

research snapshot

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The Study of Poverty Has a Long Connection to the History of Racism and Racial Knowledge

What is this research about?

Our understanding of poverty and social welfare today is shaped by the past. This includes both the historical occurrences, and the way they are interpreted, reviewed and studied. Often, the history of labour and poverty are looked at separately from colonial rule and the history of slavery and emancipation in the 19th century. This is a result of the way different academic disciplines have emerged and become authorities on how a topic is understood in both past and present times. Thus, academic disciplines continue to shape the policies and practices of government, and current ideas about the racialization of poverty that are disconnected from policies that target and harm poor and racialized women.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher sought out a genealogy of the study of poverty. She was interested in the way “poverty” became perceived as a problem, and the history of its study and interpretation. The researcher dealt with literature on the English poor laws, which introduced more “workhouses” to punish the unemployed, yet viewed these alongside anti-slavery arguments that stated labour must be free. At this time, Indigenous populations were being forcefully dispossessed of land and resources and viewed as problematic or external to the new economy. The researcher considered:

What you need to know:

Social welfare policies are shaped by the way poverty has been viewed in history. When social policies today are studied in separation from studying the past, it erases their long connection to race and the impact on women’s bodies.

- How are histories organized?
- How do they come to be separated in our study?
- What are the ongoing consequences of this separation?

The actual process for tracing the genealogy of poverty as a problem was broken down into 4 steps:

1. The first reading: Reading the literature with knowledge about the historical events, actors and politics of the time.
2. Reconciling the material: How did general attitudes and interpretations of the time period become viewed as truth (discourse)? And how did it become structured into specific areas of “study”?
3. Disciplines colonize: How did the literature and succeeding material on a topic become part of a specific field of study? And how did this shape the study of other disciplines?
4. Rupturing our knowledge compartments: how is a topic and a discipline produced over time, and

how does it come to be studied separately by other disciplines (losing an intersectional analysis).

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found there to be an important overlap between the literature on Great Britain's poor laws and the movement to get rid of slavery. Many political reformers were members of charitable and statistical societies, who developed strategies on learning about the habits of the "poor" and Indigenous peoples. Many of their studies borrowed from the ways in which 'data' was collected during the slave trade and dominant views about race. Welfare was discouraged on the basis that the poor's avoidance of work was equal to a slave's habit. Abolishing slavery was also deterred by those who worried about the "inevitable" growth of a poor (ex-slave) population.

In both instances, racial images and knowledge were used to claim that both the poor and racialized slaves were a perceived threat to the supremacy of being "white". With the perception of a problem on hand, this fuelled the interest in developing "value-free" (without bias) technologies that could measure society. Areas like statistics and population studies grew, and gave way to policies that attempted to control "natural reproduction". Experts worried about women's reproductive capacities in relation to the dangerous population growth of the poor in England while introducing the Amelioration Laws in the colonies. These laws enforced a "gradual" improvement of the conditions of slavery, as experts believed it would improve women's reproduction and allow for an increase in slave (and ex-slave) populations. The process of counting became a norm, as did population studies and statistics as disciplines that would serve economic growth and create policies that targeted the bodies and lives of racialized and poor women.

How can you use this research?

Educators and researchers may consider the insights offered by the research. It asks us to consider our dominant approaches to academic study and research, and reflect on the way we speak on certain issues. It also sheds insight on the real-life impact that the past has on our discourses.

About the Researcher

Anne O'Connell is Associate Professor for the School of Social Work at York University.

aoconnel@yorku.ca

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

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