

## Chapter 25

# The Great Chain of Poverty Explanations

*S. M. Miller*

In some high-income countries, such as the United States, the causes of poverty are restricted to two opposing and highly politicized frameworks. One emphasizes “the culture of the poor”, characterized by inadequacies in personal behaviour that lead to poverty. The other stresses “structures”, whether of inadequate employment opportunities or of discrimination, as poverty inducing. Discussions of poverty causes in lower-income nations provide a much broader agenda of explanations, many of which are also used in highly political debates. This chapter builds on both sets of national outlooks and is deeply indebted to the discussions at the CROP meeting in Paris in 1994, which led to the chapters in this volume.

Poverty hypotheses, explanations, and frameworks can be about its causes and processes as well as about policies that would be effective in reducing poverty rates and gaps. The Great Chain of Explanation is composed of many clashing as well as complementary beads.

## The methodology of poverty explanations

Two contrasting tendencies afflict poverty discussions. On one side, these analyses are usually under-theorized. On the other, poverty has too many causal explanations. Causal associations are not necessarily theories that explain the processes that lead to outcomes. Despite many assertions about what causes poverty, few are stated with a precision that can be empirically (or even logically) tested. Broad frameworks rather than bounded hypotheses prevail. Some explanations call for experimental designs that may not be achievable. For example, it is argued that

if such and such experiences had not occurred in the past, poverty rates in a nation would not be what they are today. "As if" rewriting of history is hard to measure.

In the absence of focused theory, methodology dominates. The methods and the problems chosen (a methodological issue as well as a political one) direct the understanding of poverty dynamics. Sometimes, this is because of Type III error: asking the wrong question. That misstep is often due to the cultural, financial, and political embedding of poverty research. For a time, certain issues are to the fore and favoured in research attention while others are ignored or neglected (for example, in the United States research on public assistance use is much more studied than the specific obstacles experienced by poor households).

Methodologies can attenuate The Great Chain of Explanation, stopping with a confirmable, acceptable conclusion (frequently a correlation) that should demand further exploration. Many empirical generalizations are unexamined and their causes not pursued.

The classic case in poverty explanations is deploying the characteristics of the poor as the causes of poverty. If the aged or immigrants or female-headed households have a higher incidence of poverty than do other social categories, then poverty is seen as caused by these particular social attributes. Explanation stops at that point rather than seeking to understand the processes that result in a social category's high poverty risk.

Although one wants to avoid demanding infinite regress to deeper, less obvious, or veiled causes, it is important for both theory and practice to understand what produces high poverty risks for, say, female-headed families or the low educated. After all, these are (somewhat) convenient social (and sometimes political) labels rather than revealing dynamic processes. "Why" is usually more important than only "who". Gunnar Myrdal's methodological contribution of "cumulative causation" cautions that correlational and other more static methods may obscure feedback and interacting effects (Myrdal 1944: Appendix 3).

The Great Chain of Explanation has important background assumptions and requirements. At one level, the task is to uncover empirical generalizations. At a second, the need is to clarify the contexts in which they occur – or not. That is, the recurring research and policy question of "under what conditions" has to be explored. The third level is the explaining of the finding, what forces and processes produce that result, and what its consequences are. Calculating poverty risks is not the same as interpreting the meanings and effects of poverty.

The great problem in poverty research is that explanations imply a policy or direction. At one level, this is the problem of for whom one is creating knowledge: politicians, administrators, the voting public, other researchers – or the poor. Different questions come to the fore depending on the constituency for research. The other is how this knowledge is used or misused, understood or interpreted.

A largely unexamined question is whether better explanations (better politically or scientifically) result in different and more effective policies. The answer will probably be different in different nations.

The political embedding of poverty discourses led to a strong division between so-called structural or cultural explanations. The structural level focuses on “basic” (usually economic) forces outside the household’s control, while the cultural level points to the traditional or chosen behaviour of households as leading to their poverty. The structural is regarded as a radical outlook; the cultural as a conservative one. As we shall see, the division is not sharp, and structural interpretations can be in the service of conservative positives that advocate reduced social spending.

The following report on current explanations of poverty only occasionally attempts to phrase explanations so that they might be testable hypotheses. That could be a follow-up step.

## Locality and demography

An important distinction is made between urban and rural areas. In nations with large rural populations and usually low incomes, the hypothesis is that the poverty rate and the poverty gap per poor person are higher in rural than in urban areas. In higher-income nations with smaller rural populations, the hypothesis is that rural–urban differences in poverty rates are not as great, though the poverty gap per poor person may be larger in rural areas. Urban and rural poverty may require different modes of explanation.

Regional differences, which often are associated with rural conditions, affect poverty risks. Those living in areas that have long-term economic difficulties (e.g. poor soil, broad swings in the prices of and demand for its products, low productivity) experience high rates of chronic poverty. The structural conditions of production and marketing keep people in poverty, often leading to high rates of migration to cities and to highly populated zones of poverty within them. Where one lives may determine one’s poverty history.

The hypothesis of regional differences in producing differential rates of poverty is not restricted to low-income countries or to rural areas. William Julius Wilson's emphasis on the dwindling job opportunities available to people living in particular areas is an urban phenomenon (Wilson 1987).

Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) make a somewhat different point. Their hypothesis is that segregation in a locality of a stigmatized group (which could be extended to poor people generally) maintains or worsens their poverty.

The underclass hypothesis, at least as developed in the United States by poverty researchers, is a locality-based analysis. It counts in the underclass those poor persons who live in areas "impacted" by poverty (e.g. high percentages of welfare and poverty households). Although the underclass concept connotes disturbing personal behaviour, its measurement is based on an evaluation of localities.

The general underlying hypothesis of locality is that where one lives affects the likelihood of moving into, staying in or moving out of poverty. A derivative hypothesis is that a majority of those who are counted as poor live in localities that have many poor people in them. This is the concentration of poverty argument. In contrast, several studies show that in high-income societies a majority of the poor live outside high-poverty areas. (Such generalizations are obviously affected by the definition of concentration.)

On the demographic (and biological) side is the easy assumption that the poor are poor because of mental deficiency and illness – that in somewhat meritocratic societies, the more fit persevere and manage an above-poverty experience, while those left behind are mentally incompetent or at least less competent. This thesis raises once again the heredity–environment split, which, more and more, biologists contend is not a useful formulation. In any case, this hardy perennial of explanations of poverty is hard to study.

Large household size, which may be associated with ruralness, is often cited as a high poverty risk. Because household arrangements vary within as well as among nations, differing definitions of a household may be involved in this generalization. The explanations of why particular nations or localities have large families include an intra-family social security pattern of the younger generation supporting the older in the latter's late years, the fears of early deaths of children, and cultural and religious preferences for large families.

## Economic structures and policies

Economic explanations range from the very broad (macro) and historical to specific instances of labour market imperfections. Later, what might be regarded as more meso and micro approaches are discussed.

In many low-income nations a widely accepted analysis is that their present poverty is the continuing effect of their weak position in international markets in earlier (and later) years. This situation usually resulted from imperialist control of the economy. This view has many variants, such as world systems analysis and dependency and dedevelopment theories, all of which are not easy to test without making major assumptions.

A common form of the explanation is that the imperial power forced the colony to pursue mono-crop or raw material production as the basis of its economy. The now-independent nation cannot escape from the long-term economic distortions inflicted on it, particularly with unfavourable terms of trade harming the economy. The results are a high level of chronic poverty as well as periods of crisis poverty. In this perspective, political independence does not overcome economic dependence, particularly in unstable world markets that are heavily influenced by the actions of richer countries. The inevitable result, then, is high levels of poverty.

A second historical-contemporary view is that particular economic growth paths doom large sections of a society to poverty. Although this analysis is usually applied to low-income nations, high-income countries may have similar experiences. The content or composition of gross domestic product (GDP) and the way that it is produced affect not only who wins and loses but which people and regions are thrust into or cannot escape from poverty. It is not only the rate of growth in GDP but what produces that growth that determines the fate of people. For many who espouse this perspective, international agencies have fostered the wrong kind of growth, one that enriches a few and impoverishes the many. Low wages and high rates of unemployment may result from a growth path that also enlarges an urban middle class or swells great wealth among a few.

Affluence and poverty are not incompatible events; the latter may produce the former. The poor are not just left behind as others advance but are the victims of the affluence of the few. The difficult question that follows is whether economic growth can occur without increasing inequalities and poverty. Do

growth paths vary in their inequality consequences? The World Bank did studies along these lines in the 1970s (Chenery et al. 1974); they might be updated for more recent periods.

A general proposition is that a slowing of the rate of growth in many nations is causing or maintaining poverty levels. This is partly a result of policy decisions to limit inflationary pressures and of structural changes occurring in the world economy. The heightened importance of international financial factors as well as stronger global competition constrict growth rates.

A new element is seen as worsening the situation. Worldwide transformations in modes of production have the consequence in many countries that a percentage increase in economic growth has less employment-promotion and poverty-alleviating effects than it did in earlier periods. Nations have to grow more rapidly than before just to stay at the same level of poverty. If they falter, the thesis contends, poverty rates will increase rapidly.

Price levels can be important. Inflation frequently causes poverty. As prices rise, especially for basic commodities, vulnerable sectors and groups that cannot adjust suffer decline in their level of living. Although inflation can be a pressure in all nations, it is particularly threatening in lower-income societies that may have very high inflationary rates. On the other hand, these societies may provide subsidies to consumers of basic commodities (e.g. bread) in order to lower the price and maintain levels of living. The general point is that price levels as well as incomes affect poverty rates (and definitions).

Meso interpretations assume the central importance of low wages and unemployment in the production of poverty. It is important to understand that in many low-income, rural, highly seasonal economies, the concept of "out of the labour market", an important concept in the United States and the Netherlands as well as in other nations, is not an appropriate term. People can be continually in and out of the labour market. Dichotomies do not work in these situations.

Depressed regions and sectors in a nation, which may or may not be connected to world markets, can be causes of poverty. Regions that have low value-added industries and industrial sectors that have low value-added production are likely to have workers who receive low wages. (High value-added sectors can also have low-paid workers but the latter's percentage of the sectoral labour force is likely to be lower than in low value-added regions and industries.) Regional and industrial distributions affect the poverty rate and gap. The general point is that what is happening in industries affects the poverty situation.

Whether low wages or unemployment are the more important determinant of poverty rates is controversial. An important factor is that the number of hours worked during the year affects income and that (full or partial) unemployment occurs among many more people than those listed as unemployed at a particular time of year. The annual average unemployment rate is an inadequate indicator of the income impact of unemployment.

Adding to the difficulty of assessing the impact of unemployment in high-income countries is that social policies regarding unemployment and disability benefits may affect unemployment rates. High benefits may encourage labour market departures. How the household is constructed and counted may affect poverty rates resulting from either low wages or unemployment.

At what might be considered a micro level, a variety of interpretations are adduced. A favourite of neoclassical economists and many political figures is that poverty results from the low human capital of the poor. They cannot gain higher wages or have the chance of more secure employment because they offer little to employers. Their basic factor income is stunted though a nation may (expensively) attempt to supplement it with transfer income. The policy implication is that they should add to their human capital if they are to improve their prospects.

One difficulty with this approach is that it assumes that, if those with low human capital were to improve their capacities, better paid and more secure positions would be forthcoming. In effect, it proposes a Say's Law of employment: higher capacities produce their own demand. The question is whether this interpretation would hold for the many rather than for a few.

Another difficulty is that the human capital approach usually fails to examine why so many have low human capital. In many nations, spending on education is low and frequently misdirected. Obtaining usable education and training can be a difficult road. In this critical perspective based on The Great Chain of Explanation, low human capital is a symptom more than a cause.

Discrimination in labour markets is discussed in the following section.

## Social structural explanations

The socially vulnerable become the economically vulnerable. They suffer discrimination in the labour market because of prejudice and stereotyping. Marginalized people, whether they are demarcated as women, minority groups, or recent immigrants, may have difficulty in getting jobs (indeed, may be barred

by law or custom from seeking paid work or working in certain protected activities) and may receive low wages when they are employed. Usually, they are concentrated in particular, low-wage industries or localities. It is being "different" in some socially disapproved way that causes their poverty. This difference carries over in the social realm where they experience the social exclusion that is ignored in this chapter on economic poverty.

Migration has additional negative consequences because it disrupts long-time ties and networks that connect people to access to economic resources and that yield social support. In the new place, migrants have trouble getting an economic foothold and are frequently relegated to minimum subsistence work. Worsening the prospects of migrants is the psychological damage that migration can inflict as the familiar and secure are lost to uncertainty and threat.

"Minorities", even when very large in number, long in residence in the nation, and whether defined by race or ethnicity, frequently suffer employment and social discrimination. They are barred by embedded practices from the better jobs, have difficulties in securing public benefits, and receive few public services. In terms of poverty as social exclusion, prejudice may force them into restricted and poor-quality housing areas and isolate them from mainstream life. Like other excluded or marginalized groups, they are both socially and economically deprived.

The emphasis on households in poverty obscures their gender structures. The sharing of work and economic resources may not be equal. Women may receive fewer resources than male members of the household and may be exploited. As employees or as entrepreneurs, they are likely to receive low incomes. They may not be fully or at all covered by social programmes. Even in some relatively well-off nations, married women were not counted as unemployed and eligible for unemployment benefits.

Turbulence rather than economic and political stability is the usual condition of many nations. The turbulence can be due to ethnic fighting, attempts to maintain or overthrow undemocratic or democratic governments, struggles over sharing the economic product of the nation. Whatever the cause, the result may be a devastated economy and widespread poverty.

Regions, ethnic groups, and migrants may suffer from inadequate infrastructures, whether of schools, roads to markets, or basic facilities of life. These deprivations reduce their economic opportunities and their social integration.



Social exclusion is not a linear effect of income inadequacy. In this hypothesis, activity deprivation (an indicator or measure of poverty) can decidedly decline at a threshold income point rather than experience a gradual reduction with each lowering of the income level. What might be regarded as an extreme poverty line produces the social exclusion that some regard as a main characteristic of poverty. This seems a testable hypothesis.

## Culture and individual behaviour

Cultural explanations of poverty have a strong vogue. At the present time, "agency" is a key word. It is used to convey that the poor do things that make them poor or keep them in a condition of poverty. The poor are not passive victims but engage in activities that promote or maintain poverty. They are the leading actors in the poverty drama. It is not mainly or only what is done to them, but what they do as personal agents, an active force, in their fates. In this perspective, choice and therefore individual responsibility are involved in the production of poverty.

Earlier, the culture of poverty had considerable social science and political play and is still important in discussions of poverty. The cultural emphasis is usually on practices and outlooks that are transmitted from one generation to another and limit possibilities of escaping from poverty. A cultural explanation need not involve intergenerational transmission; people's survival or coping or response strategies may be dysfunctional or ineffectual responses to their present difficult situations. In one version, if poor people's incomes move above the poverty line, their behaviour will prevent them from maintaining their improved position. They lack the discipline, responsibility, or ability to defer gratification that are needed to sustain economic inclusion. Until their survival processes are challenged and changed, governmental and other aid will fail to improve their life conditions and chances.

At one level, it often appears obvious that poor people are often not doing things that would help them and indeed may be engaged in behaviours that harm them in economic and everyday life. A frequent assumption is that if non-poor persons were in the same situation as poor persons, they would cope more effectively than do poor people. This assumption cannot be put to the test because the non-poor cannot be forced into serving as a comparison group and the non-poor who might volunteer for such a test would be a biased sample of the non-poor. A somewhat different slant is that the poor have to do more to cope

with difficult situations than the non-poor who have faced less strained and continuing challenges.

The experience of poverty can be considered a cause of poverty; for living poorly for some time makes it difficult to accumulate the economic, political, social, and psychological resources to overcome poverty conditions. Poverty creates the obstacles to its overcoming. It may discourage the poor from having confidence that great effort would lead to improved outcomes.

The biographies of poor persons do not add up to an analysis of the causes of poverty. One does not have to be an adherent of the "Annales" school of history to believe that individual history may have to be "explained" at least in part by forces beyond the ken of the biographee or the biographer. Individual biographies do not simply add up to a social or macro analysis.

What may work for some poor individuals may not be effective for most of the poor. Exemplars and models of how to rise from destitution are by definition exceptions. Extrapolation from individual poverty escapes can be misleading in developing poverty policies.

Despite the difficulty of formulating testable propositions about the culture or behaviour of the poor as causative agents in their poverty, such explanations have some role – *at some level*. That formulation brings in once again The Great Chain of Explanation. At what point does one go beyond the immediately phenomenological to examine other conditions implicated in the processes that end up as poverty? One way of thinking about the issue is: if aid is given to the poor, what behaviours and actions do they have to take to gain from the aid?

That formulation also rests on the way aid is forthcoming. Is aid that attempts to build on traditional community ways of behaving more effective than aid that attempts to depart from embedded practices? This question could be researched: do different ways of providing help have different positive effects for the poor? For example, some argue that it is the sense of powerlessness that reduces the positive impact of public transfers and other kinds of aid. The urgent need is for the participation of the poor and the mobilization of their communities if the poor are to benefit from outside help. Or, that giving the poor a more powerful role in society would enhance their effectiveness in moving out of poverty conditions. In principle, it should not be too difficult to set up aid projects in similar communities that differ in the degree and kind of participation of the poor in programmes aimed at overcoming the inertia resulting from past defeats.

A way of reconciling structural and cultural explanations of poverty is to pose a somewhat researchable question along these lines: what changes in structures, opportunities, outside help or living conditions would elicit behaviour that would bring and keep people out of poverty?

Contrary to the offering of the culture of the poor as the causative agent in poverty is the contention that it is the culture of the non-poor that keeps the poor in their poverty place. The culture of the non-poor denies economic opportunities to the marginalized (the discrimination mentioned earlier), isolates them socially so that they cannot participate effectively in the larger society, and encourages their political, economic, and social exploitation. This position argues that the non-poor exert themselves to keep the poor in traditional places in order to transmit advantages to their families; or that their everyday behaviour (such as in job networks) bars the poor from improving their position. This outlook would require the study of the impact on the poor of the intended and unintended behaviour of the non-poor.

Underlying causative approaches that emphasize the culture of the poor or the culture of the non-poor is the notion of the social construction of poverty. One implication is that poverty and its causes are viewed quite differently by the poor and the non-poor. That is clearly a researchable hypothesis and might be extended to consider what the effects of these different views are on the prospects of reducing poverty.

## Poverty policies as causative agents

A widely accepted hypothesis is that nations that rely on means-testing in their social policies will have higher rates of poverty than countries that rely mainly on near-universalistic policies. Some testing of that hypothesis has occurred in comparative studies of welfare state spending patterns.

A somewhat parallel proposition is that economic growth and unemployment rates are more determining of the poverty rate than is social spending. The assumption is that social policies cannot adequately offset the impact of economic structures and policies. Holding other influences constant would be a difficulty in evaluating this hypothesis; also, some argue that social policies affect the measured unemployment rate. Nonetheless, this postulate is open to comparative evidence.

In many low-income nations, it is conjectured that the demands on aided nations by international agencies, particularly but not only the International Monetary Fund (IMF), produce

poverty. The IMF usually requires that countries seeking its funds reduce government deficits, the supply of money, and subsidies to consumers, as well as to devalue their currencies. The contention is that, as a result, levels of living deteriorate. Many are plunged into poverty while conditions worsen for those already poor. Poverty rates and gaps increase. It is difficult to study this position carefully because nations may not maintain IMF policies for long or may carry them out only partially and because many other factors influence economic functioning and poverty conditions. Some contend that analyses of IMF interventions support this negative appraisal of the organization's effects.

They would extend the conclusion to other public and private aid agencies. The World Bank, especially in the past, has been somewhat similarly indicted. Its emphasis on big projects may have harmed people in rural areas, widened inequalities, and distorted the economy by enriching a few.

National poverty policies could have similar negative effects. In the American case it has been contended that public assistance policies provide incentives to the poor not to seek to improve their conditions. In this conservative structural version, an unusual use of structural analysis, the poor behave as rational actors. They are responding in a calculated, conscious way to the incentives and rewards available to them and therefore do not attempt to change their situations.

Although this position, espoused by Charles Murray (1984), lost the scientific debate, it won the political debate and is having a deep influence on the reconstruction of social policies, at least in the United States.

That political debate raises the contentious question of the relationship between research and policy. Among the issues involved is who decides what is a policy success and failure. In some circumstances, a small gain from an intervention might be considered a great success while a large gain might not be so evaluated because of the (monetary, political, or social) costs involved in its achievements. Cost-benefit analyses are not free of such issues because what is to be counted as cost and as benefit are often contentious issues that divide evaluators and their interpreters.

A neglected contention is that the administration of policies, not just their design or intentions, is fateful for its poverty-reduction effects. Poor management can fell many a well-designed programme. Some policies experience considerable corruption and waste so that little aid is actually received by the target population. Such occurrences may contribute to a sense of

powerlessness and helplessness among the poor. This view could be investigated by case studies of communities at the moment of announcement of poverty policies and some time later when few funds or services filtered through to them.

The inconstancy of policies may weaken their policy effects. A turbulent policy setting – short-lived programmes; shifting from one programme design to another; uncertainty about funding – blocks cumulative gain from programmes. Officials and legislators frequently exhibit an inability to delay gratification and expect rapid results. They use policy succession as an indicator of a commitment to rational policy-making: if a programme does not seem to “work” in a short time, substitute some other policy.

Another issue concerns the effects of participation or its absence in the conduct of poverty programmes. Some argue that programmes that do not involve the poor in their design, or at least, in their implementation, are inevitably limited in their effectiveness and indeed may be inappropriate. They may actually hurt the poor by deepening their feelings of powerlessness. This perspective usually regards participation of the poor as an end in itself rather than only a means. One difficulty in evaluating this outlook is that “participation” has many forms and qualities that are not easily measurable. It would be useful to study some forms of participation in different countries to see if specific settings are crucial in the impact of participation.

In this general perspective, the position of an increasing number of poverty analysts is that it is important to concentrate poverty programmes on women. By improving their social conditions, educational possibilities, and economic activities, particularly as “penny capitalists”, communities and households are enabled to improve their situations. In particular, aiding female-headed households would make a major difference in containing current and future poverty rates. The hypothesis is that poverty programmes would be more effective in reducing poverty rates if they were not gender-neutral, which usually means male-centred, but attempted to be women-centred or women-friendly. Some beginning studies along these lines have been made.

## Power and poverty

A broad thesis is that it is not economic markets of themselves that determine the distributions of income and wealth and the rates of poverty. Rather, it is the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of narrow privileged groups that produces inequalities and poverties. This standpoint regards market explanations of poverty as inherently limited, if not

misleading; for such interpretations treat the market as unaffected by economic blocs and power elites. The power perspective does not regard markets as neutral floors where supply and demand rationally dance into equilibrium. Powerful groups press markets in preferred directions. Low wages or agricultural producers' prices are not "natural" market results. Power dictates their level.

In this view the poor are poor because they lack the political power to challenge prevailing practices of economic and social exploitation. Consequently, economic improvements require power shifts. If oppressed groups do not gain power, market biases and distortions that force poverty upon the many cannot be remedied. Such contentions require historical as well as difficult contemporary analyses and may have to investigate the impact of foreign power groups on internal poverty situations.

In some countries, reductions in infrastructure and social policy spending are singled out as the cause of increased poverty rates. Political decisions to rein in expenditures to reduce government deficits are identified as the agents leading to heightened poverty rates.

This perspective again raises the question of the role of power in determining poverty rates and conditions. Dominant economic, political, and/or social elites, not abstract market forces, may determine the fate of others. A political and psychological result is that the power of the few engenders the powerlessness of the many – a broad hypothesis about the barriers to action of the poor.

Indeed, some analysts regard analyses of discrimination as obscuring or avoiding the basic causative agent – power. Exclusion does not just happen; it is usually made to happen. The concentration of power in the hands of particular groups, wielded through their control of key economic and political institutions as well as by their maleness and ethnic status, determines the fate of the majority of the population. In this version of The Great Chain of Explanation, power is the force that keeps or pushes people into poverty; discrimination and prejudice are mainly means.

The implication is that only a deep shift in power relationships would make reductions in poverty rates possible. Without a dramatic transfer of power, poverty-alleviating efforts are unlikely to be initiated. If initiated, they will not be backed by resources and conducted by administrations that could make them effective. In this explanation, the route to poverty remedy is through power transfer or, better, power transformation where the (majority) poor gain their rightful influence.

Less sweeping than the power explanation of poverty is the view that in many societies there is little political or societal interest in attenuating poverty. It is just not on the political agenda. Other issues gain attention and precedence. Combating inflationary possibilities is a strong competitor for national action; that concern often leads to limiting wage increases. Or the drive for increasing productivity (and poverty) by employment reductions has precedence over poverty reduction.

In contrast to this concern with neglect and inattention are situations where the poor are centre stage but in negative contexts. In some nations poverty-bashing is a rewarding political action. The poor or immigrants are kept in their place or pushed into an even more disadvantaged position because politicians feel that they gain support by doing so. Poverty-bashing creates political advantages that lead to worsening poverty.

## A sampling of implications

This chapter's emphasis on the economic measure of poverty has neglected the social dimensions of poverty in terms of definition, processes and causes (Miller and Roby 1970; Townsend 1979). Undoubtedly, the understanding of what causes poverty would be expanded by utilizing a more social perspective. Also, this chapter has treated those in poverty as a single group, ignoring the enormous variations among the poor. For example, the extremely poor, the poorest of the poor, the Fourth World in the lexicon of the international poverty organization Aide à Toute Détresse, may have had quite different experiences from those who only occasionally are poor, or who have been poor for a relatively short time, or whose resources hover around the poverty line. Variations among the poor as well as variations in the causes and processes of poverty require attention.

The testing of many poverty hypotheses or beliefs about causes may not be easy. Because much thinking about what to do about poverty is clouded by unthought-through notions of what causes or perpetuates or alleviates poverty, some advance in evaluating explanations and processes is an important step. Further development of hypotheses and theories would do well to apply this volume's arrays of hypotheses and frameworks to a large number of countries. The questions are not only which points hold up for many countries and which do not but the conditions under which they may be sustained as clarifying explanations. Because *poverty is a name for many varied situations*, we should not expect one all-encompassing explanation.

The Great Chain of Explanation is subject to three contrasting inferences. One is that the great range of causative analyses reveal that social scientists and policy makers do not understand what causes poverty – that the response to most explanations is the Scottish verdict “not proven” – and do not know what is effective. Such agnosticism can lead to a decision not to act. Not acting is an important policy that assumes that poverty will not worsen and that its damage can be ignored. A different way of regarding social science uncertainty is to look upon policy interventions as a way of testing explanations. That requires a deeper approach to understanding programme effects than is usually employed in evaluation studies.

Second is the view that all explanations are implicated and have to be dealt with in order to have a deep effect on poverty rates and rates. With the great diversity among most nations’ poor, that proposition cannot be ignored. In most nations, however, one or two measures (e.g. an income “floor” to prevent poverty, the experience of rather than a “safety-net” that operates only after one has plunged into distress) are likely to be important for many.

Third, many regard more “fundamental” or “basic” explanations, such as the power thesis, as compelling. In this view, anything short of root transformation is a waste of time and energy, an avoidance of the difficult steps that must be undertaken if poverty is to be eradicated. Certainly, policy makers and administrators need to recognize the limited poverty-eliminating possibilities of less basic measures. These are limitations in terms of how much poverty can be reduced for how many people and for how long.

So-called “bandaid” measures may protect the damage of a poverty wound only to some extent. Nonetheless, bandaids may be useful for some poor persons in overcoming obstacles or simply in alleviating difficult conditions. Denying or delaying the use of bandaids in the hope of producing a revolution or transformation raises ethical questions about treating people as means not ends. Political questions also emerge about what conditions produce the possibilities of deep changes. Does bandaid reform lower pressures for deeper shifts or does it promote desires for more encompassing transformation?

The danger in short-term, limited policies occurs when they impede the understanding of and the need for broader and deeper actions or they lead to under-attention to poverty issues because of over-confidence in what narrow policies can accomplish. That situation is likely when political rhetoric to win support



outruns any reasonable assessment of possible achievement of an anti-poverty programme.

A different view of The Great Chain of Explanation is that the importance of different causes of poverty varies among nations. In some countries, a particular explanation explains little whereas in another it may have an important role. To some extent, cross-national borrowing of poverty concepts and analyses from the United States has clouded the understanding of poverty dynamics in particular countries.

Within a nation, poverty has diverse sources. It can result because many in a group are left behind in deteriorating circumstances as other members emerge, or because a locality's economic opportunities decline. Some are poor because of deliberate policies to repress them economically, politically, and/or socially. Others may be the victims of Zsuzsa Ferge's "quasi-intentionality" or "unanticipated anticipatable consequences" where the effects of policy would clearly push people into poverty but no attention was paid to this result (Ferge 1987).

The Great Chain of Explanation does not have one final point. It is a circle or necklace, with each link possibly important. Which is crucial in a particular place at a particular time is not fore-ordained. On the other hand, the many routes into poverty and the many obstacles to moving beyond it do not mean that one policy may not be effective in changing the prospects for a large number of poor persons.

The understanding of the "causes" of poverty is blocked by the conventional separation and isolation of academic divisions into economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and, some would say, biology and genetics. In society, the influences ensconced in these academic boxes interact with one another. It is their interpenetration that is the important question. For example, what are the effects of a rise or decline in income of a poor family on its work effort, family constellations, educational efforts, political behaviour, or social interactions?

Issues of interaction raise questions about the correlational methodology that is almost standard in poverty and other sociological analyses: holding some influences (variables) "constant" in order to estimate the "independent" effect of a particular influence. When the issue is interactional effects that may not be the best strategy for getting at "causes". This is particularly so when the concern is with the policy implications of a causation accounting: would an important independent variable have the same effect in real conditions when influences with which it customarily interacts are absent or of high or low significance

(Lieberson 1985: chs 7 and 10: 146–51). Certainly, the order in which interventions should occur is important. Perhaps the most general point is that explanation does not simply and mechanically lead to policy formulation. Policy is a leap from causative statements.

The Great Chain of Explanation is more a worry bead than a secure fastener. It directs analysts to “why” and “how” questions, not to comfortable answers. However, it should not lead us to declare that a cause is a cause, is a cause, is a cause. Rather, it should awaken us to the range of possible answers and interventions.

#### REFERENCES

- Chenery, Hollis, Montek S. Ahluwalia, C. L. G. Bell, John H. Duloy, and Richard Jolly (1974) *Redistribution with Growth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ferge, Zsuzsa (1987) “Study poverty”, in Zsuzsa Ferge and S. M. Miller (eds), *Dynamics of Deprivation*. Aldershot: Gower, pp. 9–31.
- Lieberson, Stanley (1985) *Making It Count*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton (1993) *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Miller, S. M. and Pamela A. Roby (1970) *The Future of Inequality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Murray, Charles (1984) *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. New York: Basic Books.
- Myrdal, Gunnar (1944) *An American Dilemma*, vol. 2. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Townsend, Peter (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*. Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin Books.
- Wilson, William Julius (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.