead of paying a hard-working employee more, they can hire two or three new people for minimum-wage jobs which reduces companies' expenses.

Personal Perspectives and Experience with Poverty

The first experience I had with poverty was when I was living in Kigali, Rwanda. My father worked as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Country Director and focused on health, education, disaster relief, and economic empowerment. I saw poverty in the projects my father oversaw, especially with the economic empowerment projects. These projects would loan small amount of money to people in poverty to help them start up their

own business so they could become self-sufficient. But I never actually comprehended what poverty was until much later when I was living in Sana'a, Yemen. There I would see women, children, elders, and disabled people begging on the streets. I was sad and wished I could have helped them, but there was a feeling of not wanting to interact with them. This, I believe, was caused by the stigma many people have put on those in poverty. The stigma is something that seems to have stemmed from the fear of becoming like those in poverty, or the shame that we have for not doing all we can to help these individuals.

One of the larger reasons for poverty, in my opinion, is caused by structural and economic factors. When crisis happens, people with six figure salaries can become part of the working poor struggling to find enough food for their families (Midgett, 2013). This shift could be caused by several factors, such as a divorce, loss of a job, or death in the family or a combination of these factors.

Part B: Interview Findings

Interview Overview

I interviewed my father, Nagi Khalil, who has been working for Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) for the last 34 years. ADRA is a non-profit, non-governmental, humanitarian organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that works to help deliver relief and development services to people all over the world. He is currently the Country Director of ADRA Lebanon and Syria and has always been a role model for me with all that he does and the passion he has for his work. With his strong personality, my father passed his views onto me and helped guide me to understand people and respect them as the children of God.

Interview Summary

What is poverty. For my father, poverty is when people do not have the resources or the infrastructure to support themselves or their family. However, it is also beyond just being poor. Poverty can be based on where a person was born and raised, such as in India. While he was in India, my father saw people living and bathing on the streets, working, begging, and sleeping on the side of the road. There were people pulling carts for their livelihood when horses or donkeys usually pulled the carts. As he said, "It was beyond imagination, no shelter, no place to sleep, no food, no job to do, this is how I experienced mass poverty" (N. Khalil, personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Causes of poverty. As my father believes, one of the leading causes of poverty is the government. When a government does not use their resources, is not interested in their citizens, and is filled with corruption, poverty runs rampant. Foreign intervention and international sanctions that target specific countries, preventing them from importing or exporting goods, can also lead countries into poverty. Some other reasons that could cause poverty are wars or natural disasters in which a person loses everything he or she owned. Other times, there are social factors, such as the caste system in India or racial discrimination, that prohibits specific groups of people from having the same opportunities and mobility as others.

Ending poverty. According to my father, one of the only things that can be done to help end poverty is to call on Jesus to come back soon. For him, humanity will never be able to get to a stage where everyone will be at the same level or where no one is in poverty. However, the answer he gave showed that, in theory, having a collective effort to help the impoverished could decrease the number of people in poverty. Governments, society, families and individual people all need to work together towards the common goal of ending poverty. One of the more relevant ways that my father believes poverty could be reduced is through education. Nevertheless,

"[w]hen people are hungry…they have no time to think about education. They are weak and tired; they can't study" (N. Khalil, personal communication, April 7, 2017). With the lack of food present in poverty, education is not a priority. For those in extreme poverty, the best solution is first to meet their basic needs of hunger before education can be an efficient tool to help them work their way out of poverty.

        Political party involvement. In my father's opinion, both political parties claim that they have the solution, yet nothing has seemed to change. Poverty has appeared to stay the same, no matter the political party in power. He gave an example of a program he heard about in Rwanda that targeted poverty and explained that it was extremely successful since the whole country collectively worked together.

Interview Comparison

        Compared to the three theories of poverty, I noticed that my father believes in the culture of poverty and the socialist views of poverty. The culture of poverty is evident in how he mentioned that many times, people who are poor are lazy. However, his views of the government as one of the causes of poverty leans closer to the socialist perspective. His views seem to come from a conservative background rather than a liberal one.

        When compared to my beliefs, my father and I have similar views of poverty. We both agree that structural and governmental factors play a role in causing and increasing poverty. Yet, while I agree that some people in poverty can be lazy, I do not agree with my father that most individuals in poverty are lazy. My father believes that education is the best way for people to escape poverty, but in my opinion, education alone is not enough to prevent and protect oneself from external factors.

Conclusion

  While my original perspective was somewhat narrow, I now have multiple views regarding poverty. With all the interconnected factors that contribute to poverty, it is difficult to pinpoint a single reason for what causes poverty. With my understanding of poverty, I believe that it will strengthen my career as a social worker. Keeping in mind all the complicated, connected pieces of poverty in mind, I can see clients in a whole new light. Studying this topic has been an incredible experience in contributing to expanding my knowledge and understanding of poverty. Knowing the difference between political parties can be a helpful tool when lobbying for change and successfully tapping into the values of each party to pass legislation.

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