**Assignment #III**

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Omega Graduate School

SR 968- 22 Sociological Methodology

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**Assignment #3 – Essay**

Complete the Hidden Threads assignment as detailed below and explained in class.

Requirements

1. Topic Selection and Approval:

a. Email your topic and a rough outline to Dr. Reichard for feedback and approval well in advance of the assignment due-date deadline. (president@ogs.edu)

b. Schedule a meeting with Dr. Reichard to review feedback. (president@ogs.edu)

c. After receiving approval of the topic and rough outline, submit a rough draft to Dr. Reichard in advance of the turn-in deadline (president@ogs.edu). He will provide the feedback necessary for preparing the final paper.

2. The Essay – This paper should be approximately 5-7 double-spaced pages in length and may be longer. Provide an appropriate (and interesting) title for your essay. Write a short paragraph introducing the reader to the topic you will explore in your paper (i.e., This paper explores both theological and sociological dimensions of the obesity epidemic in the United States...). Then, follow the steps listed below: (Develop each in paragraph form, and clearly explicate all concepts you will develop.) Follow this pattern and organize your work under headings, or using the numbers for the parts of the assignment listed below:

a. Identify a few concepts to be used for the interpretation of the problem you have chosen. (i.e., for a topic dealing with obesity, you might choose “hunger” or “emptiness.”) Define/explicate this concept(s), explaining how it will be employed in your analysis.

b. Identify sub-concepts that are related to the concepts you have chosen in #1.

(i.e., for obesity sub-concepts might include, “gratification,” “satisfaction,” etc.)

Define/explicate these sub-concepts, explaining how they offer additional

analysis of your chosen problem. This extends your analysis beyond #1,

offering additional depth and nuance.

c. Identify several biblical passages or concepts that provide meaning for

these concepts and sub-concepts? (Perhaps something that addressed “food

and drink that satisfy” ... or other passages that deal with such matters as

being “filled with the spirit, “gluttony,” “fasting,” “feasting,” etc.) Drawing on

these passages, and related theological ideas, explain their connection to the

d. concepts/sub-concepts you have employed in your analysis of the problem.

Note: this is not simply attaching Bible verses that “inspire” or “shed light on...”

Rather, the emphasis should center on the conceptual and analytical. (I’m not as interested in “normative” [Christians must... Christians should...] approaches.)

e. Identify secular (i.e., sociological) studies that utilize or address these

concepts and sub-concepts. (Supersize Me [a movie], The McDonaldization

of Society by George Ritzer, Studies on anorexia or bulimia, etc.) Use these

to develop your analysis sociologically. You can think of this as a very short

“literature review.”

f. Explain how your analysis aids /offers insight into contemporary life/society.

(i.e., the burgeoning fast-food industry, Western society’s focus on efficiency

and calculability, etc.) Where is your chosen problem “visible” in contemporary

society... what contemporary illustrations can you identify and briefly interpret

using some of the analysis developed in #1- #4)?

g. How does your analysis make a contribution to Christian thinking on the

topic/problem? (For example, understanding the relationship between

appetite, indulgence, and a life of the Spirit, and then extending these ideas to

areas other than just obesity and food.) What fresh new idea(s) can you offer

to fellow Christians?

h. How does your analysis make a contribution to sociological thinking about

this issue? Can you offer a new sociological insight or two derived from your

analysis?

**Introduction**

In 2023, approximately 36.8 million Americans lived in poverty, showcasing the persistent challenge of economic hardship in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, housing shortages, and wage stagnation have exacerbated these conditions, underscoring the need for immediate relief and systemic reform to address the root causes of poverty. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have historically been at the forefront of aiding vulnerable populations by addressing immediate needs and spiritual care. FBOs offer various services and programs, from emergency shelters and food banks to job training programs and educational initiatives. However, their impactful efforts raise critical questions about the sufficiency of charity-based approaches in addressing systemic barriers perpetuating poverty and inequality. It is important to note that poverty is more than the responsibility of one institution; many can contribute to improving outcomes for others.

This essay explores how FBOs address poverty through holistic interventions that integrate spiritual care and material support, examining their contributions and limitations within the framework of social inequality theory. This analysis will uncover “hidden threads” that connect faith-based action with the pursuit of social justice by weaving together sociological observations and biblical principles. This essay will consider whether FBOs’ efforts sufficiently challenge systemic barriers or primarily focus on immediate needs, drawing on biblical teachings and sociological theories to understand how faith-driven approaches can better align with the growing demands of an unequal society.

**Key Concepts**

Faith-based organizations operate at the intersection of spiritual care and practical social support, making them a unique entity in the fight against poverty. To critically analyze their contributions, it is essential to explore three primary concepts: faith-based intervention, social inequality, and community empowerment. These concepts frame the discussion on how FBOs address poverty, the “hidden threads” that connect faith-based action with the broader social structures that perpetuate inequality.

**Faith-Based Intervention**

Faith-based intervention refers to programs and initiatives led by FBOs that combine spiritual ministries with tangible assistance to alleviate poverty. Examples include food banks, emergency shelters, rent assistance programs, and childcare subsidies. These interventions often go beyond material support by addressing emotional and spiritual needs through pastoral counseling, support groups, and spiritual formation, fostering hope and resilience (Yeung, 2022). The dual approach of FBOs, combining faith-driven compassion with practical aid, is rooted in religious teachings, such as the biblical call to “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27, New International Version).

However, while these interventions provide immediate relief, their ability to address the systemic roots of poverty—and the moral responsibility of faith communities to engage in systemic change—remains a critical question. For instance, emergency shelters may provide temporary housing but fail to address the more significant issues of affordable housing shortages or discriminatory housing policies in communities (Johnsen et al., 2018). Later, we will explore how funding limitations and reliance on volunteers hinder FBOs’ capacity to address systemic issues effectively.

**Social Inequality**

Social inequality is a critical lens for understanding the systemic barriers that perpetuate poverty. It refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power based on race, class, and gender (Htun & Weldon, 2018). For many low-income communities, systemic issues like underfunded schools, labor market discrimination, and inadequate healthcare create significant obstacles to escaping poverty.

FBOs often step in to fill gaps left by governmental and secular systems, providing resources and support to marginalized populations while building social capital through networks of support within communities (Syed et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000). However, the broader question remains: Are these efforts enough to dismantle the structural inequalities that keep communities socially stratified? According to social inequality theory, addressing poverty requires individual assistance and systemic change to redistribute power and resources equitably (Weber, 1978).

**Community Empowerment**

Community empowerment is another central concept in the discussion of poverty alleviation. It fosters community self-sufficiency and resilience, enabling individuals to overcome systemic barriers. FBOs contribute to this process by offering job training programs, financial literacy courses, and access to educational opportunities beyond worship service (Yeung, 2022). By building social capital and networks of relationships that provide resources and support, FBOs create pathways for upward mobility (Putnam, 2000).

While FBOs empower communities, their effectiveness depends on their ability to challenge structural barriers. For example, while job training programs can improve employability, they may not address deeper issues such as wage disparities or labor market discrimination (Johnsen et al., 2018).

These three concepts, faith-based intervention, social inequality, and community empowerment—are deeply interconnected. Faith-based interventions provide immediate relief, while community empowerment initiatives aim for long-term self-sufficiency. However, both are limited by the persistence of social inequality, which FBOs should challenge.

**III. Biblical and Theological Perspectives**

Faith-based organizations draw heavily on biblical teachings and theological principles to inform their efforts in addressing poverty. These teachings provide a foundation for their work's charitable and justice-oriented aspects, motivating them to engage with marginalized populations and challenge systemic inequalities. This section explores key biblical passages and theological ideas underlying FBO initiatives, emphasizing their relevance to faith-based intervention, social inequality, and community empowerment.

James 1:27 emphasizes the importance of faith in action, stating, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (New International Version). This passage reflects FBOs' moral responsibility to care for the most vulnerable members of society. It serves as a call to action for FBOs to prioritize tangible support for impoverished individuals, aligning with faith-based intervention. However, while this passage highlights direct care, it challenges faith communities to move beyond charity and address the systemic causes of poverty that create such vulnerability.

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus states, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (New International Version). This teaching underscores the intrinsic value of every individual and the moral imperative to serve those in need. It aligns closely with FBO efforts to empower communities through job training, education, and advocacy, connecting spiritual care with material support. The passage also provides a theological basis for addressing social inequality, as it calls for active engagement with marginalized groups to promote dignity and justice.

The prophetic call in Amos 5:24, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (New International Version), emphasizes the importance of systemic justice over performative charity. This passage challenges FBOs to focus on immediate relief and long-term solutions to structural barriers. It serves as a theological foundation for community empowerment initiatives, urging FBOs to advocate for policies that address inequities.

Theologically, FBOs often view their work as a reflection of God’s love and justice, integrating compassion with advocacy for systemic change. For example, theology emphasizes the need for social justice and solidarity with the oppressed, encouraging faith communities to confront the root causes of inequality. Similarly, Christian ethics promote the idea that addressing poverty is not just a moral obligation but also a means of embodying faith in action. Too often, the faith community engages with policy reform through the efforts of an elected representative or forming alliances in some denominations in fighting social justice causes; however, marginalized communities or those that lack resources and capacity tend to stay away from this type of engagement.

**Connections to Key Concepts**

Biblical teachings provide a framework for FBOs to address the interconnected concepts of faith-based intervention, social inequality, and community empowerment: Passages like James 1:27 emphasize caring for the vulnerable, inspire direct action such as food banks and shelters, and demonstrate compassion for needy individuals. The Teachings of Amos and Matthew show the need to confront systemic barriers and advocate for justice-oriented policies that address the root causes of social inequality. Furthermore, theological principles of dignity and self-sufficiency align with FBO programs that aim to empower individuals through education and skill-building, fostering community empowerment.

Grounding their efforts in biblical teachings, FBOs bring a unique spiritual dimension, blending faith-driven compassion with action. However, these teachings also challenge FBOs to critically assess their role in addressing immediate needs and the systemic injustices contributing to poverty. FBOs should balance providing direct aid and working toward systemic change to address poverty and inequities in partnership with others.

**IV. Secular Studies and Sociological Perspectives**

Faith-based organizations play a significant role in addressing poverty, but it is critical to evaluate their efforts alongside secular perspectives that offer broader sociological and empirical insights (Syed et al., 2023); Johnsen et al., 2018; Htun & Weldon, 2018; Putnam, 2000). These perspectives show the complexities of poverty and the need for multifaceted solutions beyond providing immediate relief to the problems and challenges of others.

According to secular studies, one factor is the importance of trust in community or community engagement. Syed et al. (2023) emphasize the critical role of trust-building in connecting marginalized communities to essential services. FBOs, often embedded within communities and guided by love, empathy, and compassion principles, are well-positioned to foster this trust. This resonates with the biblical principle of “loving your neighbor as yourself,” which underscores the importance of genuine care and relationship-building in addressing poverty (NIV, n.d.). However, Syed et al. (2023) also caution that trust alone is insufficient to dismantle systemic barriers to opportunities from those of a white race and brown race; the same access and opportunities are not fair in most cases across the spectrum. This finding underscores the need for FBOs to move beyond charitable acts and engage in systemic advocacy to address the root causes of poverty.

This need for systemic change is further emphasized by Htun and Weldon (2018), who examine how structural inequities rooted in race, class, and gender perpetuate poverty. They argue that addressing social inequality requires individual assistance, policy reforms, and resource redistribution. This challenges the traditional charity-based models often employed by FBOs, which may focus primarily on immediate relief rather than long-term solutions. Johnsen et al. (2018) illustrate this challenge in their study of FBOs addressing homelessness. While FBOs provide critical services and support, these interventions often fail to address systemic issues, limiting their ability to offer sustainable solutions. I have seen these dynamics throughout my career and as a Youth Pastor of several churches in poverty deserts in the southern parts of the United States in Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

The limitation of FBOs in tackling systemic barriers is further illuminated by sociologist Max Weber's (1978) theory of social stratification, which addresses the unequal distribution of power and resources in society. This unequal distribution creates systemic barriers that FBOs, often operating with limited resources and relying heavily on volunteers and donors, cannot easily overcome and leave some only to do the best they can. I have also seen in practice that in many bi-vocational or working jobs other than being a full-time Pastor, leaders in religious institutions did not allow them to have the time, resources, staff, and structure to uplift these systemic barriers. For instance, while FBOs may offer job training programs, they cannot often address broader labor market inequities such as wage gaps or employment discrimination.

Despite these limitations, FBOs possess unique community-building strengths, which can be leveraged to promote social change. Robert Putnam’s (2000) concept of social capital shows the importance of fostering relationships and networks within marginalized communities. With their strong community ties and emphasis on spiritual support, FBOs are well-positioned to build social capital and empower communities to advocate for their needs. However, Putnam (2000) also cautions that social capital alone is insufficient; it must be paired with institutional support to produce lasting results and overall change. This shows the importance of collaboration between FBOs and secular organizations to address poverty's immediate needs and systemic causes.

In conclusion, secular studies provide valuable insights that complement and challenge the service of FBOs. They emphasize their need to balance their focus on immediate relief with efforts to address systemic inequalities. By integrating these sociological perspectives with their theological motivations, FBOs can develop more comprehensive and practical strategies to alleviate poverty and promote social justice.

**V. Faith-Based and Secular Approaches**

Faith-based organizations have contributed to poverty alleviation by integrating spiritual care with material support. Their holistic approach provides crucial aid and fosters a sense of hope within communities. However, a comprehensive assessment necessitates critically examining their strengths, limitations, and the broader systemic challenges they encounter in addressing the root causes of poverty. This section will analyze the impact of FBOs, considering their valuable contributions and inherent limitations in tackling systemic inequalities.

**Contributions of FBOs**

FBOs excel in addressing immediate needs within marginalized communities. Their ability to provide food, shelter, rent assistance, and job training programs has made them indispensable in areas where governmental support is insufficient. Studies such as the one conducted by Syed et al. (2023) underscore the trust that FBOs build with vulnerable populations, which enhances their reach and effectiveness in delivering services. This trust, coupled with their embeddedness in local communities, allows FBOs to serve as intermediaries between needy individuals and larger support systems. Furthermore, FBO’s emphasis on spiritual care offers a unique dimension to poverty alleviation. Yeung (2022) shows how spiritual guidance and emotional resilience contribute to holistic healing, enabling individuals to address the psychological toll of poverty. Programs that combine material aid with counseling and spiritual formation often foster a sense of hope and empowerment among participants.

**Limitations and Barriers**

Despite their significant contributions, FBOs encounter limitations in addressing the root causes of poverty. Their reliance on charity models often leads to a focus on immediate relief rather than systemic change. While food banks and shelters provide essential services, they do not address underlying issues (Johnsen et al., 2018). This can inadvertently create dependency rather than foster long-term solutions. Additionally, FBOs often operate with limited funding and rely on volunteers, restricting their capacity to scale operations and work on systemic barriers. This limits their ability to effect broader societal change and create an environment conducive to overcoming poverty.

**Social Challenges**

The persistence of systemic barriers hinders FBOs' efforts. As Weber’s (1978) theory of social stratification suggests, power and resources are unequally distributed in society, making it challenging for FBOs to dismantle entrenched inequalities. Collaboration with organizations and policymakers is essential to overcome these barriers and create change.

One effective strategy for FBOs is to partner with secular organizations that possess resources and expertise that complement their strengths. By collaborating with organizations experienced in policy advocacy, research, or program development, FBOs can expand their capacity to address systemic issues. For example, partnering with a community development organization could help an FBO advocate for affordable housing policies or develop job training programs that address specific market needs.

When forming partnerships, carefully considering the alignment of values and missions is important. While collaborating with diverse organizations can be beneficial, FBOs should prioritize partnerships that share their commitment to social justice and community empowerment. This ensures that collaborative efforts effectively contribute to positive change and avoid inadvertently reinforcing harmful practices or systems.

Another strategy for FBOs is investing in capacity building. By expanding their funding sources and professionalizing their staff, FBOs can strengthen their infrastructure and increase their ability to engage in advocacy work. This might involve seeking grants, developing fundraising strategies, or providing professional development opportunities for staff.

Furthermore, FBOs can enhance their impact by focusing on systemic advocacy beyond direct service provision. While direct services are essential for meeting immediate needs, advocating for policy changes that address the root causes of poverty is critical for creating better solutions and practices. This could involve partnering with advocacy groups, educating policymakers, or mobilizing community members to support policy reform that promotes economic justice and social equity.

**Balancing Charity and Justice**

The tension between charity-based models and justice-oriented approaches remains a critical issue for FBOs. While acts of charity are essential for meeting immediate needs, a greater emphasis on systemic justice is necessary to create long-term solutions. FBOs must balance their compassionate work with efforts to address the structural barriers perpetuating inequality, as exemplified by Amos 5:24’s call for justice to “roll on like a river.” This requires a shift in focus from alleviating the symptoms of poverty to actively challenging and transforming the systems that sustain it. By embracing a justice-oriented approach, FBOs can move beyond temporary relief and contribute to lasting social change that empowers individuals and communities to break free from the cycle of poverty.

**VI. Insights and Contributions**

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) play a unique role in poverty alleviation, blending spiritual care, material support, and community-building efforts. FBOs contribute significantly to both Christian theology and sociological understanding. However, it is important to look more in-depth into the contributions of both Christianity and from a sociological perspective.

**Christian Contributions**

FBOs embody the biblical call to serve others, acting as instruments of faith in action. Their efforts highlight several critical theological considerations. First, the prophetic call for justice in Amos 5:24 challenges Christians to view justice as an integral part of their faith, moving beyond simple acts of charity to address systemic inequities actively. This theological perspective encourages FBOs to balance compassion with advocacy, emphasizing justice-oriented approaches to poverty alleviation.

Second, Matthew 25:40 underscores the moral imperative to uplift marginalized communities. By integrating spiritual care into their programs, FBOs meet immediate needs and foster hope, resilience, and dignity among participants. This holistic approach recognizes the interconnectedness of material, emotional, and spiritual well-being in overcoming poverty.

James 1:27 inspires direct action in addressing poverty while raising questions about faith communities' moral responsibility to tackle systemic barriers. This reflection calls on Christians to embrace a holistic ministry that combines service, advocacy, and community empowerment. These theological perspectives encourage Christians to assess their role in addressing poverty and inspire new ways to integrate spiritual and systemic solutions.

**Sociological Contributions**

From a sociological standpoint, FBOs offer several valuable insights. Firstly, Robert Putnam’s concept of social capital finds practical application in FBOs' work. By fostering trust and relationships with marginalized communities, FBOs create networks that promote collective action and resource sharing. However, the effectiveness of these networks depends on their integration with more extensive institutional support. Therefore, FBOs must work to connect the social capital they generate with broader support systems to ensure sustainable change.

Secondly, Syed et al. (2023) shared that FBOs are intermediaries between the people and government or secular organizations. This dual role enhances access to resources and reveals challenges in navigating power dynamics and systemic barriers. FBOs must be mindful of these power dynamics and actively work to ensure that their efforts empower communities rather than reinforce existing inequalities.

Finally, it contributes to the broader sociological discourse by demonstrating the intersection of faith and social change. Their efforts to address housing, employment, and education inequalities showcase how faith-driven initiatives can influence public policy and societal attitudes. This showcases the potential for FBOs to act as catalysts for social change, advocating for policies and practices that promote justice and equality.

The intersection of theological and sociological perspectives reveals that faith-based action relates to system change. By drawing on biblical teachings and social theories, FBOs can deepen their impact, addressing immediate needs and poverty's root causes. Collaborative efforts with others provide an opportunity to amplify these contributions, leveraging the strengths of each approach.

The impact of FBOs presents opportunities for innovation and growth. FBOs can expand into advocacy roles by implementing policy reform addressing systemic inequities. Collaborating with secular organizations can enhance the scalability of faith-based initiatives, allowing them to reach more people and have a more significant impact. FBOs can also lead the way in reframing poverty alleviation as a dual effort of charity and systemic justice, setting an example for faith communities and secular organizations. By integrating theological and sociological insights, FBOs can evolve into transformative agents of change, addressing poverty not only as a symptom but also because of systemic inequity.

**Conclusion**

This essay has explored the role of faith-based organizations in addressing poverty, examining their contributions and limitations through the lens of social inequality theory. By integrating biblical principles with sociology, the analysis has sought to uncover faith-based action in pursuing social justice in an unequal society.

FBOs offer a holistic approach to poverty alleviation, combining spiritual care with practical support to address immediate needs and long-term empowerment. They provide spiritual care and physical services such as counseling, food, shelter, and job training while fostering community engagement and advocating for system change. However, their impact is often constrained by limited resources, reliance on charity models, and the persistence of systemic barriers.

FBOs should embrace a balanced approach that combines compassionate aid with justice-oriented advocacy to enhance effectiveness. This involves collaborating with secular organizations and policymakers to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. By integrating theological and sociological approaches, FBOs can evolve into transformative agents of change, contributing to a more just and equitable society where all individuals can thrive.

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