

Causal Attributions for Poverty and their Correlates

FLORA G. GENERALAO

University of the Philippines, Cebu College

The causal attribution for poverty and its dimensions and correlates were examined in a survey of 373 housewives from depressed rural ($n = 145$) and urban ($n = 228$) areas in Iligan City. Results showed that the respondents judged the cause of their condition as internal but were equivocal about its stability and controllability. They appraised their condition positively. Older and elementary educated respondents judged the cause of their condition as uncontrollable and permanent. Elementary educated respondents judged the cause as internal while rural respondents judged it as uncontrollable. Their positive appraisals of their condition were significantly associated with their judgments of internal locus, permanence, and uncontrollability of its cause.

Social perceivers employ the attribution process in determining causal explanations for behaviors and outcomes. Questions that probe into people's perceived causes of outcomes as well as unexpected, negative, and threatening events can set into motion this process (e.g., Enzle & Schopflocher, 1978; Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Several content domains (i.e., achievement, helping, depression, and poverty) utilize the attributional framework. In the domain of poverty, foreign studies typically ask respondents to rate the importance of different explanations for poverty and analyze the responses using factor analysis (e.g., Feagin, 1972; Feather, 1974; Morcol, 1997; Smith & Stone, 1989; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In comparison, the few local studies on perceived cause of poverty

use an open-ended question that ask people why they are poor and analyze their responses according to categories and frequencies (e.g., Decaesstecker, 1978; Gonzaga, 1984; Gonzales, 1977). Results of foreign studies consistently reveal three types of poverty explanations: individualistic-personal dispositions and behaviors of the poor; structural-socioeconomic forces; and fatalistic-luck, fate, God and other chance factors. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler (2001) added the subculture of poverty explanation (e.g., breakdown of the nuclear family, bad schools, being born into a poor family).

Antecedents of Poverty Attribution

Causal attributions for poverty vary according to dominant values and beliefs and sociodemographic variables (e.g., Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Feagin, 1972; Forgas, Furnham & Frey, 1988; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Morcol, 1997; Smith & Stone, 1989; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Respondents from individualist cultures like the United States endorse more person-centered implicit theories for poverty. In the pioneering study of Feagin for example, majority of Americans attributed poverty to individualistic factors such as the poor's lack of thrift and proper management, lack of effort, and loose morals and drunkenness. Subsequent studies corroborated this finding (e.g., Cozzarelli, et al.; Kluegel & Smith; Smith & Stone). This preference for individualistic explanations among Americans is seen as a reflection of their belief in the Protestant ethic, which stresses hard work, competition, and reward.

On the other hand, the Australian respondents in Feather's study (1974) assigned more importance to both personal misfortunes (sickness and physical handicap) and structural factors (failure to provide good schools, exploitation of the poor by the rich). The Turkish respondents of Morcol (1997) favored structural explanations such as the socioeconomic system, income distribution, and unemployment. In the Turkish society, state and society are the main sources of power and influence in the

lives of its citizens. Poor Filipinos explained their condition as a result of low income, lack of education and skills, many children, unemployment and lack of job opportunities, misfortune to be poor, and external forces which they have no control (e.g., Decaesstecker, 1978; Gonzaga, 1984; Gonzales, 1977).

Beliefs and values. Studies generally show that respondents with high levels of political conservatism, belief in a just world, and social dominance orientation explain poverty in individualistic terms (e.g., Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Harper & Manasse, 1992; Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo, 1994; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In addition, Zucker and Weiner found that the type of cause endorsed was associated with the perceived responsibility for poverty. Conservatives who endorsed individualistic explanations attributed more responsibility to the poor while Liberals emphasized external forces like government policies and economic domination of a few.

Socio-demographic variables. Studies that examine variations in causal poverty attributions as a function of race, social class, gender, and age have produced checkered results. White participants made internal attributions more than non-white participants and non-white participants made more external attributions than white participants (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Cozzarelli, et al., 2001). In contrast, Hunt (1996) reported that Blacks and Latinos rated both individualistic and structural explanations as more important than did Whites. Black respondents specifically cited low wages, poor schools, and prejudice.

Middle-class respondents endorsed with greater frequency internal attributions for poverty while poor respondents favored structural explanations (e.g., Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Feagin, 1972; Furnham, 1983; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Singh, 1989). In contrast, Morcol (1997) found that both poor and non-poor respondents favored structural explanations with the former endorsing fatalistic explanations more than the latter. Morcol also found that

respondents with a higher level of education preferred structural explanations like socio-economic system and income distribution.

Kluegel and Smith (1986) reported few gender differences in the attributions made for poverty. Feagin (1972) and Morcol (1997) however, found women favoring more individualistic explanations while Stacey and Singer (1985) found men favoring societal causes.

Except for the study of Griffin and Oheneba-Sakyi (1993), studies that examined age as a variable for causal poverty attribution produce significant but inconsistent results. In some studies, younger respondents including children cited individualistic factors (Alston & Dean, 1972; Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Jhaveri & Ng, 1989). In other studies, older respondents endorsed more individualistic explanations compared to younger respondents (Feagin, 1972; Feather, 1974; Morcol, 1997). The older respondents in the study of Cozzarelli, et al. made more cultural and external attributions than younger respondents while the older respondents in Morcol's study emphasized fatalistic explanations in addition to individualistic ones.

Causal Attributions for Poverty and Affect

The process of causal attribution generates differentiated emotional responses (Weiner, 1985). Extant studies that relate dimensions of causal poverty attribution to affect generally evince consistent results. Respondents who favored structural and economic forces to explain poverty expressed positive affect toward the poor, positive stereotype about the poor, and willingness to help the poor (e.g., Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Feagin, 1972; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Smith & Stone, 1989; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Respondents who endorsed internal causes reported negative stereotypes about the poor and negative attitudes toward helping them. Zucker and Weiner found that respondents who favored internal causes imputed control to the poor for their condition, blamed them for their disadvantaged positions, and consequently expressed more anger and less pity.

Purposes of the Study

Most of the studies abroad focus on middle-class stereotypes about the poor and their causal attributions for poverty (e.g., Bullock, 1995; Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). There is a dearth of studies on how the poor themselves explain and emotionally assess their living condition. Moreover, studies that focus on poor women are almost nil. In their review of the Psychology literature, Saris and Johnston-Robledo (2000) concluded that poor women are relatively invisible in mainstream Psychology. In the Philippines, the need to study poor women is even more compelling as they usually bear the brunt of poverty. The management of their households mainly rests on them (e.g., Decaesstecker, 1978; Gonzales, 1977). This study aims to know how they perceive the cause of their living condition and judge its dimensions according to its locus, stability, and controllability. It also aims to determine how these judgments correlate with socio-demographic variables (place of origin, age, educational attainment) and their feelings about their condition.

METHOD

Participants

Three hundred seventy three housewives from rural ($n=145$) and urban ($n=228$) depressed areas in Iligan City participated in the study. Their mean age was 37.96 ($SD=12.79$) with 78 as the oldest and 18 as the youngest. These women had an average of 4.35 children ($SD=0.8$). Almost all of the rural women relied on farming as their family's main source of income. The urban women depended on vending and employment in the service sector. Majority of the rural and urban women reached elementary and high school respectively.

Materials and Procedure

This study is part of a larger study on the social-psychological dimensions of poverty. Participants were individually interviewed about their socio-demographic characteristics, perceived cause of their living condition, the dimensions of the cause, and their emotional appraisal of their condition.

Unlike previous studies that derived the dimensions of the perceived cause from the results of factor analysis, this study examined the respondents' direct assessment of the causal dimensions. Five-point horizontal numeric scales were used to assess locus (1=internal and 5=external), controllability (1=cannot do anything and 5=can do something) and stability (1=permanent and 5=temporary).

A seven item 5-point bipolar scale was used to measure attribution-dependent affects (contentment, happiness, shame, guilt, fairness, hopefulness, and anger). These were culled from the work of Weiner (1985) in the achievement setting. The coefficient alpha for the scale excluding hopefulness was .79. Hopefulness correlated negatively with the overall affect score.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings

Respondents cited job (31.64%), income (16.89%), God and fate (16.09%) as causes of their living condition. They also cited education (9.6%) economic and weather problems (8.8%), effort (8.3%), and peace in the family (4.02%). Both rural and urban respondents cited job and income while only the urban respondents cited individual effort and high prices of goods and commodities. Rural respondents cited the weather and God. For both rural and urban respondents, their jobs and those of their husbands were unstable, menial, and low paying.

Majority of the respondents attributed the cause of their living condition to the self ($M=2.33$, $SD=1.28$) but were relatively

undecided in their judgments of the controllability ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.06$) and stability ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.14$) of the cause. They appraised their living condition positively ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .81$). Specifically, they felt an absence of shame ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .80$), of regret ($M = 3.98$, $SD = .81$), and of disgust ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .84$) about their living condition. They were in fact happy about it ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .68$) but were relatively undecided about their level of contentment ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .96$).

Correlations among Socio-demographic Variables and Causal Dimensions

Locus of causality. Except for education, the respondents' judgments of locus of causality were not significantly related to their place of origin and age (Table 1). Elementary educated respondents were significantly less likely to judge the cause of their living condition to external factors (*Standard Normal Deviate* = -2.46, $p < .01$). High school educated respondents were more likely to judge the cause of their outcomes to external factors (*Standard Normal Deviate* = 3.08, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Socio-demographic Variables Associated with the Dimensions of the Perceived Cause

| Variables | Locus | | | Controllability | | | Stability | | |
|-----------------|-------|----------|--------------|-----------------|----------|--------------|-----------|----------|--------------|
| | d.f. | χ^2 | Cramer V/rho | d.f. | χ^2 | Cramer V/rho | d.f. | χ^2 | Cramer V/rho |
| Place of Origin | 2 | .02 | .008 | 2 | 6.35 | .13* | 2 | 4.87 | .11 |
| Education | 4 | 12.27 | .13* | 4 | 36.11 | .22** | 4 | 16.02 | .15** |
| Age | 371 | | -.07 | 371 | | -.18** | 371 | | -.20** |

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Note: Dimensions were measured by 5-point horizontal numeric scale with 5 representing external for locus; "can do something" for controllability and changeable for stability.

Controllability of the cause. Place of origin, education, and age were significantly associated with the controllability of the perceived

cause of their condition (see Table 1). There were significantly more urban women who perceived the cause as controllable (*Standard Normal Deviate* = 2.51, $p < .05$) compared to rural women. Similarly, there were significantly more college-educated respondents who believed that they can do something about the cause (*Standard Normal Deviate* = 4.98, $p < .01$). Elementary educated respondents were less likely to judge the cause as within their control (*Standard Normal Deviate* = -4.60, $p < .01$). Younger women meanwhile, were more likely to consider the cause as something within their control.

Stability. Age and education were significantly associated with the respondents' judgments of the stability of the cause. The older respondents were more likely to consider the cause as permanent. A significant number of college educated respondents considered the cause as transient (*Standard Normal Deviate* = 2.94, $p < .01$) while a significant number of elementary educated respondents considered the cause as permanent (*Standard Normal Deviate* = 2.98, $p < .01$).

Correlations among the Dimensions of the Perceived Cause and Affect

Respondents' feelings of contentment and happiness in relation to their living condition were not significantly associated with their judgments of the dimensions of the perceived cause of their condition (Please see Table 2). There were significant associations though among the dimensions of the perceived cause and their overall affective reactions to their condition, and their feelings of shame, regret, fairness, disgust, and hopefulness.

Internal conceptions of the cause were significantly associated with a sense of fairness and an absence of disgust regarding their living condition. Judgments of permanence and uncontrollability were significantly associated with their overall positive assessment of their condition, with a sense of fairness, and with the absence of shame, regret, and disgust. These however, were associated with feelings of hopelessness.

Table 2. Correlations Among Affect Measures and Dimensions of the Perceive Cause

| Affect | Location | Stability | Controllability |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|
| Contentment | -.09 | -.07 | -.03 |
| Happiness | -.09 | -.02 | -.04 |
| Absence of Shame | -.06 | -.21** | -.22** |
| Absence of Regret | -.05 | -.26** | -.15** |
| Sense of Fairness | -.13* | -.15** | -.16** |
| Absence of Disgust | -.13* | -.17** | -.16** |
| Total | -.13* | -.20** | -.20** |
| Hopefulness | .04 | .27** | .26** |

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Note: All were measured by 5-point horizontal numeric scales with 5 representing the positive ends for the affect; external for locus, and changeable for stability and can do a lot for controllability.

DISCUSSION

The respondents' causal attributions for their living condition reflect what is salient in their context. They latched onto content-based causes (job, income, God, the weather) that easily come to mind. Urban respondents cited problems of the economy as their day-to-day survival is hinged on their purchasing power. In comparison, rural respondents cited the weather as a causative factor since they are dependent on farming for survival. Overall, their implicit theories for poverty are similar to previous studies (e.g., Feagin, 1972; Furnham, 1974; Morcol, 1997). They however, put less emphasis on personal dispositions and behaviors and cited more frequently God, fate, and peace within the family.

The respondents generally judged the cause of their condition as internal. This does not corroborate the results of previous studies where poor respondents favored external explanations (e.g., Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, et al., 2001; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Morcol, 1997). This disparity is probably a result of a difference in methodology. This study directly assessed their judgments of locus of causality while previous studies derived this dimension theoretically.

The respondents' penchance for internal locus of causality may be a form of control. By attributing the cause to the self, they can readily explain their condition and hopefully, predict and control the cause in the future. Moreover, an internal attribution is probably a reflection of their sense of inadequacy brought about by their lack of education and skills. In fact, there were significantly more elementary educated respondents who judged the cause as internal compared to those who reached high school and college.

The younger and the college educated respondents judged the cause of their living condition as transient compared to the older and elementary educated respondents. Long term poverty generates a sense of helplessness about one's condition. This helplessness is exacerbated by the fact that one does not have the tools and the skills to do something about one's condition.

Despite their material deprivation, the respondents appraised their condition positively. This overall positive affect is significantly associated with their judgments of an internal locus, uncontrollability, and permanence of the cause of their living condition. They have accepted their material deprivation. This means that they have probably lowered their standards and are not hopeful anymore about changing their condition. It is possible that for these women, life is acceptable as long as they are able to meet their daily food requirements.

CONCLUSION

Poverty does not necessarily mean misery. These women generally assessed their living condition positively and thus, have embraced their material deprivation. This apparent acceptance of deprivation is more palpable among the older and the elementary educated respondents. The young and the high school and college educated respondents still see opportunities to improve their living condition.

This positive affect for their condition is significantly associated with their judgments of an internal locus, permanence, and

uncontrollability of the cause of their condition. As such, they may lack the incentive to engage in instrumental actions to change their condition. They may rely on stopgap measures, short-term financial help, and patronage that could lead to dependency. Poverty intervention programs therefore, should seriously consider the poor's cognitions and affects.

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