Viewing Poverty and Educational Attainment from an Interactionist Perspective

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Although the United States is among the most affluent of nations, poverty has remained an issue of great concern. The increasingly large gap between the affluent and the poor which characterizes the social structure existing in the United States has drawn considerable attention in the past several decades. Although the process of geographical concentration of poverty and affluence began in the nineteenth century following the dawning of the industrial revolution, the problems became alarming only within the recent span of a few decades (Massey, 1996). This economic gap is perpetuated by social practices and is predicted to cause grave consequences in terms of feelings of relative deprivation among the poor as well as other social tensions (Massey, 1996). Combined with the idea that mobility of economic class is possible but considered highly unlikely, one begins to wonder what perpetuates the cycle of poverty, wherein generation after generation falls into the same deplorable conditions characterized by a low quality of life.

Indeed, the question of why some people are poor and others are not has been continually asked within the context of academic inquiry. Postulations for the causes of poverty have been limitless and cover a wide variety of possibilities. While these causes are thought to be numerous and complex, it is generally accepted that low educational attainment plays a significant role in the occurrence of poverty as well as social mobility and quality of life (Ainsworth, 2002). A consistent finding is that the probability that an individual will end up in poverty decreases with each level of attainment of education (Epps, 1995; Henslin, 2002). Also prevalent in social research is the finding that individuals who live in poverty, particularly in areas where there is a high concentration of poverty, are dramatically less likely to achieve levels of educational attainment comparable to those not in poverty (Ainsworth, 2002; Bryan, 2005; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998). Time and again, research relates that students with higher socioeconomic status are less likely to drop out of school early than those in poverty,
and this evident imbalance is detrimental for those in poverty because high school graduation is critical to social mobility (Ensminger, Lamkin & Jacobson, 1996; Schneider, 2001).

Corcoran (1995) notes that “children raised in poverty receive less schooling, achieve lower incomes, and are much more likely to be poor in early adulthood than are children raised in non-poor families” (p. 247). In short, these children’s disadvantage is carried on because schooling is associated with higher adult incomes yet their likelihood of succeeding is greatly diminished. Consequently, it seems that a closer look at the interplay of educational attainment and poverty is warranted and may provide sources of possible interventions to alleviate the occurrence of poverty, particularly as it occurs through transmission from one generation to another, a cycle known as intergenerational poverty. The interactionist perspective, a sociological approach that gives consideration to both the individual and the social environment of the individual, ultimately provides a highly useful way for understanding the problem of poverty and its connection to educational attainment. Likewise, this theory helps to inform strategy for intervention of this social issue. While having weaknesses like any other theory when applied to real world problems, its strengths are numerous and it conceptualizes the connection of poverty and low educational attainment as a complex problem that can and should be remedied but only with the combined effort of many.

There are two general ways of approaching the issue of the fundamental causes of poverty (Cotter, 2002). The first involves looking at the structure of the society. The second involves looking at characteristics of the individual or the individual’s culture that contribute to the person’s poverty. What has been recently noted, however, is that a successful way of conceptualizing the roots of poverty would be to look at how both aspects affect the individual. The interactionist perspective, which encompasses the approach known as symbolic interaction,
seems to at least attempt to make this combination work, endeavoring to move beyond the
"simplistic culture-vs.-structure dichotomies of the past" (Corcoran, 1995, p. 242).

The interactionist model theorizes that the individual is involved in continual interaction
with his or her environment and that this interaction within the social context is what gives rise
to meanings, and consequently values, beliefs, and attitudes (Henslin, 2002; Zastrow & Kirst-
Ashman, 2004). Much importance is placed on the idea that humans construct meaning through
cultural symbol systems while affecting and being affected by their contexts of social interaction.
The meaning, co-constructed by individual and social environment, is not static for the simple
fact that both the individual and the social environment are dynamic entities. Meaning is thus
negotiated across time through interaction. Through the symbolic interaction approach,
socialization is viewed as context- or culture-specific as well as mediated through
communication within the individual’s social environment. Notably, this view further allows
that the individual is an active participant in organizing the understandings that are gained
through interaction (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992).

Interactionists view an individual’s behavior as arising from constructions of meaning in
past and present interactions of multiple, overlapping social contexts which significantly affect
the individual. This belief provides a firm base for exploring the contexts that contribute to
poverty. It also provides an opportunity to account for the reasons that values and attitudes
toward educational attainment, which are affected by structural systems may result in lower
educational attainment among those in poverty as differentiated from those who are not.

The interactionist perspective would approach the educational achievement gap by
viewing the people that compose the disparate groups – the achieving and the non-achieving – as
having different frameworks for understanding the educational environment. Because the theory
holds that a person’s location within society is a large determinant of what meanings, values, and
beliefs they attribute to the educational setting and process, interactionism would expect that individuals who are living in conditions of poverty would view these aspects in a different way than those who are not. Academic findings give some credence to this idea.

First and foremost, the existence of an achievement gap has its roots in many issues, including the presence of school funding, extracurricular opportunities, and family and peer support, as well as quality of teaching, educational structure, readiness for education, and social issues such as discrimination and segregation. Initially, then, the education gap can be viewed as evolving out of rising structural inequalities between these two general socioeconomic contexts. What ties the application of interactionist theory together is the fact that the individual is both experiencing and witnessing these details about their social environment as well as engaging in communication with others about them (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992).

Indeed, individuals in poverty, being active rather than passive participants in the creation of meaning, are largely aware of the poor conditions afforded to them in their path of educational achievements and witness daily their peers and predecessors as they face the obstacles created by such conditions. They are also likely to converse with others in their social environments about their attitudes and experiences, which lends to an atmosphere of shared meaning. The interactionist approach would, therefore, predict that people occupying similar contexts and interacting with one another would have similar—though not the exact same—attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding opportunities for educational attainment. Particularly, individuals in poverty are likely to have more negative views about the opportunities for educational attainment because facilitating these perceptions is the noticeable presence of pervasive barriers to the achievement of moderate to high educational levels. Furthermore, these values are reinforced through shared interaction among individuals in this context.
The idea that negative views about educational attainment exist within contexts of poverty is evident in academic social literature. Hannon (2003) discusses how limitations within the structure of the social environment frequently make possible the feelings in children and adolescents in poverty of powerlessness regarding their abilities to achieve the levels of education that those living in contexts of higher socioeconomic status are able to achieve. Because of these structural constraints coupled with various known incentives to achieve such as a desire to get a steady, well-paying job that requires at least a high school diploma, Hannon notes a consequent attitude of ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ (p. 579). In concordance, Epps (1995) articulates the fact that individuals who live within the context of poverty “have concrete attitudes that are more cynical about the occupational and economic benefits of education than are those of middle class” individuals (p. 599). It is clear that many forces exist that operate to limit the educational attainment of individuals in poverty, and the extremely limited advancement opportunities that are experienced help to create a shared culture of despair (Hagan, 1997; Hannon, 2003).

Despair and feelings of powerlessness to attain a moderate to high level of education are frequently present in the realistic attitudes of those living in poverty, as urban areas especially witness a gap in achievement between people in poverty and people of higher socioeconomic status. Bryan (2005) remarks that this gap “has come to be accepted as normative and [those living in poverty as well as their educators] perceive little hope for transformation in these schools” (p. 1096). It is thus evident that the conditions of the social environments marked by poverty influence the ways in which these individuals aspire to attain their education, and this in turn has a significant impact on their consequent educational attainment (Epps, 1995). This is true because educational resilience is noted to be a largely contributing factor to educational
attainment for those in poverty (Bryan, 2005). Without an extreme resolve to persevere despite immense barriers, high levels of educational achievement are unlikely in this context.

The interactionist approach accordingly attempts to conceive of poverty and its perceived effects on educational attainment in addition to actual structural limitations as contributing to a perpetuation of poverty among the individuals living within this context. Theoretically, the views regarding the education process and setting held by these individuals and the people in their social networks who influence them are likely to pose barriers to achievement, a situation that is in contrast to the perceptions of individuals who do not face such hardships and whose situations facilitate achievement. Overall, then, the interactionist perspective attempts to foster what Harwood and Weissberg (1992) term “an appreciation for the impact that a lack of access to power, resources, and opportunities can have on an individual’s behavior” (p. 88).

Because the interactionist perspective sees poverty as arising from a combination of structural and individual problems, both of these factors must be firmly handled in order to incur success at significantly decreasing the problem of low educational attainment by those in the context of poverty (Corcoran, 1995; Harwood & Weissberg, 1992). An interactionist intervention would facilitate changes in structure by changing the structural contexts of society which promote poverty as well as attempting to facilitate change by promoting educational success through empowerment of individuals who have grown up in poverty and may be experiencing, witnessing or indirectly attending to its effects on educational attainment.

By necessity, an intervention would have to focus on impacting multiple levels of the situation. Both influences on the child and on the context must be addressed if significant change is to occur (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992). Because a successful intervention that is appropriately informed by interactionist theory must have such an “integrated multi-level focus”
(Harwood & Weissberg, 1992, p. 87), its approach would need to encompass a wide variety of effort and change.

Of initial concern is the alteration of the structures that work to create structural barriers and limitations to the individuals’ achievement. This would engender the establishment of programs to help students in poverty acquire adequate nutrition, extra academic attention, increased school funding to improve overall school physical environment and resources as well as the quality of teaching. Likewise, it would be necessary to create programs that provide sufficient preschool opportunities so that the gap in equality is lessened from the start due to the fact that unequal opportunity in early education poses great obstacles for those in poverty who begin school at a disadvantage in comparison to their more affluent peers. From the interactionist perspective, an efficient intervention would require that enough of these efforts to improve the structure of the current education system be implemented such that the actual barriers did not overly limit the student from achieving educational success which is comparable to their more affluent peers.

Secondly, the intervention would necessitate a change in the perceptions that students in this context have about their educational opportunities. While more optimistic attitudes would realistically follow the decreases in structural barriers after a time, the most efficient intervention would immediately empower individuals to seize their newfound opportunities and become active pursuants of high educational attainment and increased power to control the outcomes of their lives. This stimulation of personal perception of power in educational attainment is initially necessary because negative perceptions of barriers may linger due to past contextual experiences and present expectations, which may be relatively slow to evolve without this empowerment.

This subsequent phase of intervention, because it is primarily a preventative strategy, can be successfully implemented through partnerships formed between schools and the families of its
students (Bryan, 2005; Harwood & Weissberg, 1992; McGee, 2004). The social worker’s role in the intervention would be that of a coordinator to bring these two parts together in an organized way and also that of the educator to bring each entity the knowledge needed to maximize achievement as soon as possible once the structural changes take effect (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). By focusing these partnerships to help students who are considered at risk for low attainment but not limiting the scope of intervention to benefit only these individuals, significant change can be brought about in the direction of increasing educational attainment. This form of intervention, then, is predicted to be effective because it sufficiently addresses considerations of both the individual and structural context. This is fitting because the interactionist perspective dictates that an intervention to the problem of poverty and its relation to low educational attainment must treat the problem as one in which the interactions between the individual and the institutional and social contexts allow the cycle to persist (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992).

As with every other theory that attempts to conceptualize complex issues like poverty, the interactionist approach incurs both criticism and praise. Criticisms come primary in three camps. First, the interactionist approach is involved in attempting to make educated guesses about what the people in a given context are thinking by observing behaviors and making assumptions. While this may be justified, it seems that the true content of thoughts and feelings of the persons involved are beyond the realm of this sociological perspective, even though it does focus on the individual. Some consider this to be a great flaw. A second weakness of this theory in general application is that it has limited falsifiability. While its flexibility is such that it could conceptualize the reason for each outcome of each individual—primarily because it relies upon the premise that each individual occupies a unique context and consequently has a different construction of meaning than other persons—it does not lend itself to a variety of ways in which
the theory could be shown to be incorrect. Thirdly, application of this theory requires considerable effort, money, and resources, and though these may be deemed appropriate and necessary to alleviate the severity of the problem, the acquisition of these may not be entirely feasible given current budget concerns and conservative spending patterns.

Despite the presence of these criticisms, however, the interactionist perspective is commended for its many strengths. A first and highly significant reason that it receives praise is because it directly addresses the concerns of race, gender, ethnicity, diversity, and oppression in a way that most other theories cannot. Because the interactionist perspective sees discrimination and variations in expectations based on race or gender as structural limitations, it is able to account for the fact that minorities, such as African Americans and females, are particularly overrepresented in the population of people living in poverty. Without attempting to blame these minorities, the theory explains that barriers in educational attainment result in both a lowered ability to achieve given the barriers which are present for a large number of these students and a consequent perception of decreased ability as well as decreased expectations among these students. While it does not attempt to explain the exact causes of the oppression currently faced by many individuals, the interactionist perspective requires that changes in the structure of the educational process and setting be altered before true and lasting change can come about in the individuals who are experiencing oppression through their poverty.

Furthermore, the interactionist approach does not attempt to confound issues of poverty with ethnic identity. In fact, a successful application of the theory would require that issues of poverty be deliberately differentiated from issues of ethnicity (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992). Ethnic identity, pride and diversity, then, are fostered through this approach because ethnic characteristics are explicitly viewed as separate from those which result in poverty. These considerations are highly significant due to the fact that many of the theories that conceptualize
poverty attempt to blame either the victims or their culture for the hardships they are experiencing (Massey, 1998). This blame is considered highly unwarranted under the interactionist perspective and is thought to provide a barrier to understanding the real structural reasons behind poverty and their consequences on the individual because the blaming is both demeaning and unhelpful to the process of eliminating transmission of poverty (Bryan, 2005; Harwood & Weissberg, 1992).

Other strengths exist that add to the superiority of interactionist theory in considering poverty and educational attainment. It notably recognizes that not all students approach their education in the same way, and it can account for both individual differences and differences between groups of people, small and large depending on the social context. Thus, it deals successfully with each the micro, mezzo, and macro systems within which the individual is continually interacting (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004), and deals particularly well with detailing how each of these systems affect and are affected by the individual.

A last but not inconsequential strength for the interactionist theory is that it gives appreciation to the complex nature of both the social structures and the individuals who engage in complex interactions (Harwood & Weissberg, 1992). Because poverty has shown itself to be a multifaceted problem, it is necessary that a theory be able to handle such complexity. Interactionism does this well, and provides hope for the future of poverty and its link to educational attainment.

This inquiry into the causes of poverty and the factors that maintain and allow its transmission has become particularly urgent topic in the last few decades. This urgency is the result of an increasingly wide gap in educational attainment between those in poverty and those who live under better economic and social conditions. Indeed, as high school diplomas continue to decline in value relative to wages and as college attendance becomes more of a necessity
regarding the ability to make the income necessary to maintain a satisfactory quality of life for oneself and one's family (Schneider, 2001), the need for immediate intervention is high. As repeatedly stated, the interactionist approach offers a helpful way to conceptualize poverty and the gap in educational attainment as well as offering a valuable manner with which the grave situation at hand can begin to be remedied.
References


