

Why Poverty?

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With the increasing number of individuals in poverty, people must ask themselves where it comes from. There are many theories about what causes poverty, but to understand where poverty comes from, one first needs an understanding of what poverty is. According to the class textbook, *American Social Welfare Policy* by Karger and Stoesz (2014), “Poverty can be defined as deprivation- either absolute or relative” (p. 96). Absolute poverty refers to a condition in which a person cannot meet his or her needs for survival. Relative poverty is the inequality of income or goods, or the inability to obtain the standard of living that most members of the society have.

Causes of Poverty

There are several theories that try to answer the question, “Why poverty?” One of those theories is called the Culture of Poverty (COP). This theory says that poverty traits are transferred between generations to create a sustained cycle of poverty. The culture of poverty surpasses regional and national differences to show similarities in family structure, interpersonal relations, and value systems among other things (Karger & Stoesz, 2014).

The book *The Working Poor*, by David Shipler, seems to hold a similar viewpoint. In chapter two of his book, Shipler also presents poverty as a cycle that is self-perpetuating. For example, one woman had a hard time finding a decent job because she had no teeth. The woman had no teeth because she had no money to purchase decent dentures. Finally, the woman had no money because she had a hard time finding a better paying job (Shipler, 2005).

Another view on the cause of poverty that *American Social Welfare Policy* discusses is “Eugenics.” Karger and Stoesz (2014) said in their textbook “Theories based on genetic inferiority have been used as explanations for poverty, crime, and disease” (p. 97). It has been

argued that inequality, and subsequently poverty, is due to poor genes. Hitler used the theory of eugenics to justify and promote genocide in an attempt to create a stronger society.

A third view of poverty given by Karger and Stoesz is the radical or socialist view of poverty. Radicals believe the ruling capitalists create poverty through exploitation. Socialists think poverty provides capitalists with laborers who decrease the wages of other workers (Karger & Stoesz, 2014). A social trend within this viewpoint is the assignment of status roles. Poverty is related to the status and occupation of a group because lower status roles receive lower wages.

Personal Perspectives/Experience

My first experience with poverty came when I was just a toddler. For as long as I can remember it has surrounded me. I grew up in a poor neighborhood, so seeing homeless citizens and the less fortunate never came as a shock to me. Growing up, my family was not financially secure, so the concept of not having enough money seems to be present even in my earliest memories. My reactions and thoughts differed with the circumstances. I remember becoming embarrassed when the car would not start and we would have to wait in the parking lot of a grocery store. I also remember feeling guilty when the electricity or city water was shut off from unpaid bills because I thought I had used too much. I remember having feelings of guilt when my mom would worry about buying groceries because I thought I had eaten too much.

My view of poverty has altered since my initial experiences with it. I never realized my family could have been considered poor, because I thought the homeless people were the poor ones. However, I learned about the different levels of poverty and realized that it is not that simple. Reading the book, *The Working Poor*, has helped change my view of poverty from the one I carried as a child. I realize that poverty is not just homelessness and that it is not necessarily anyone's fault. I realize now that poverty can be an unbreakable, self-sustaining

cycle. People can be born into poverty, but work hard throughout their lives, yet never escape. I understand now that it is not our fault as individuals, but as a society.

Interview Overview

Sandra allowed me to interview her on her views of poverty to help me complete the next portion of this paper. I know Sandra as my “granny.” She is the step-mom of my father, and has been a very influential person in my family and in my life particularly. I have had a relationship with my granny since birth and have always esteemed her opinions highly. She responded to the questions from an empathetic point of view. Sandra realizes that poverty is not always a person’s fault, but that it can be caused by external reasons such as a poor economy or bankrupt company (S. Grignon, Personal Communication, April 3, 2016). As far as political influence, Sandra claimed to be of neither major political party and suggested that both parties have good and bad influences on the state of poverty in America.

Interview Comparison

Throughout the interview, Sandra seemed to adhere to a social view of poverty. She related closest to the school of thought previously discussed as the Culture of Poverty. My interviewee highlighted education when asked, “What can be done to help end poverty?” Like me, my granny believes that education plays a major role. She went on to talk about the cycle of poverty, evident in the successional generations of families on welfare in this country. During the interview, Sandra mentioned the socioeconomic group known as The Working Poor in relation to why people are poor. She, again, said that education plays a role in the creation of the working poor population. It is Sandra’s belief that poverty is sometimes caused by a lack of educational training which inhibits individuals from finding jobs to sustain themselves (S. Grignon, Personal Communication, April 3, 2016).

Conclusion

My upbringing, education, and experiences have worked together to give me the perspectives that I have on poverty today. My upbringing showed me that those less advantaged should not be judged or ignored but loved. My education has taught me that there are many complicated facets involved when trying to explain and cure the disease known as poverty. Finally, my experiences have given me a compassion for the poor that I would not have if my life experiences been any different. My perspectives on poverty will surely influence my future work as a social worker. I believe that my views and perspectives will give me an open mind when it comes to the poor, and help me to treat my clients as equally as I would an upper-class citizen. In conclusion, studying the topic of poverty has opened my eyes to see how truly complicated poverty can be; there are many causes and many effects, yet few solutions.

References

Karger, H. J., & Stoesz, D. (2014). *American social welfare policy*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

Shipley, D. (2005). *The working poor*. New York: Random House, Inc.