

Adopting a specific sociological theoretical 'lens' of your choice critically explore one of the following contemporary issues in society: 'Poverty Porn and/or Charity Porn'

This essay will explore the contemporary issue of 'poverty porn', analysing what is meant by the term, where it originates from and the guises in which it manifests. It will also consider the motivations behind the variations of 'poverty porn'. The assignment will explore issues of ethics, politics and social impact, and will be considered through the sociological lens of conflict theory.

To explore the issue of 'poverty porn', it is perhaps best to understand what is meant by that term. Nimishakavi (2018) states that 'poverty porn' refers to the use of media, whether that be through video footage, images or literature, to victimise people and generate sympathy and pity. The rationale for drawing on people's emotions in this way is to target potential donors and funding opportunities. Gharib (2015) suggests that the concept of 'poverty porn' has been around since the fundraising campaigns of the 1980s, with appeals such as the Ethiopian famine relief. Graphic images of malnourished children were used for publicity, and the use of these has been described by some as questionable, even exploitative.

Over time however, the use of the phrase 'poverty porn' has expanded or perhaps evolved. Patrick (2017) describes its use in reference to particular formats of reality television programmes. Some of the programmes cited are *Benefit Street*, *On Benefits and Proud* and *Benefits: Too Fat to Work*. The titles and formats vary, but a familiar theme runs throughout. The shows, Patrick suggests, are designed to vilify those on benefits, labelled as 'scroungers' and 'skivers' for the sensationalistic entertainment of those considered the 'hard working majority', fostering division through an us-and-them mentality.

To explore these issues through the lens of conflict theory, the fundamental principles of such a paradigm must first be established. Collins (1974, pp. 56-57) proposes the origins of conflict theory began to some degree with Machiavelli and Hobbes, who theorised that social order is achieved through a form of symptomatic coercion, borne of self-interest. It was only later that German-born sociologist Karl Marx (1818-1883), proposed, in much greater detail, the idea of conflict as a perpetual class struggle between the workers and the production owners that exploit them for capitalist gain. A contemporary of Marx, Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838-1909), was a sociologist of Polish-Austrian decent. Scott (2007, pp. 58-60) argues that

although Gumpłowicz took inspiration from the theories of Marx, he believed the root of conflict was not just of question of ‘class’ conflict, but significantly influenced by racial diversity. Theories surrounding the impact of race and ethnicity on social stratification were quite commonplace at the time, due in part to the work being published by renowned anthropologist, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), with his theories of evolution and natural selection.

Whereas Marx and Gumpłowicz viewed conflict on a macro level, Georg Simmel (1858-1918), sought to identify and analyse specific issues (Levine, 1991). Simmel, although a proponent of conflict theory, did not see conflict as essentially negative, but as a binding component of social cohesion. However, not all theories of conflict are confined to 19th century Europe. Feminism is in itself another form of conflict theory, with the struggle for power revolving around gender, as opposed to class or race. Walsh (2012, pp. 100-101) however, proposes the conflict for women is two-fold, and that the fight for gender equality exists alongside class struggle, not in place of it. Walsh also suggests that whilst some seek to reform the capitalist social structure, many feminists believe nothing less than the complete overthrow of capitalist and patriarchal system will suffice.

From the evidence it would appear that conflict theory is quite broad in perspective, but with a struggle for power and equality appearing as a common thread, running throughout. With this in mind, how might the issue of ‘poverty porn’ appear through the lens of a conflict theorist? Mooney and Sifaki (2017, pp. 205-208) explore the idea that by talking about benefit claimants in terms of money or lack of affluence, the narrative shifts the issue from wealth to implied social class. A clear distinction is drawn between the wealthy estate owner seeking financial assistance for costly repairs to a stately home, and a working class single mother claiming housing benefit. In the case ‘poverty porn’ shows such as *Benefits Street* and *Britain’s Benefit Tenants*, they acknowledged that programmes of this type tended to attract an exceptionally large amount of viewer complaints. The nature of the criticism received, generally revolved around the portrayal of participants, and how they were vilified and ridiculed in a stereotypical way, despite often being extreme representations.

In 2013 there was an apparent ‘explosion’ in this type voyeuristic spectacle, according to Jensen (2014), who draws attention to programmes such as *We Pay Your Benefits*, broadcast by the BBC, in which four taxpaying guests are given the task of scrutinising the expenditure

of four benefit recipients. A whole host of similar shows appeared that same year, shining the spotlight on anyone from *Gypsies on Benefits* to *Shoplifters and Proud*. Channel 4, in an effort to provide a new twist, chose to set benefits claimants the unenviable task of surviving on post-war welfare restrictions in *Benefits Britain 1949*. The list goes on. In response to criticism, Channel 4 defended their broadcasts as ‘observational documentaries’, a description seen as questionable by Jensen. Wright, Johnsen and Scullion (2018) suggest that the demonisation, as portrayed by the media, is leading to punitive benefit sanctions. They draw attention to statistics for 2012-2013, that revealed the number of benefit sanctions that were issued in that year, outnumbered the amount of fines issued by criminal courts over the same period.

Tyler (2015) proposes the whole format of these shows is designed to promote class division. The obligatory camera pan across a sea terraced houses, giving the viewer the sensation of looking down on the lower classes with casually dressed, seemingly idle individuals, smoking and talking. Images of bags of rubbish, split and spilling onto the street appear to compound the idea that these are somehow the undeserving poor. Tyler also accuses Channel 4 of being ‘disingenuous’ in their claim that the broadcasts portray the reality, and suggests that many of the scenarios are staged, purely for gain. Jensen *et al.* (2019) accuse the media of playing a pivotal role in not just reframing how benefit recipients are perceived, but in facilitating increasingly stringent welfare reforms, for political ends. Jacobs (1979) theorised that whilst conflict theory is often applied to issues of economic inequality, it is not so frequently considered in respect of coercion. Jacobs argues that in law enforcement, when the state holds the balance of power, it is natural for law enforcement officers to side with the state. Much the same could be said of media outlets, reinforcing the narrative that marginalises the recipients of benefits.

This type of three-way power exchange ‘thesis-antithesis-synthesis’ is found in conflict theory and has been referred to by some as a ‘dialectic triad’, a theory built upon by Marx, and based on the work of 19th Century German philosopher, Georg Hegel (Stewart, 1996). Dialectical methods such as Hegel’s, suggests Maybee (2016), refers to diametrically opposed groups ‘thesis and antithesis’, or in this case the Government and benefit recipients. The conflict is then resolved by the introduction of a third element ‘synthesis’, which in the case of ‘poverty porn’ could be representative of the media. Eventually, growing in power,

the ‘synthesis’ becomes the new ‘thesis’ and generates its own ‘antithesis’, in a continuous cycle.

Breaking the cycle of poverty though, is no simple matter. Whilst ‘poverty porn’ television shows appear to stigmatise and shame, so-called ‘charity porn’ campaigns seem to centre on attempts to stir emotions of guilt and pity, something Lentfer (2018) suggests, can trivialise the lives of those in suffering. Graphic images are displayed without any insight provided as to the cause of their extreme poverty, leaving sufferers portrayed merely as victims. Nimishakavi (2018) argues that reducing someone to a one-dimensional label such as ‘poor’ or ‘homeless’, is to strip them of all personality, agency and worth, in effect de-humanising them.

Similar consequences may result from another manifestation of ‘poverty porn’ known as ‘slum tourism’. Although package tour operators will sometimes claim they are providing a much-needed economic boost to poor and rundown areas, in reality the spectacle can be voyeuristic and exploitative (Monroe and Bishop, 2016). The origins of ‘slum tourism’ go back as far as Victorian times, when members of the elite would visit deprived areas of London to see how the poor lived. Doubtless there were well-meaning philanthropists, but it is also probably fair to assume that others were there to observe the spectacle as if attending some kind of circus freak show.

The fundamental difference between ‘tourism porn’ and ‘poverty porn’, according to Korte and Regard (2014, pp. 211-215), is in the age-old notion of deserving and undeserving poor. ‘Tourism porn’ tends to conjure up images of victims, helpless and at the mercy of their plight. ‘Poverty porn’ shows however; quite often portray the subjects as opportunist, workshy and even criminal. Korte and Regard suggest that not enough effort is made to educate the viewer in the case of reality TV shows and that they should encourage their audience to view with compassion rather than disdain. Shildrick (2018) proposes that the shift in public perspective that arises from ‘poverty porn’ has serious social implications. The misrepresentation of poor communities can have a significant impact on inequality and justice. Citing the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 as an example, the tragedy highlighted the gross inequality that can, and does, exist within a single borough of London. Inequality that has been growing, it is argued, since the neo-liberal, free market economic policies of the late

1970s. ‘Poverty porn’, Shildrick suggests, could be perhaps more accurately be described as ‘poverty propaganda’.

Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn (2018) explored the ‘propaganda model’, proposed by Herman and Chomsky, that suggested the power of the elite restricted the impartiality of media output. The consequence of stifling mainstream discourse has given rise a new breed of activism, in the form of independent journalists attempting the redress the balance. Hobart (2016) believes that a degree of conflict is essential to achieve egalitarianism, and rejecting overbearing political control is actually quite a natural response. Automatic levelling mechanisms should be sufficient to allow society to evolve, a structural functionalist might argue, but as social hierarchies expand, Hobart suggests conflict is inevitable to prevent the elite from wielding excessive power.

So who, if anyone, does ‘poverty porn’ empower? Kaskure and Krivorotko (2014) consider the notion that although poverty is generally regarded as lacking, whether that is lack of security, income or resources, it is usually measured by what someone does not have rather than what they do. With ‘poverty porn’ however, the predicament itself can be a source of agency. Images of poverty can be a powerful tool for fundraising, and create social capital that can in turn be used to facilitate change. Mooney and Hancock (2010) disagree however, suggesting the mistrust and moral outrage such images generate serves only to justify political ideologies such as austerity and welfare reform. A portion of the blame, it is suggested, should fall squarely at the feet of successive governments, who have failed to adequately address problems such as social housing. Many of poorest have been corralled together in rundown estates, where suitable role models are sometimes few and far between.

Responsibility should not rest solely with government according to Norris (2017), who believes television broadcasters should also shoulder some blame. With Channel 4’s *Great Property Giveaway*, they invite families affected by the housing crisis to make their pitch as to why they should be given a 3-bedroom property. Norris suggests this kind trivialisation plays into the government’s hand, absolving them of their welfare responsibilities, describing it as ‘neoliberal dream’. Loftsdóttir, Smith and Hipfl (2018, pp. 81-84) appear to agree with this assessment, suggesting they are portrayed as undeserving consumers of resources. Fairness for hardworking taxpayers became a focal point, in the campaign rhetoric for the 2010 UK General Election. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties formed a

coalition government, and a considerable amount of public support for welfare and benefit reforms set the tone for a new economic agenda.

Garnering public support for political ends is perhaps as a double-edged sword and it is possibly in this grey area that the most contentious element of ‘poverty porn’ lies, a question of ethics if you will (Outterson and Selinger, 2010). Victorian England was perhaps a typical example of the disparity and inequality between rich and poor at the time, with many of the wealthy oblivious to the desperate plight of the poor. The only insight for many of the elite as to levels of inequality was through the writings of Charles Dickens. A cynic may say that however well-intentioned Dickens was, to profit from the misery of the less fortunate could also be construed as ‘poverty porn’. Whatever Dickens’ motive though, his literary insight almost certainly raised the profile of inequality. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens’ second novel, he highlighted the harsh conditions inside the workhouses, a cruel and punitive environment, intended not so much to make work profitable, but rather make the reality of unemployment intolerable (Socialism Today, 2012). Davies (2012) acknowledges Dickens’ impressive literary achievement, with a catalogue of work that has been in print continuously, since the 1830s. The impact Dickens had on social reform though, appears to be less apparent. The general consensus among historians is that, aside from his direct involvement in projects to help destitute young women, there is little evidence to suggest Dickens’ had a direct and positive effect on social policy.

The extremes of social inequality have been brought to public attention, in a somewhat more contemporary format in recent years. Director Ken Loach’s film, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), centred on the UK social security benefits system and punishing sanctions that are issued for missing interviews. The film portrays the harsh reality many experience when claiming benefits, relying on food banks and coping with bureaucratic red tape (Crummy, 2017). Despite the award-winning film being critically acclaimed, it has been described by some as ‘poverty porn’. It can hardly be accused of glamorising the subject, and the scene involving a food bank makes for uncomfortable viewing. It is worth pointing out though that Loach has history of filmmaking with gritty social commentary, from as far back as the 1960s with films such as *Cathy Come Home*, and later the bleak working-class drama *Kes*. Chakelian (2016), in response to criticism, suggests that the indifferent reception to Loach’s film in some quarters is a telling insight into today’s society. The film itself is by all means open to criticism but the material, according to Chkelian, is meticulously researched.

Loach seems to make no secret of his political views, and has allowed his socialist values to help shape his film career from the outset (Ide, 2019). The hard-hitting dramas, portraying working class lives, appear to reflect a conscious attempt to try and encapsulate what he perceives as a permanent class struggle. The fundamental principles and integrity that Loach has strived to maintain throughout his career, has at times, resulted in Loach himself being somewhat of a pariah among his contemporaries. The marginalisation that sometimes arises when championing the underdog is perhaps a direct parallel to society, and may even be an inevitable, part of the process. Beresford (2016) argues that whilst the right-wing media are at times all-too-ready to participate in the dissemination of articles on benefit fraud, it is then the task of the left-wing leaning broadsheets to highlight the misery and reality of such reforms, dragging the debate back towards the centre ground.

Deranty (2004) proposes that personal conflict is essential to affecting change and breaking the cycle of social reproduction. Arguing that, through provocation, recognition can be achieved and that without recognition, there is little chance of emancipation. The way that poverty is presented, according to Nayar (2012), can be seen as controversial, especially for those seeking to appeal to a western audience. There is a fine line, he suggests, between sympathy and sensationalism. What is intended to be liberating, can often be misconstrued as profiteering. Hancock Fell (2017) states that even some of the larger non-profit organisations, who really should know better, have fallen foul of this. Celebrities too, such as Ed Sheeran, have been criticised for sensationalising poverty, with what has been referred to as ‘white saviour complex’.

Finding a balance between raising awareness of issues such as famine, without overstepping the mark into ‘poverty porn’ is a complex and contentious issue. It appears extremely difficult to interpret motive or agenda, without making sweeping judgements. It is perhaps then only fair, to judge people on their record rather than fleeting public perception. It would appear that the moral dilemma of helping the less fortunate, without appearing exploitative, is far from clear-cut. From the early examples of ‘poverty tourism’ to the contemporary spectacle of reality TV, the debate surrounding ‘poverty porn’ looks as though it is here to stay. A little over two hundred years on, and the evidence would appear to show little has changed.

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