How does structural functionalism relate to poverty?

Structural functionalism can be a very useful theory when addressing poverty. It focuses on the structure of things and can be used to analyze the effects that structure has on poverty.

One main point of the structural functionalism theory is that the structure of a family directly impacts their likelihood of living in poverty. As Schriver states, “the nuclear family…has preferential or exclusive enjoyment of economical and sexual rights over one another” (Schriver, 2004, p. 349). This theory takes the stance that same sex parents and single parents are more likely to raise their children in poverty. This proves to be a problem because, “almost half of all American children will live in a single-parent family at some time during their childhood (Porterfield, 2001, p. 1302). In 1999, “nearly 36% of female-headed families with children were in poverty…compared with 6.3% of married-couple families” (Porterfield, 2001, p. 1302). The structural functionalism theory allows the connection to be made by comparing the structure of the family with the statistics of people in poverty.

How are the resources within the community structured?

Within Hamilton Country there are many resources available to those in need. The problem however is knowing where to get the resources. There are a couple of main resource centers such as United Way, which has many other nonprofit organizations that branch off of it. Another one of the main resource centers is government assistance. As of March 2007 the City Council has agreed to grant funds to 24 different projects for a grand total of $4,435,940.08. These funds will be distributed from July 2007 to June
2008 (n.a., 2007). With this extra help there is hope that more resources will be available to those in need.

**Limitations of Structural Functionalism**

While structural functionalism is a very good fit for poverty as a whole there are still some limitations. The main limitation is that it does not take into account that there will always be people that do not fit the norm. While it may be rare there are single parents that are very well off and provide for their child without ever worrying about not being able to provide for their child. On the other hand though there are also married couples raising their children in poverty. There will never be a definite way to determine who is poverty ridden and who is not. Anyone could go into living in poverty at any point in time and structural functionalism does not take this into account.

**Conflict Theory:**

Conflict theory states that “society is composed of groups fiercely competing for scarce resources” (Schriver, 2004, p. 120). This theory fits well with poverty because people are constantly fighting for the resources they need. It may be that they need a place to stay, a bill to be paid, or maybe somewhere for their children to go during the day. No matter what the need is, there will always be many people needing and go after the same things. This theory is a good fit because it bring into light the fact that not everyone can have the same resources.

_Are resources truly scarce?_

While the conflict theory argues that groups are competing for scarce resources there is another side to consider. Groups will always be competing for resources, but in Hamilton County there are numerous resources. Therefore, are groups really competing
for scarce resources? Or do groups just have a limited idea of what resources are out there and therefore they are competing for the same resources, but maybe not scarce resources?

**Limitations of conflict theory**

One of the main limitations of the conflict theory is that it does not take diversity into account. Yes, there are many people fighting for the same resources, but what people are fighting for what resources? This theory does not allow for options such as race, location, or age to be brought into account. These are all very important factors that the conflict theory leaves out.

**Ecological Perspective:**

The ecological perspective “allows the incorporation of multiple impacts” (Schriger, 2004, p. 237). This is very valuable when it comes to poverty because it is important to realize that there is not one or even two reasons for poverty. There are many different things that cause poverty and affect people that are living in poverty. This perspective looks at the person in their environment and all of the possible factors that are impacting their life and contributing to them living in poverty.

**How does the economy affect people living in poverty?**

Many things can contribute to the continuation of poverty. One factor that is often overlooked is the economy. Even though the economy has been growing in Hamilton County poverty has not seen a decline. In 2005, 40,125 people in Hamilton County were living below the poverty line (Flessner, 2008). It was thought that by making more jobs in downtown Chattanooga that the poverty level would decrease. However, most of the jobs that were made are low paying jobs, such as service jobs
(Caylor, 2007). Therefore, even though there are more jobs there are also more people living in poverty because these jobs do not pay enough for an individual to suppose ones family.

**Limitations of ecological perspective**

The main limitation of the Ecological Perspective is that it is very broad. It is great in that it is so diverse, but by being so broad it can be hard to apply to specific scenarios. Also by being so broad there is a chance of looking into too many different areas. It could be overwhelming to try and look into every possible factor that might have lead to being in poverty.

**Conclusion**

Poverty is an age old problem and Hamilton County is doing a good job at dealing with it. There will always be hypothesis as to what causes poverty and what can fix it, but for now it is best to just deal with the issues at hand. Resources should be made available to those in need and given the knowledge of how to find those resources some people that are currently living in poverty might be able to finally get out.


