

The Layering of Poverty Attribution among Disadvantaged Groups in the Developing World

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Abstract

Majority of poverty attribution studies have been on middle class adults from developed countries. Where cross cultural studies were extended to developing countries, samples were of those not experiencing poverty directly. Possibilities of extending generalizations across cultures have therefore been difficult. A modified index was administered on a sample (n=383) from Badia, a low income community in Lagos. The result showed that poverty attribution was understandable in terms of respondents' Social and Economic Status. However, while the result confirmed earlier findings that disadvantaged persons adopted structural attributions for poverty, it was shown, that the disadvantaged are likely to combine fatalistic and structural attributions in compromise explanations. The result therefore challenges past neglect of fatalistic explanations.

Keywords: Split consciousness; causal attribution, Dual consciousness, poverty.

1. Introduction

Seekings (2005: 1) noted that a plethora of studies interested in attitudes toward distributive justice, poverty and inequality has been conducted in 'societies of North America and Western Europe' which have lower levels of poverty and inequality. Studies of poverty attribution have been limited to samples from middle classes and university students from these countries with very few exceptions (e.g. Wollie, 2009; Nasser *et al.*, 2005). Often, where they have been done in the developing world, they were cross cultural studies comparing attribution between the global north and south (e.g. Hine and Montiel, 1999; Bolitho *et al.*, 2007). Even where this was the case, samples have included middle class citizens of the developing countries concerned or students. Most studies conducted have therefore been on people who were not experiencing poverty directly. As Shek (2003) noted, to date, there has been no study of how poor people view poverty.

Harper (2003: 188) argued that social scientists continue covert 'victim blaming' by conducting studies on the poor, while neglecting studies on the rich, likening this to Ross' (1977) 'attribution error'. While Harper (2003) made this assertion in respect to over 30 years of attribution research, it is clear that most attribution studies conducted so far have been on middle class persons, mostly from advantaged social groups (Shek, 2003). Contrary to Harper's (2003) argument therefore, it is clear that attribution studies have rather made an attribution error by neglecting the view of the poor of poverty and how such attributions shape legitimization and action. As Bolitho *et al* (2007) argued, focusing on a limited range of western countries runs the risk of generalizing to different national contexts such as developing countries. Many studies in USA have revealed the salience of 'individualism (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Smith and Stone, 1989). Hunt (1996) however showed that individualistic philosophies are not all encompassing because Americans differ in attitudes according to race and geographical locations. Robinson (2009) demonstrated how American beliefs could be understood on the basis of an individualist-structural continuum on which attributions and legitimization could be located. As most studies were conducted in more secular western societies, the salience of fatalistic explanations has been obliterated. As Lepianka *et al* (2009: 426) noted, in most studies, fatalistic attributions generated low adherence (e.g. Smith and Stone, 1989; Feagin, 1975; Cozzarelli *et al*, 2001). Many studies therefore focused on individual and structural explanations downplaying the importance of fatalism. This underlines the need for research that acknowledges the historical, social and political contexts of different countries (Shirazi and Biel, 2005; Bolitho *et al.*, 2007).

The salience of fatalistic attribution is discernable from its possible influence on possible action. When structural factors are layered with fatalistic factors, people perceive structure as causing poverty but at the same time that fate plays a role. Robinson (2009) argued that there is not much action possible (or policy implication) for belief in 'bad luck' or 'God's will'. While fatalism is neither individual nor structural, studies in western societies where 'traditionalism' and religion is on decline underplay its value as an explanatory factor. Robinson (2009: 497) summarized the presumption of

western scholars when he proposed that '*research on mechanisms legitimating structured inequality may be most fruitful on how strongly people hold individualistic or structural attributions*'. As most studies of attribution have been in the developed world, scholars have therefore reported the influence of attribution on the views of the middle classes regarding assistance to the poor. Perhaps in the developing world, perceptions by the poor may have different consequences for the poor's responses to their situation.

2. Lay Explanations for Poverty

Feagin (1972: 101-129) advanced three categories of attributions of poverty:

1. Individualistic: Attributing responsibility for poverty to the poor themselves, including lack of thrift, effort, loose morals.
2. Structural: Encompassing the external and economic forces, including wages, access to good education, lack of jobs, and discrimination.
3. Fatalistic: Entailing forces beyond individuals' control, including; bad luck, illness.

Feagin's study has been replicated (e.g. Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Hunt, 2004; Bullock, 2006; Nasser et al., 2002; Bolitho et al., 2007; Hine and Montiel, 1999; Shek, 2003; Robinson, 2009; Nasser et al., 2005; Wollie, 2009). Feagin's (1972) work has therefore formed the basis for current studies regarding attributions of poverty. In virtually all studies, poverty attributions have been correlated with respondents' social and economic characteristics, ideological and political orientations. Studies showed that attribution of poverty is correlated with economic self interests; respondents who ascribe poverty to individual characteristics are more likely to be of higher incomes and ideologically conservative (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Conversely however, respondents who attribute poverty to structural inequality are more poetically liberal (Hunt, 2004). Economically advantaged groups (whites, men) attribute poverty to individualistic factors while disadvantaged groups (minorities, women) attribute poverty to external or structural factors, thus indicating a correlation between attributions, sex, and race (Feagin, 1972; Nasser et al., 2002). Individual attribution has also been correlated with age and type of academic training (Guimond et al., 1989), race (Hunt, 1996), gender-related social roles and social power (Shirazi and Biel, 2005) and class (Nasser, 2007). However, contrary to expectation, education has been found to be positively correlated with structural attribution; education, it is argued, has an enlightening effect, as higher education enhances awareness of inequality and consequently evokes compassion toward the disadvantaged (Hunt, 1996).

3. Objective of the Study

Many studies of poverty attribution have thus been on people who were not experiencing poverty directly. There is therefore, a neglect of the need to understand the attributions of the 'really' poor of poverty. A study of the attribution of the poor in Badia, a low income community (otherwise, slum) in Lagos Nigeria therefore enhances the understanding of the perception of the poor of causes of poverty. Attribution of causes of poverty has been linked to respondents' Social Economic Status (SES) (Kluegel and Smith, 1986). Studies in western societies have found that disadvantaged people are likely to combine structural and individual attributions in compromise explanations (Hunt, 1996; Bobo, 1991). The main objective of the study therefore was to investigate empirically if the SES hypothesis is valid for a sample of respondents in the developing world who are actually experiencing poverty, and if there are possible variations in combinations of explanations from the widely held individual – structural continuum (Robinson, 2009) which has been widely reported in many studies in the global north. Consequently, an increased number of items eliciting fatalistic beliefs were included in the research instrument to test if the fatalistic attribution type truly existed as an explanatory construct in the developing world.

4. Research Methods

I conducted a survey with a sample size of 383. The sample size was determined using the *Raosoft* sample size calculator online ([@http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html](http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html)), based on a standard error margin of 5%, a 95% confidence level and a 50% response distribution and estimated population of Badia of 120,000 (NPC, 1997). Data was collected using a questionnaire that required respondents to rate 38 items on causes of poverty on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, (where 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree). Highest possible score was 190, while lowest was 38. Higher scores meant higher agreements with item. Data was analyzed using Principal Components Analysis (PCA) and bivariate correlation.

5. Results

Results of PCA shows that factor analysis was an appropriate extraction method for the data obtained given a Kaiser Meyer- Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy of 0.802 and Bartlett Test of Sphericity (BTS) $X^2 = 6612.03$ ($df = 300$), $p < .001$. This indicates a relationship between rotated variables and sample size adequacy. Two stages of factor analyses were run. In the first stage, factor analysis produced *eigen* values for the 38 items. In the next stage, PCA was repeated excluding thirteen items whose *eigen* values were lower than of 0.05, and thus contributing insignificantly to factor loading. Varimax rotation was applied on the remaining 25 items extracting three factors; individual, fatalistic and structural attributions of poverty.

Table 1: Rotated component matrix, mean and SD of attribution factors

	Components			Mean	SD
	1	2	3		
Poor people don't plan	.832			2.08	1.14
Poor people waste resources/do not save	.811			1.89	1.08
Poor people lack motivation/efforts to improve themselves	.782			2.04	1.04
Poor people lack sexual control	.766			1.96	0.98
People are poor because they are lazy	.764			1.95	1.06
The poor lack talents or skills	.755			2.27	1.12
Poor people have low intelligence	.732			1.82	0.95
The poor lack ambition	.696			2.19	1.16
The world is just: People get what they deserve	.602			2.05	1.00
People have the same chances to succeed	.530			2.09	1.10
People's occupations are a calling from God		.798		3.54	1.18
Successful ones are the chosen ones of God		.756		3.41	1.34
The poor have bad destiny		.728		3.12	1.43
Poverty is the result of evil works of enemies		.685		3.13	1.17
Some people will be rewarded on earth; others in heaven		.651		3.86	0.95
Success depends on luck		.649		2.91	1.14
Life chances are spiritually determined		.636		3.78	1.08
There is heaven where things will be better than on earth		.609		4.19	0.85
The Government is inefficiently run			.828	3.81	1.25
The government is corrupt/ dishonest			.818	3.87	1.36
Employers are not paying enough			.744	4.08	0.94
Government does not provide enough good Jobs			.740	3.53	1.47
Western capitalists are the cause of poverty and underdevelopment in Nigeria			.649	3.29	1.30
Government is not providing enough access to education			.548	3.99	0.97

As table 1 indicates, factor loading for individual attribution ranged from 0.832 for the item 'poor people don't plan' to 0.530 for the item 'people have the same chances to succeed'. However, with the highest mean rating of 2.27 the item 'poor people lack talent/skills' is the most important item in explaining individual attribution. Factor loading for fatalistic attribution ranged from 0.798 for the item 'people's occupations are a calling from God' to 0.609 for the item 'there is a heaven where things will be better than on earth'. The latter item, with a mean rating of 4.19 is thus the most important fatalistic item. Result for the structural sub-dimension shows that factor loading ranged from 0.828 for the item 'the government is inefficiently run' to 0.548 for the item 'government is not providing enough access to education'. With a mean rating of 4.08, the item 'employers are not paying enough' is the most important item in this category. However, with the highest overall mean rating for all items, the item 'there is a heaven where things will be better than on earth' (mean = 4.19) a fatalistic item, is the most important single explanation that Badia respondents have for poverty exists.

Table 2: Total variance explained for poverty attribution

Components	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.9	23.66	23.66
2	4.46	17.85	41.49
3	3.92	15.69	57.18

The three factors extracted cumulatively accounted for 57.18% of variance in poverty attribution. This variance is relatively high (see table 2) compared for example with Wollie (2009: 256) whose three factors accounted for 30.31%. Similarly, Bolitho *et al.* (2007: 16) reported 55% variance; Nasser *et al* (2005: 6) reported 55.96% variance after extracting six factors while Nasser *et al* (2002: 106) reported 40.2%, 41.7% and 44.4% for Lebanese, Portuguese and South African sub-samples respectively. Hine and Montiel (1999: 950), who extracted five factors, reported 45% variance. The result therefore shows that in comparison with other studies, the result from the present study shows a better factor output. The percentage of variance diminishes significantly after the three factors were extracted thus diminishing the need to extract other factors. The three factors extracted are consistent with Feagin's (1972) original typology. Factor 1, individual attribution, with ten 10 accounts for 23.66% of variance while factor 2, fatalistic attribution with eight items and factor 3 structural attribution with seven items accounted for 17.85% and 15.69% respectively. Cronbach's alpha test (see Table 2) for the 25 items used for the second PCA showed a reliability of 0.68 which is 'acceptable'. The individualistic sub-scale was 'excellent' with Cronbach's alpha = 0.91, mean = 20.35, SD = 7.86, the fatalistic sub-scale was 'very good' and reliable with Cronbach's alpha = 0.86, mean = 27.93, SD = 6.60 and the structural sub-scale also 'very good' given a Cronbach's alpha = 0.85, mean = 22.57 and SD = 5.56. Comparative overall rating of all attributions shows that structural attribution with the highest mean rating of 27.93 is the most prevalent attribution among the people of Badia (see table 3).

Table 3: Cronbach's alpha, means and SD for attribution sub scales

	Cronbach's alpha	Mean	SD	No. of items
Individual	0.91	20.35	7.86	10
Structural	0.86	27.93	6.60	7
Fatalistic	0.85	22.57	5.56	8
All	0.68	74.30	9.70	25

Furthermore, bivariate zero-order correlations were obtained for sub-dimensions of attribution and social-demographics. Results shown in table 4 indicates that individual attribution is negatively correlated with gender, $r = -0.186$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed) and religion, $r = -0.111$, $P < 0.05$ (1- tailed) but positively correlated with age, $r = 0.170$, $p < 0.01$ (2- tailed), income, $r = 0.302$, $p < 0.01$ (2- tailed). Fatalistic attribution however showed significant correlations with age, $r = 0.416$, $p < 0.01$ (2- tailed), education, $r = -0.421$, $p < 0.01$ (2- tailed), income, $r = -0.485$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), work type, $r = 0.445$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), position at work, $r = 0.362$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), ethnicity, $r = 0.282$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed) and religion, $r = 0.358$, $p < 0.01$ (2- tailed). Similarly, structural attribution is correlated with gender, $r = 0.279$, $p < 0.01$; 2-tailed), age, $r = 0.121$, $p < 0.05$ (1- tailed), education, $r = .215$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), work type, $r = -0.439$, $P < 0.01$ (2-tailed), ethnicity, $r = 0.181$, $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed) and religion, $r = -0.353$, $P < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

Table 4: Zero-order correlations for poverty attributions and demographics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
(1) Gender	-										
(2)Age	-0.064	-									
(3)Education	.027	-.140**	-								
(4)Income	.062	-.295**	.551**	-							
(5)Work	-.197**	.232**	-.398**	-.147**	-						
(6) Position	-.235**	.122*	.048	-.055	-.028	-					
(7) Ethnicity	-.061	-.158**	-.255**	-.044	.268**	.225**	-				
(8) Religion	-.030	-.086	-.212**	-.018	.442**	.101*	.225**	-			
(9)Individual	-.186**	.170**	.041	.302**	.029	-.111*	-.070	-.111*	-		
(10)Fatalistic	-.89	.416**	-.421**	-.485**	.445**	.358**	.282**	.358**	0	-	
(11)Structural	.279**	.121*	.215**	.095	-.439**	-.353**	.181**	-.353**	0	0	-

** . $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), * . $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

Correlation coefficients showed divergences and convergences with the literature. Hunt (1996: 314) concluded that the effects of independent variables on poverty attributions varied across groups. Thus the ideas that these processes operate in a similar pattern for different groups and locations is not sustainable. Like many other studies, this study found effects of, gender, age and income on attributions (Hunt, 2004, 1996; Nasser *et al.*, 2005; Wollie, 2009; Hine and Montiel, 1999). While women are more structural than men in attributions, the younger and the less educated are also found to be more structural (Shirazi and Biel, 2005). Of note however, the present study does not find a significant relationship between education and individual attribution, even though education predicts structural attribution. Hunt (1996) argued that education has an enlightening effect. Nasser *et al* (2002: 112) averred that education is a 'double-edged sword' thus

while education as a signpost to upward mobility may be expected to enhance individualism, studies have found that liberal and humanistic education enhances the appeal to structural explanations. While the Badia sample was in no way composed of highly educated people, the result still showed no correlation between education and individual attribution. Other studies have reported a similar finding (Klugel and Smith, 1986). Huber and Form, 1973). Given that the educational gap among Badia respondents is not wide, statistical significance may have been unlikely. However it is possible that a comparative study with a more educationally diverse sample may provide a different result. Bobo (1991) argued that education has an enlightening effect as more educated people are more able to empathize with the conditions of the disadvantaged. The role of education has therefore been subject of debates. While some studies have found positive correlation between education and structural attribution, some have reported a negative relationship. Thus, theoretically, the effect of education has been confusing (Nasser *et al.*, 2002).

5.1 Comparative Ratings of Poverty Attribution Sub-dimensions

The three sub-dimensions of poverty attribution were compared to determine respondents' preferred attributions. This was attained by comparing the statistical mean ratings of each attribution choice. Respondents' preferred attribution was taken to be the attribution category where he/she recorded the highest mean rating. Individual mean ratings were calculated by adding up the total Likert scale scores for each sub-dimension after factor extraction (at this stage, PCA had reduced the number of items from 38 to 25). Total scores were then divided by the total number of items in each sub-dimension (Individualistic; n = 10; Fatalistic, n = 8; structural; n = 7). Comparative ratings for all the sub-dimensions are depicted in table 5. The dominant poverty attribution among inhabitants of Badia community is structural attribution, which is adopted by 59% of the respondents. However, 37.1% of respondents preferred fatalistic explanation. This result is consistent with the 'actor and observer' thesis (Robinson and Bell, 1978) and the fundamental 'attribution error' (Ross, 1977) both of which propose that lower economic status respondents attribute poverty to factors external to themselves. This has been the consistent finding of most studies of poverty attribution (Hine and Montiel, 1999; Nasser *at al.*, 2002; Nasser *et al.*, 2005; Wollie, 2009; Bolitho *et al.*, 2007). People of lower economic status consistently preferred structural attribution. Wichowsky (2007: 1) argued that in areas with higher income inequality, people often blame the society for poverty. Explanation of poverty is therefore a function of respondents in question and the kind of inequality that exists in one's environment (Wilson, 1986; Wichowsky, 2007). Studies finding predominant structural attribution than individual attribution reported that their findings support the system 'blame hypothesis' (Wollie, 2009; Nasser *at al.*, 2005), as against the 'culture of poverty' thesis where individual attributions predominate (Bullock, 2006).

Table 5: Preferred attributions

	Frequency	%
Individual Attribution	15	3.9
Structural Attribution	226	59.0
Fatalistic Attribution	142	37.1
Total	383	100.0

However it is notable that while in past studies, structural attribution have been found to be predominant among the under-privileged, almost in all cases, structural attribution has been combined with individual attribution with diminished report of fatalism (see Wollie, 2009; Nasser *et al.*, 2005) leading scholars to report that fatalistic attributions were less significant (Lepianka *et al.*, 2009). In light of the above therefore, the result from the Badia sample diverges from the main flow of the literature given that 37.1% of respondents reported fatalist beliefs. While one may be tempted to conclude that fatalism is diminished when studies are conducted in western countries, it is notable that studies in Africa and other developing countries also reported higher individual than fatalistic explanations. Wollie (2009: 264-265) for example, while acknowledging that Ethiopians believe that causes of poverty are controlled by supernatural powers, still reported that the fatalistic factor scored low percentage of variance in his data than individualistic explanation. Similarly, Nasser *at al* (2005) reported higher individual attribution than fatalism among an Indian sample. While reporting significantly higher structural and individual attribution among a combined South African, Lebanese and Portuguese sample, Nasser *et al* (2002: 110) reported higher fatalistic beliefs among South Africans than Portuguese and Lebanese. Surprisingly however, they reported (Nasser *et al.*, 2002: 112) that White and Colored South Africans showed the highest level of fatalistic beliefs in their cross national study. Furthermore, the result from the present study supports the value inconsistency and compromise explanations linked to Mann's (1970) argument that values inconsistency is the basis for social order. While Bobo (1991:87) linked value inconsistency to the existence of an egalitarian structuralist outlook layered upon

individualism among oppressed groups in America, results from Badia shows that structuralist outlook is layered upon fatalistic beliefs. Many studies reported that participants used more than one attribution concurrently (Harper, 2003: 186). Verkutyan (1988) estimated that typically only about 7% of respondents use single explanations in attribution research. This indicates that split consciousness is a part of the cognitive processes of the underprivileged. The present study produced evidence of split/dual consciousness. While acknowledging that structural barriers cause poverty (59%), 37% of the sample preferred fatalistic attribution. Thus while Bobo (1991) described split consciousness as the layering of individual and structural attribution, in the present study, the result shows that split consciousness entailed layering structural with fatalistic attributions. The result therefore contradicts the widely held belief that people's attributions fits neatly into two 'camps' (Wichowsky, 2007: 18) when thinking about causes of personal economic failure or success (Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

6. Discussion

The findings of the study supports but significantly contradict previous studies on poverty attribution. Studies in USA and European countries have reported predominant individual attribution (Feagin, 1972; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). Others have uncovered ambivalence where race, region and contexts are introduced (Hunt, 1996; Robinson, 2009). Robinson (2009) proposed that American attributions for poverty could be situated within an individual-structural continuum. There is evidence that attribution beliefs vary between cultures (Morçöl, 1997; Nasser *et al.*, 2005). However, cross cultural studies have found that while respondents in Western countries preponderantly attributed poverty to individual factors, their counterparts in less developed countries were more structural in explanation with individual explanations coming second (Bolitho *et al.*, 2007). Hine and Montiel (1999: 954) reported that Filipinos blamed the poor and their government more for poverty than Canadians. They however observed that *'had individuals from the lower classes been surveyed, their responses may have been more in line with ... initial prediction'*. Perhaps more significantly, studies in other developing countries repeatedly reported predominantly structural explanations layered with individual attributions among their samples (Nasser *et al.*, 2002, 2005; Wollie, 2009). The difference in the result of the present study may be attributable to two factors. In the first instance, most of the studies conducted on respondents in developing countries did not sample the 'really poor'. Like western studies, they concentrated on studying (university) students (Wollie, 2009; Nasser *et al.*, 2002, 2005) or middle class anti-poverty activists (Bolitho *et al.*, 2007), who were upwardly mobile, western educated and more likely to exhibit western values. Secondly, past studies had been reluctant to include statistically significant number of items eliciting fatalistic responses in their research instruments. Hunt (2004: 837) used only two items related to 'God's will' to construct a fatalistic sub-scale that yielded a moderate Cronbach's alpha of 0.64. Hunt (2004) therefore argued that statistical insignificance of fatalistic explanations in past studies is due to the paucity of items eliciting fatalistic response. Similarly, Bolitho *et al.* (2007: 19) argued that 'fate' has been an under-represented factor as spiritual beliefs are absent from current instruments *'despite their central significance in many belief systems'* (emphasis is mine). They suggested that this shortfall may be redressed by including items in the point of view of the poor themselves, given that current items are mostly derived from western sources beginning from the work of Feagin (1972). The study therefore confirms Bolitho *et al.*'s (2007: 19) fears that these constructs are not fully relevant across cultural contexts. This of course does not diminish the fact that they may be similar where applied to similar socio-economic categories. Brimeyer (2008) recently confirmed that the belief in 'divine intervention' is a relevant construct in the attribution maps of the disadvantaged when sufficiently elicited. The present study, following the suggestions of Hunt (2004), Bolitho *et al.* (2007) and Brimeyer (2008) confirmed that indeed the fatalistic construct is real when elicited with sufficient items especially in studies involving the underprivileged and the poor.

7. Conclusion

The results from the present study showed that layering of attribution is not only in an individual-structural continuum. Perhaps the layering of fatalistic attributions with structural attributions offer better explanations of failure to take action in the face of injustice, given the more extreme effect of fatalistic attribution than individual attribution. Robinson (2009) recently argued that there are not many actions or policy options possible where people adduce poverty to fate. The finding that fatalistic attribution is heavily layered with structural attributions by the disadvantaged answers the question why people remained reluctant to engage in collective action despite level of identification or perception of efficacy or ripeness of structural conditions. As Harper (2003) noted, attribution research has failed to generate effective conclusions that might aid in the fight against poverty. No doubt, with attribution studies focusing on attributions of the rich for poverty, the prospects of generating ground for mobilization to fight poverty are impaired. Contrary to what many past studies

reported, this study has shown that fatalism is a real explanation of poverty among the disadvantaged. However, as the study was conducted using a sample of predominantly poor and less educated sample, it will be necessary for future studies to replicate the study to confirm the validity of the findings and to ascertain if the inclusion of more fatalistic items in research instruments where applied to middle class samples will provide similar results

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