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Etiology of Poverty: A Critical Evaluation of Two Major Theories

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The purpose of this article is to appraise two competing frameworks related to poverty attribution: individualistic theories and structural theories. Using the Theory Evaluation Scale (TES)—an empirically validated nine-criterion measure—this paper scrutinizes the aforementioned theories for coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical assumptions, connection with previous research, testability, empiricism, limitations, client context, and human agency. Results revealed that, at the scale level, both perspectives are of excellent quality. However, at the item-level, the structural perspective was found to be significantly stronger than the individual perspective. Therefore, the structural perspective is an epistemologically sounder framework for informing antipoverty interventions.

Keywords: poverty, etiology of poverty, poverty attribution theories, theory evaluation scale, epistemology

Background

Arguably one of the most perennial social problems that humanity has ever faced, poverty has adversely impacted individuals, groups, and families in both industrialized and less developed countries. Despite the successful completion of the United Nations' first millennium development goal—which aimed at “eradicating extreme poverty and hunger” by 2015—the 2015 World Bank metric showed approximately half of the world's population were part of households living on less than \$5.50 a day (World Bank, 2018). The United States, notwithstanding its affluence and massive expenditures on antipoverty programs (Joseph, 2017; McLaughlin & Rank, 2018), was home to over 40 million poor people in 2016 based on estimates from the official poverty measure (OPM). Of those, there were more than 13 million children (Fox, 2017; Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017).

Given the scope and persistence of poverty, it is important for all stakeholders to understand the etiology of the problem. Comprehending the root cause of poverty is essential to develop effective anti-poverty interventions (Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Consistent with this line of argument, there are two broad theoretical perspectives that drive the poverty attribution discourse in the United States and elsewhere: the individualistic perspective and the structural perspective.

Broadly, the individualistic perspective regards the causes of poverty to be rooted in individual characteristics, failings, and inadequacies (Lewis, 1959; Mead, 2011; Moynihan, 1965; Rank, 2004; Royce, 2018). Individual theorists assert that particular characteristics of the poor ensure that they will become and remain poor. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis' (1959) culture of poverty theory posited that the poor have their own culture (or subculture), which consists of a set of values and behaviors that are different from those of the non-poor. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) reported that the pathology of Black families and individuals caused their impoverished position. Edward Banfield (1974) viewed the poor as impulsive and so present-oriented that they could not plan for the future. Furthermore, Banfield (1974) cited school incompletion, crime, and preferring welfare to work as characteristics of those living in poverty. Finally, Herrnstein & Murray (1994) wrote that poor people are born

with cognitive deficiencies that are explanative of their impoverished positions.

Structural theories, on the other hand, depict poverty as resulting from negative functions of capitalism (Goldsmith & Blakely, 2010; Royce, 2018). A number of influential authors and theorists who have been directly involved with organized socialism (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2002; Harrington, 1997; Hunter, 1904; Piven & Cloward, 1997) have also been promoters of the structural theories of poverty. Socialism has limited acceptance from the American general public (Newport, 2010), which may hinder American people's ability to accept structural explanations of poverty despite compelling empirical support for the structural perspective (Katz, 1989; O'Connor, 2001; Ropers, 1991). With the exception of Murray (1999), the majority of structural theorists support government intervention in the form of a social safety net (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003; Rank, 2004; Royce, 2018; Schiller, 2012).

In America, there is a tendency for the general public to consider individual and cultural factors in determining poverty attribution. Indeed, it is difficult to recognize how structural factors affect one's life (Iceland, 2013). The complexities of structural theories reduce their "user-friendliness" for the general public. Americans tend to support individualism, self-reliance, and capitalism (Feagin, 1975; Katz, 1989, 1993; Kenworthy, 2011) and thus are more willing to embrace perspectives that espouse the absence of these ideals as causative.

It should be noted that the individualistic perspective toward which America has leaned transpires from Lewis' (1959) culture of poverty theory. This theory developed based on ethnographic research conducted in third world and developing economies. Despite its connection to non-industrialized societies, the culture of poverty theory appealed to American policy-makers and primed the reception of influential documents such as the Moynihan Report (1965) that assumed the pathology of the Negro family.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the two major aforementioned theoretical perspectives in relation to the etiology of poverty: *individual perspective* and *structural*

perspective. This paper is of paramount significance because the current scholarship has not yet analyzed these perspectives in an objective manner. Many scholars have reviewed the literature pertaining to poverty attribution (Bradshaw, 2007; Lehning, Vu, & Pintak, 2007; Turner & Lehning, 2007; Vu, 2010; Wolf, 2007). However, previous reviews fail to involve instruments in their analysis. This paper used the *Theory Evaluation Scale* (TES), a newly developed empirical measure to answer this question: Which of the two theoretical perspectives about the etiology of poverty is more epistemologically robust? Given its clearance by Congress, acceptance by the general public, and long-term implementation in social programs, we anticipated that the individualistic perspective would prevail.

It should be acknowledged that the terms perspective, theory, framework, approach, model, and paradigm are used interchangeably throughout this paper. It should also be noted that the binary individual/structural comparison is necessary for the purpose of this paper. Presenting a critical analysis of the myriad of theories under each perspective would be unmanageable. Therefore, the best way to address all of them is to group them based upon the overarching characteristic of whether poverty is attributed to the individual or to society.

Methodology

The Theory Evaluation Scale (TES) is a newly developed instrument designed to appraise social work theories (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). Through extensive consultation of seminal works on theory analysis (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2008; Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006, 2011; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988), criteria for evaluating theories were assembled. An exhaustive list of 16 epistemological items from the literature reflecting post-positivist and constructivist perspectives were selected and reviewed by a panel of internationally recognized experts from various backgrounds. These experts came from four different continents (Europe, Asia, America, and Oceania), had between 11 to 30 years of teaching experience, and had published a broad range of peer-referred materials on theories. The expert reviewers rated all items as either "essential," "useful," or "not necessary," in keeping with Lawshe's (1975) content-validity methodology. Of the 16

original criteria, 9 items survived this refining process: coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical assumptions, connection with previous research (historical roots), testability, empiricism, limitations, client context, and human agency. Each of these is defined in the "Results" section.

Reliability and face validity of the instrument was achieved by having a group of 10 professors anonymously rate the person-in-environment framework (PIE), a popular social work theory, and running Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) to determine internal consistency of the scale items. This led to an ideal reliability score of 0.88.

There exist at least four other theory evaluation scales in the social work literature: Witkin and Gottschalk's (1988) constructivist framework, Hutchison and Charlesworth's (2003) benchmark, Gentle-Genitty et al.'s (2008) Criteria for Theory Quality Scale, and Robbins, Chatterjee, and Canda's (2006, 2011) standards. Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) proposed a model based on four elements: being explicitly critical, human agency, client experiences, and promotion of social justice. By contrast, Hutchison and Charlesworth (2003) recommended that theory be evaluated based on five criteria: coherence and conceptual clarity, testability and empirical support, comprehensiveness, emphasis on diversity and power, and usefulness for social work practice. Meanwhile, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2008) developed the *Criteria for Theory Quality Scale* which contains the following items: internal consistency, conceptualization and operationalization of variables, testability and evidence of empirical support, connection with previous research, assessment for shortcomings, and promotion of social justice. Finally, Robbins et al. (2006, 2011) argued that the analysis of a theory should be conducted in relation with six criteria. These are: emphasis on specific aspects of human dimensions, relevance for practice, consistency with ethics, philosophical assumptions, inquiry paradigm or methodology, and propensity for acceptance. The TES reflects previous work in that its nine criteria originated from the aforementioned scales. However, the TES is different from existing scales in one significant way: its content was empirically vetted. Due to its paradigmatic versatility, the TES is designed to analyze all social work theories, regardless of their size and nature.

The TES uses a grading system ranging from 9 (the lowest possible point) to 45 (the highest possible point). The TES ranks

the quality of a theory as poor (for a score of 9), fair (for a score between 10 and 19), good (for a score between 20 and 29), and excellent for a score between 30 and 45). Scores for constructivist theories are expected to be lower on the TES as opposed to those for positivist theories (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019).

Results

Table 1 below highlights TES results for both the individualistic perspective of poverty and the structural perspective of poverty. The level of poverty attribution on the TES was based on a thorough review of the literature. Scores were assigned to each item in function of the level of support gathered in the existing scholarship. As demonstrated in Table 1, the individualistic theory of poverty and the structural theory of poverty drew TES scores of 33 and 35, respectively. The fundamentals for the grading are provided in Table 1.

1-Coherence

Coherence refers to the smooth, logical flow of ideas that describe a concept, or how well a theory is defined. Theories that have coherence are consistently synchronized from one sentence or paragraph to the next (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003; Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). As pertains to coherence, both the individualistic perspective and the structural perspective are logically explained.

Individual attributions, which include cultural attributions due to the locus of control, identify the causes of poverty to be individual behaviors or characteristics such as financial irresponsibility, laziness, substance abuse, lack of ambition, loose morals, and poor values (Bullock, 2004; Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Lewis, 1959; Mead, 2011; Rank, 2004; Royce, 2018). Structural attributions move beyond the individual, and propose that causation for poverty rests within social institutions, such as those that are political or economical. These areas include factors that lie beyond the control of impoverished individuals, such as, low wages, prejudice, discrimination, social welfare policies, and social isolation (Bullock et al., 2003; Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Wilson, 1987). Because both

Table 1. Poverty Attribution Theories under the Theory Evaluation Scale (TES)

Item	Criteria	Score	
		IT*	ST [†]
1	The theory has coherence.	5	5
2	The theory has conceptual clarity.	5	5
3	The theory clearly outlines and explains its philosophical assumptions.	3	3
4	The theory describes its historical roots in connection with previous research.	5	5
5	The theory can be tested and proven false via observational and experimental methods.	5	5
6	The theory has been critically tested and validated through empirical evidence.	2	4
7	The theory explains its boundaries or limitations.	2	2
8	The theory accounts for the systems within which individuals interact with people around them.	1	5
9	The theory recognizes humans as active agents within their environment.	5	1
Overall score		33	35

Theory quality based on overall TES score:

Individualistic Theory (IT): Excellent

Structural Theory (ST): Excellent

Theory quality based TES item-level comparison:

Individualistic Theory (IT): Weaker

Structural Theory (ST): Stronger

* Individualistic Theory

† Structural Theory

theories unambiguously explain their stance with regard to poverty attribution, maximum credit (5 out of 5) was assigned to the “coherence” criterion (please see Table 1).

2-Conceptual Clarity

Conceptual clarity is a lack of ambiguity about the interpretation of a theory (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). That is, scholars from all academic backgrounds should have a clear understanding of the message that a particular theory conveys. In a comparative fashion, Royce (2018) identified 17 fundamental elements that separate the individualistic perspective from the structural perspective (pp. 257-259). Arguably, Royce’s (2018) work was designed to provide some much needed clarity on both groups of theories. As result, these theories are perceived in similar ways in sociology (Wolf, 2007), community development (Bradshaw, 2007), religious studies (Morazes & Pintak, 2007), political science (Lehning, 2007), psychology (Turner & Lehning, 2007), and social work/social welfare (Delavega, Kindle, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2017; Joseph, 2018; Lehning et al., 2007; Rein, 2017). In other words, it is fair to argue that there has been a large consensus across disciplines with respect to the conceptuality clarity of both sets of perspectives. Therefore, a grade of 5 is allotted to each theory in this section (please see Table 1).

3-Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions reflect a theory’s underlying principles as well as its paradigm. The theory should explicitly indicate whether it is from the positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, or critical theory paradigm. Guba (1990) wrote that the paradigm from which a theory emanates informs about the nature of what the theory is about (ontology), the type of relationship that should exist between researchers and study participants (epistemology), and the methods of inquiry (methodology).

As stated previously, Royce (2018) proposed 17 diverging assumptions pertaining to the two poverty attributions theories under consideration in this paper. These assumptions cover many aspects of poverty, including its etiology, persistence, prevention, and remediation (pp. 257–259). More specifically,

Royce's (2018) work explored sources of poverty, allocation of valued resources, cultural and moral values, equality of opportunity, barriers to economic independence, prejudice and discrimination, decision-making patterns, economic systems, and anti-poverty strategies, to name a few (pp. 257–259). However, the literature has so far failed to capture the school of thought (paradigm) to which the above described theories belong. Therefore, a TES score of 3 for both theories seems fair (please refer to Table 1).

4-Historical Roots

Historical roots refer to a theory's connection to previous research (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2008), that is, an account of the pioneers and other preeminent figures who contributed to the launch and development of the theory.

Turner & Lehning (2007) reported, "in general, until 1980, psychological theories of poverty emphasized the role of the individual or group to explain the causes and impact of poverty" (p. 57). Since the 1980s, psychological theorists have gradually acknowledged the role of structural factors (social, political, and economic) in poverty causation and maintenance, not solely relying on individual pathology (Turner & Lehning, 2007). Mead (2011) conceived that people are poor primarily due to the individual factors of non-marriage and not working. He stated that structural barriers (such as low wage jobs, cost and availability of childcare for single mothers, incarceration rates, and "mismatch" of the location of jobs in relation to the poor or unemployed) are not the primary reasons why most people are poor. Those most likely to hold individualistic rather than structural causal attributions of poverty are "Americans with extremely conservative political views; identifying as strong Republicans; raised in Evangelical Protestant, Moderate Protestant, Latter Day Saint, or Other World Religious traditions" (Robinson, 2009, pp. 501–502).

Meanwhile, structural theories have existed for decades with their mainstream emergence coming in the 1960s (O'Connor, 2001). Analysis of urban minority neighborhoods highlighted the targeted marginalization of entire groups of people through structural mechanisms (Clark, 1965; Rainwater, 1969). Studies using a broader lens looked at persistent poverty in an

affluent society (Myrdal, 1965; Ornati, 1966). Economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1976) questioned whether or not the poor would benefit from economic growth due to their marginalization in labor markets. Michael Harrington (1997) echoed this concern that due to the poor's "otherness" they may be resistant to economic growth.

This section clearly outlines the historical roots of poverty attribution theories under consideration in this paper. Because the emergence of individualistic theories and structural theories was connected to previous work, maximum credit can be assigned here (please see Table 1).

5-Testability

As the name implies, *testability* alludes to a theory's ability to undergo rigorous empirical scrutiny. In other words, the tenets of the theory can be challenged through observations and testing (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). Many scholars and researchers have managed to indirectly test the poverty attribution theories (Bowles & Gintis, 1974; Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Cryns, 1977; Delavega et al., 2017; Landau, 1999; Noah, 2012; Perry, 2003; Rubin, Johnson, & DeWeaver, 1986; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Varley, 1963; Weiss, Gal, Cnaan, & Majlaglic, 2002; Wodarski, Pippin, & Daniels, 1988). Meanwhile, numerous scholars have argued that most of the social welfare policies in America have been implemented under the individualistic approach toward poverty (Bradshaw, 2007; Campbell & Wright, 2005; Hasenfeld, 2009; Levitan, Mangum, Mangum, & Sum, 2003; Maskovsky, 2001; O'Connor, 2001; Quigley, 2003). Because the aforementioned poverty attribution theories are testable, this section earned a maximum TES score across the board (please see Table 1).

6-Empirical Support

Straightforwardly, a theory is empirically supported if it survives the critical experimentation process and continues to be proven true over time. The quality of the evidence should also be taken into consideration. This can be determined via the study types (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal, cross-sectional), the size and representativeness of samples, and number of studies available, to name a few. With

regard to empirical evidence, there is currently more support in the literature for the structural perspective than the individualistic perspective.

In fact, historians (O'Connor, 2001; Sugrue, 1996), journalists (Noah, 2012; Wilkerson, 2010), and social scientists (Conley, 2009; Piven & Cloward, 1997; Wilson, 1996) have demonstrated the powerful impact structural factors have played in creating poverty in the 20th century, with particular attention paid to racial minorities. While seemingly disparate, the vast body of inquiries demonstrates the complexity and pervasiveness of structural poverty causation. Bluestone and Harrison (1982) demonstrated that the deindustrialization of the manufacturing trades has led to American workers losing good paying jobs with benefits. William Julius Wilson (1987) continued under this theory but included Black population movements in analyzing the Black urban poor. Residential segregation primarily attributed to racism has been shown to be a variable associated with persistent poverty (Gould, 1999; Jencks, 1992; Massey, Gross, & Shibuya, 1994; Wilson, 2009). Structural theorists have empirically tested and shown that an individual's class origin is the best predictor of their ultimate social standing (Bowles & Gintis, 1974; Noah, 2012). The structural functionalist perspective argues that poverty and inequality serve a beneficial function for society in general, as the division of labor requires everyone to play a role, even undesirable ones (Davis & Moore, 1945). Herbert Gans (1974) further qualified it in a Marxian way by proposing that poverty and inequality only serve the interest of those in "power" by safeguarding their privilege.

By contrast, Lewis' (1959) culture of poverty theory—very influential for public policy (Jansson, 2005)—has been found to be empirically deficient (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Burton, 1992; Coward, Feagin, & Williams, 1973; Valentine, 1968). In fact, an analysis of the culture of poverty revealed that income disparities between those at the bottom of society and the middle class was a function of structural factors (Abell & Lyon, 1979). Moreover, Coward et al. (1973) found that less than half of the participants in their studies in a Southwestern city had the traits found in the culture of poverty theory, and that those traits would be better viewed as situational rather than cultural.

By extension, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, designed and implemented under the culture

of poverty model, has failed to lead people toward economic self-sufficiency (Aratani, Lu, & Aber, 2014; Holzer, Stoll, & Wissocker, 2004; Johnson & Corcoran, 2003; Joseph, 2018; Joseph, Potocky, Girard, Stuart, & Thomlison, 2019; Murray & Primus, 2005; Ozawa & Yoon, 2005; Sheely, 2012). On the other hand, programs carried under the structural paradigm proved to be relatively more effective. In effect, the literature has demonstrated the multifaceted short-term, medium-term, and long-term impacts of educational programs such as Head Start programs (National Head Start Association, 2018) and Pell Grants (Baum & Payea, 2005; Bettinger, 2004; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Wei & Horn, 2009). Based on the aforementioned assessment, a grade of 2 and 4 were assigned to individualistic theories and structural theories, respectively (please see Table 1).

7-Boundaries

Boundaries refer to the scope of competence of a theory (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2008). Every theory has limitations that should not be camouflaged or overlooked. To some extent, boundaries may also imply how particular theories are similar to and/or different from one another. While the above discussed attribution of poverty theories are diametrically different from each other, neither of them actually sets clear limitations with respect to other theoretical frameworks.

For example, the individualistic theories of poverty seem a more sophisticated version of Social Darwinism (Bagehot, 1899; Hofstadter, 1992; McKnight, 1996; Spencer, 1860; Sumner, 1963), while the structural theories of poverty share a lot of similarities with Piven and Cloward's (1971) Social Control Thesis. Meanwhile, both poverty attribution theories discussed above do not explain their limitations with respect to the scope of their applicability. In other words, there are no expressed directions regarding settings where these theories might or might not be applicable. As things stand, though, the United States and the United Kingdom appear to be suitable venues for individualistic theories of poverty, while Scandinavia seems to embrace structural theories of poverty (Breitkreuz & Williamson, 2012). Because the literature only makes a veiled reference to the limitations of these theories, a grade of 2 seems reasonable for this section.

8-Client Context

The *client context* criterion is defined as the capability of a theory to “account for the systems within which individuals interact with people around them” (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019, p. 9). This implies the theory’s relevance to—or usefulness for—social work practice (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003; Robbins et al., 2006, 2011).

Although individual theories see a connection between people and surrounding systems (workplace, school, criminal justice), these theories totally disregard the impact of other systems on individuals/families (Royce, 2018). On the other hand, structural theories not only monitor interactions between individuals/families and other systems but also take into consideration how the workplace, the school system, and the criminal justice system influence people’s lives (Royce, 2018). Hence, in this section individual theories earned minimum credit, while cultural theories deserved maximum credit (please refer to Table 1 above).

9-Human Agency

Finally, the *human agency* criterion depicts a theory’s ability to recognize people as being active actors within their respective environment (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). Structural theories are multifaceted, as many systems interrelate with individuals and communities in ways that confound the issues accompanying poverty (Royce, 2018; Wilson, 1987). However, these theories (perhaps unintentionally) mainly minimize human agency by focusing more on systemic failures and less (or not at all) on individual deficiencies. On the other hand, individual theories—perhaps unintentionally—greatly promote human agency by painting individuals as architects of their own destiny (Royce, 2018). Hence, in this section individual theories prevail over structural theories with a grade of 5 versus 1 (please see Table 1 above).

Discussion

An epistemological tool, the TES provides an overall impression of the quality of theories by assessing them on nine different

criteria. The overall scores of 33 and 35 for the individualistic and structural perspectives, respectively, indicated excellent quality in both frameworks. However, an item-level comparison of the theories needs to be taken into consideration and analyzed more closely to shed more light on the findings and explain the usefulness of each theory. Both the individualistic perspective and the structural perspective generated identical scores for coherence (Item 1), conceptual clarity (Item 2), philosophical assumptions (Item 3), connection with previous research (Item 4), testability (Item 5), and boundaries (Item 7) (please see Table 1). Because the theories are almost diametrically opposed to each other, the divergent scores for client context (Item 8) and human agency (Item 9) seem reasonable. In fact, in this regard the two theories are object mirrors of each other. Item 6 (empirical evidence) showed the superiority of the structural perspective over the individualistic perspective. This difference in empirical support answers the question raised in this paper: which of the two theories is more epistemologically robust?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that explains knowledge, its nature, scope and boundaries among other things (Cole, 2008). The knowledge seeker would conduct an inquiry to validate or refute a claim. Within a paradigm, epistemology deals with the relationship espoused by a researcher and study participants in the quest for knowledge (Guba, 1990). In this paper, the individualistic perspective and the structural perspective made diametrically opposed claims about knowledge (the etiology/attribution of poverty). Causal attribution of poverty is important to consider, as interventions and programs are based, in part, upon what is perceived to be the cause of a social problem or condition.

The individual theory claims that poor peoples' behavior causes their poverty (Lewis, 1959; Mead, 2011; Moynihan, 1965). Thus amelioration of poverty focuses on changing the behavior of the poor. As the focus of poverty is on the qualities of the poor, explanations for it and its continuation tend to be based on some form of absolute definition of poverty (Andreb, 1998; Eberstadt, 2008; Iceland, 2013). This is because absolute measures do not take into account social norms, standards, and structural variables external to those experiencing poverty; thus these theories direct attention internally to the individual agent as opposed to relative measures that consider these additional variables (Iceland, 2013).

The structural perspective, on the other hand, questions capitalist dynamics and structural forces that prevent the poor from exiting poverty (Bremner, 1964; Harrington, 1997; Holzer, 1999; Jencks, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Kain, 1969; Katz, 1989; Rank, 2004; Ropers, 1991; Schiller, 2012; Tussing, 1975). These include a wide range of socioeconomic and political factors such as poor labor conditions, income disparities, and discriminatory and stigmatizing rhetoric about poverty and welfare (Royce, 2018). Welfare state, living wage, and wealth redistribution are seen as important interventions within the structural framework (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003; Rank, 2004; Royce, 2018; Schiller, 2012).

Implications for Policy, Theory and Research

The lack of empirical support for the individualistic perspective (score of 2 on Item 6) is troubling because most social welfare policies are based on the assumptions of these theories (Bradshaw, 2007; Campbell & Wright, 2005; Hasenfeld, 2009; Levitan et al., 2003; Maskovsky, 2001; O'Connor, 2001; Quigley, 2003). Joseph and Macgowan (2019) used the concept *legislative malpractice* to describe the tendency of lawmakers to enact macro-level policies based on little to no evidence. As seen above, social welfare policies in America—mainly those intended to help the most marginalized citizens—were developed without empirical evidence justifying a culture of poverty.

Since the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s and the passage of welfare reform in 1996, Congress has leaned even more toward the individualistic approach by authorizing states to introduce work requirements in key welfare programs. These include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), and Medicaid. The White House Council of Economic Advisers (2018) recently released a 66-page document advocating for work requirements in non-cash welfare programs. This move is further evidence that the culture of poverty still drives the social welfare landscape. Notably, there is no evidence that people who are poor refuse to work under all circumstances, and yet government officials believe this is the case. Joseph (2018) argued that policies that rely on a flawed theoretical framework are likely to fail.

The findings in this paper call on poverty and social welfare stakeholders to understand that the structural framework is the more accurate of the two perspectives in explaining poverty and in tailoring solutions. Individual choices and behaviors do impact poverty, but only within the larger structural context. That is, the context of economy, policies, power dynamics, and opportunity structure determines the size and scope of poverty generally. Hence, if policymakers are serious about solving or alleviating the issue of poverty, their overreliance on the individualistic approach should be scaled down. The findings also extend the literature on poverty attribution by providing a more or less objective lens to the analysis of theories. In other words, this paper brought the discussion about the etiology of poverty to an empirical level. Elsewhere, the thorough evaluation of the individual perspective and the structural perspective via the TES increases understanding about these perspectives themselves.

Limitations and Recommendations

The selection of the TES with respect to this paper was justified because the instrument allows a more objective appraisal of social work theories in general, regardless of their scope. Yet, the plausibility for subjectivity in the grading of items still exists. Although the researchers rely heavily on the literature for the analysis of each criterion on the TES, the paper does not claim complete grade accuracy. Future research can use a panel of experts to corroborate or refute the findings in this paper.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to critically evaluate the individual perspective and structural perspective in relation to the etiology of poverty. It is a noteworthy contribution, as existing scholarship has not evaluated these perspectives objectively. Although scholars have considered poverty attribution literature, they have not used instruments in their evaluations. The individual and structural perspectives were chosen for this analysis as they are major theoretical perspectives found in poverty attribution literature. Both perspectives are very broad, and as such, an analysis of the numerous theories under each perspective is

beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the major concept that binds each perspective is whether or not poverty is attributed to the individual or society. The Theory Evaluation Scale (TES) is paradigmatically versatile due to its construction and empirical vetting. This makes it suitable for evaluating social work theories irrespective of their scope. Poverty is central to the social work profession, and having a comprehensive understanding of its attribution is necessary to build policies and programs aimed at its alleviation (Stoeffler, 2019).

The critical analysis of these theories under the TES generated almost identical scores with 33 for individual theories and 35 for structural theories. These scores place both theoretical frameworks in the lower end of the excellent range on the TES. Despite the fact that the models appear to be object mirrors of each other, the structural framework holds an epistemological advantage over the individual paradigm. Indeed, although equally flawed, the structural perspective is more empirically supported than the individual perspective (as shown in item 6). This justifies the perspective as more sound and thus it can serve as the basis for social welfare policies and programs.

It is imperative that solutions to poverty be based upon the most accurate perspectives. Policies and programs created from faulty theoretical frameworks are prone to failure. Legislators who are sincere about addressing poverty should base social welfare policy on the soundest theoretical foundations and thus reduce support for the individualistic perspective and increase support for the structural perspective. Additional research is needed to validate or contradict the findings in this paper.

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