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Attribution of poverty among Malaysian students in the United Kingdom.

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates Malaysian students' attribution of poverty and attitudes towards the poor in rural Malaysia. A combined total of 124 Malaysian students in the United Kingdom participated in this web-based survey. Factor analysis results reproduce the tripartite (individualistic, structural and fatalistic) structure for attribution of poverty. The results suggest that there is a statistically significant main effect for gender ($F_{3,120}$=4.48, p=.005) wherein females have a higher attribution for poverty. On attitudes towards the poor, it was found that with upward social mobility, respondents have a more positive attitude towards the poor. It was recommended that further study should focus on how the poor attribute poverty

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1. Introduction

Poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon which cannot simply be understood based on income alone but require input from various areas of social sciences. Singh and Pandey (1990) argued that although the economic approach in defining and identifying poverty is useful, such indicators imply that all poor people are the same psychologically, socially, culturally and politically. While countless studies were conducted in the area of economics and sociology, psychology has been lagging behind.

Most studies on the psychology of poverty attempted to explain poverty from existing psychology theories such as achievement motivation theories (Pareek, 1970), locus of control (Furnham, 1986), expectancy theory (Gurin & Gurin, 1970), learned helplessness (Rabow, Berkman & Kessler, 1983) and attribution theory (Feagin, 1972).

One of the most important studies in the area of psychology of poverty is by Feagin (1972) who conducted a survey on the attribution of poverty on the United States population. This study, based on Heider's Attribution Theory in 1958, has been replicated or partly replicated in various countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, India, Australia, Turkey, Lebanon, Malawi, Canada and the Philippines.

The majority of research into the attribution of poverty has found a tripartite main factor of causal attribution; (1) individualistic (blame the poor), (2) structural (blame external social and economic factors) and (3) fatalistic (bad luck, illness, etc). The study by Feagin (1972) and later by Kluegel and Smith (1986) revealed a prevalence of an individualistic view of poverty among Americans. However a closer inspection found that this view was held mainly by middle class American whites, and was not shared by other ethnic groups. On the other hand, Hunt, (1996) found that southern Californians endorsed a more structural view of poverty. Similarly, India (Singh & Vasudeva, 1977) and Turkey (Morcol, 1997) showed that respondents (a majority of whom were from lower income groups) endorsed a more structural view of poverty.

Among university students, research in the United States (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Sun, 2001), Lebanon (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2001), Australia (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998) and India (Nasser, Singhal &

Abouchedid, 2005) found that undergraduate students accorded more importance to structural explanations of poverty. In the case of Schwartz and Robinson (1991), respondents believed that fatalistic causes of poverty were more relevant than individualistic factors. On the other hand, Malawian students (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998) and middle class students (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Cozzarelli Tagler, & Wilkinson, 2002) were more likely to attribute poverty to internal factors instead of external or cultural factors. A qualitative study on attribution of poverty among Malaysian students aged 12-16 years in rural and urban Malaysia by Halik and Webley (2011) found a similar structure with the addition of one extra factor, labelled as other factors (age, land, geography and encouragement). They found that with increasing age, students are more likely to attribute poverty to structural rather than the individualistic factor.

While socio-demographic factors were shown to have some influence on the public's view of poverty, some researchers believe that attitudes and belief systems are an important antecedent to public's view. MacDonald (1971) showed that ethics of social responsibility (those who see the source of injustice reside in people rather than society) to be positively associated with endorsement of the Protestant Ethic and negative attitudes towards the poor. Furnham and Gunter (1984) found a similar result among British respondents, whose 'strong just world beliefs' were more negative towards the poor. Atherton, Gemmel, Haagenstad, Hold, Jensen, O'Hara and Rehner in the United States (1993) found that the Social Work undergraduates had more positive attitudes towards the poor compared to their counterparts from different programmes. A follow-up study by Rehner, Ishee, Salloum and Velasques (1997) in Mississippi showed that older social workers tend to have more favourable attitudes towards the poor. Cozzarelli et al. (2001) were the first to study the relationship between attitudes and attribution towards poverty. They found that those who have overall positive attitudes towards the poor were more likely to endorse external explanations. Their follow-up research found that respondents have a more positive attitude towards poor women as compared to poor men (Cozzarelli et al., 2002).

Overall, the most stable determinants of attribution are attitudes and value systems; those who have positive attitudes towards the poor are more likely to attribute poverty to structural factors. Studies (Beck, Whitley & Wolk, 1999; Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Pandey, Sinha, Prakash & Tripathi, 1982; Wagstaff, 1983; Zucker & Weiner, 1993) have shown that political affiliation too, is a stable predictor.

There were two major research questions in this study. Previous studies suggested that demographic variables influenced respondents' attribution for poverty. Firstly, this study will investigate whether demographic variables (e.g. gender, age, income, education, residence and marital status) affect respondents' attitudes towards the poor and attribution for poverty in rural areas of Malaysia. Secondly, based on the work by Cozzarelli et al. (2001), who suggested that those who have generally positive attitudes towards the poor were more likely to endorse external explanations for poverty, this study attempts to verify whether a similar pattern exists among Malaysian students in the UK. The sample group was chosen as part of the two stage study on local and overseas Malaysian student's views of poverty so comparisons can be made on the similarity or differences of attribution of poverty structure.

2. Method

2.1 Respondents

There were 124 Malaysian students from all over UK (m=70, f=54) who participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 19-50 years (80 percent of respondents were in the 21 to 40 years age bracket). Respondents participated in this study on a voluntary basis and were not promised or given any payment. The breakdown of respondents' information is shown in Table 1.

2.2 Instruments

I. Attitudes towards the poor (ATP)
This is a five point Likert-type scale consisting of 15 items, 6 of which were phrased in a positive direction. Respondents rated the extent of their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree).* The attitude scale was made from three attitude components; affective, behaviour and cognition with items derived from the work of Artherton et al. (1993) and

Cozzarelli et al. (2001, 2002). An initial set of 48 items was reduced to 15 items using factor analysis (FA) and reliability analysis. The final completed scale for the final version of the pilot study had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.79

Table 1:
Demographics information

Gender	Male	70
	Female	54
Age	Below 21	8
	21-30	41
	31-40	56
	41-50	19
Income level (RM)	Under 2000	18
	2001-4000	46
	4001-6000	24
	Above 6000	36
Marital Status	Single	46
	Married	78
Occupation	Civil Servants	75
	Private Sector	17
	Students	32
Residence	City	98
	Town	14
	Rural	12
Education level	Undergraduate	48
	Postgraduate	76

II. Attribution of Poverty (AFP)

This scale consists of 16 items divided into three subscales. Respondents rated the extent of their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items were designed to look into the three explanatory factors of poverty: individualistic, structural and fatalistic structure.

The AFP scale was made up mainly from Feagin's (1972) scale with additional items coming from Furnham (1982), such as *lack of intelligence among poor people* and *no attempts at self-improvement among the poor*. There were initially 20 items in the scale, which was later reduced to sixteen items using FA and reliability analysis. The finalised scale (which was made up from 3 sub-scales) consists of 6 items that measure individualistic (alpha coefficient = 0.71), 5 items on structural (alpha coefficient = .63) and 5 items on fatalistic factor (alpha coefficient = .58). The ideal Cronbach value should be above .7 but it is not uncommon to find low Cronbach values with short scales (see Pallant, 2001).

2.3 Procedure

This questionnaire was web-based and was distributed using a 'snowball approach'. The first page on the questionnaire gave participants a brief introduction to the study, sought their agreement in participating in this study and assured them of confidentiality of responses. The questionnaires were sent via email to individual student, webmaster or the president of the Malaysian students' group in the UK and to get their assistance to forward the link to the rest of the Malaysian students in the particular group.

3. Results

3.1 Attribution for Poverty in Rural areas of Malaysia

A principal component analysis with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) was performed on responses from the Attribution for Poverty (AFP) scale. Oblique rotation was selected because of the assumption that items in the scale might not be independent. Field (2005) suggested that in this situation oblique rotation is a better option than orthogonal rotations as it allows the factors to correlate.

In the initial analysis, loadings less than 0.5 were suppressed at the cost of ignoring few items that could be significant in the scale. Three factors were extracted which is consistent with most available literature on attribution for poverty. These three components together accounted for 48.9% of the total variance. Two items, *death of the head of family* and *lack of intelligence among poor people* were suppressed as their value was less than 0.5.

Table 2:
Factor Analysis (Direct Oblimin) of Attribution for Poverty in Rural areas of Malaysia

	Component		
Items	1	2	3
Factor 1: Structural attribution (α = .73)			
Failure to provide good schools for the poor	.746		
Prejudice and discrimination against poor people	.685		
Failure to provide enough jobs for poor people	.643		
Low wages in some businesses and industries	.613		
Being taken advantage of by third parties	.598		
Lack of infrastructure and business facilities	.539		
Factor 2: Individualistic attribution (α = .78)			
Lack of effort and laziness by the poor themselves		.830	
Unwillingness to make economic changes		.815	
No attempts at self improvement among the poor		.714	
Loose morals, alcohol & drug abuse among the poor		.692	
Factor 3: Fatalistic attribution (α = 0.65)			
Sickness and physical handicaps			-.736
Lack of ability and talent among poor people			-.735
Just bad luck			-.651
Being born into a poor family			-.552
Percentage of variance explained	23.386	18.132	9.924
Eigenvalues	3.274	2.538	1.389

After excluding the two items, the items were subjected to a second oblique rotation. The resulting factor solutions with fourteen items accounted for 51.4% of the total variance explained. The items in the factors that emerged clearly fit into the three fold factor of attribution for poverty found in many attribution studies. All items load into the expected component that represents individualistic, structural and fatalistic factors with respectable alpha coefficients of .78, .73 and .65 respectively (see Table 2).

The fatalistic factor was positively correlated to individualistic factor (r=.227, p= 0.05) suggesting a moderate relationship between individualistic and fatalistic scores. There was also a strong positive relationship between fatalistic and structural factors (r=.349, p= 0.01). However, there was no significant correlation between individualistic and structural factors (r=0.022, n.s.).

Structural factors were found to have the highest mean (3.48), followed by fatalistic (3.04) with the lowest being the individualistic factor (2.87). To examine the differences on attribution structure for the eight

variables in this study, a series of one-way MANOVAs were conducted with the three attribution factors as dependent variables. The seven independent variables were age, gender, income, marital status, occupation, residence and education level. The results suggested that there was a statistically significant main effect for gender ($F_{3,120}$=4.48, p=.005, Pillai's Trace=.10). Analysis of each dependent variable on gender showed significant differences in individualistic attributions of $F_{1,122}$=10.15, p=0.02, after Bonferroni correction[1]. Inspection of the means indicated that female respondents reported higher level of individualistic attributions for poverty (M=3.17, SD=1.04) than male respondents (M=2.64, SD=.82). There were no significant differences on other demographic variables (age, income, education level, marital status and residence) and attribution for poverty structure.

Table 3 presents the ranking of item importance based on mean scores. The highest ranked item attributed by respondents is *being taken advantage of by third parties* (M=3.98) and the lowest ranked item is *bad luck* (M=2.53). The highest ranked item for fatalistic attributions was *sickness and physical handicaps* (M=3.56) and the highest rank for individualistic attributions was *unwillingness to make changes* (M=3.02). These responses revealed that the respondents were more likely to suggest structural attributions than any other causes for poverty.

Table 3
Means and standard deviation of AFP items score

N =124	Mean	S.D.
Being taken advantage of by third parties	3.98	.79
Low wages in some businesses and industries	3.92	.98
Sickness and physical handicaps	3.56	1.07
Being born into a poor family	3.53	1.16
Failure to provide enough jobs for poor people	3.44	1.19
Lack of infrastructure and business facilities	3.42	1.23
Failure to provide good schools for the poor	3.18	1.36
Unwillingness to make economic changes	3.02	1.26
Prejudice and discrimination against poor people	2.92	1.25
Lack of effort and laziness by the poor themselves	2.88	1.15
No attempts at self improvement among the poor	2.87	1.31
Loose morals, alcohol & drug abuse among the poor	2.72	1.21
Lack of ability and talent among poor people	2.54	1.24
Just bad luck	2.53	1.31

3.2 Attitudes towards the Poor

For the Attitudes towards the Poor (ATP) scale, responses were totalled to provide the overall score for this scale and were found to be reliable (α=0.82). The mean for ATP scale is 56.91 (SD=7.99) out of a possible score of 75.

Table 4 presents the ranking of item importance based on mean scores from the ATP scale. Overall, most respondents have highly positive attitudes towards the poor as suggested in the table wherein all the positive-worded items showed higher means compared to the negative-worded items. The highest ranked item attributed by respondents is *I sympathise with the situation of the poor* (M=4.53) and the lowest ranked item is *alcoholic* (M=1.81).

Three separate two-tailed independent sample *t*-tests were conducted with gender, marital status and education as separate independent variables and ATP as dependent variable. A significant difference was

[1] Bonferroni correction will be applied to subsequent MANOVA analysis at the level of 0.016 for three dependent variables and 0.0125 for four dependent variables. This also applies to Chapter 8.

found for marital status at t_{122}=-3.04, p=.003 with married students (M=58.53, SD=7.14) being more likely to have a positive attitude towards the poor than single students (M=54.15, SD=8.67). On education level, a significant difference was found (t_{122}=-2.26, p=.025) where post graduate students (M=58.18, SD=8.00) are more likely to express positive attitudes towards the poor compared to undergraduate students (M=54.89, SD=7.64).

Table 4:
Means and Standard Deviation of ATP items score

N =124	Mean	S.D.
I sympathise with the situation of the poor	4.53	0.66
We are responsible to help the poor	4.31	0.96
I am ready to spend some of my time educating the poor	4.05	0.79
I would always make myself available if the poor need me	3.98	0.79
I plan to get involved indirectly in helping the poor	3.90	0.94
Resilience	3.67	0.99
Hardworking	3.27	1.09
Problematic	3.19	1.24
The poor are too dependent on the government	2.81	1.12
Unmotivated	2.66	1.25
The poor likes to complain	2.42	1.01
Drug abusing	2.15	1.12
Immoral	1.90	0.95
Criminal	1.85	0.92
Alcoholic	1.81	0.99

A series of one-way between-groups ANOVAs were conducted with age, income, occupation and residence as independent variables.. The tests revealed significant main effects for age ($F_{3,120}$=4.42, p=.006) and occupation ($F_{2,121}$=6.62, p=.002).

For the age variables, respondents were divided into four groups according to their age group. Post hoc comparison with Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean for the below 21 years group (M=49.5, SD=2.72) was significantly different from 31-40 years old group (M=58.79, SD=1.03) and the 41-50 years age group (M=58.16, SD=1.76). There was no significant difference for those in 21-30 years old group with any of the other groups. This result suggests that the older age groups (31-40 years and 41-50 years) are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the poor compared to the younger age group.

In terms of occupation, respondents were grouped into three; students, private sector and civil servants. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test showed that the mean score for students (M=52.78, SD=58.67) was significantly different from that for civil servants (M=58.67, SD=8.01). There was no significant difference between private sector and the two groups. The result suggests that students are more likely to have lower positive attitudes towards the poor as compared to civil servants.

On how attitude towards the poor will influence respondents' attribution preference, a one-way Manova was conducted with score of ATP as independent variable and mean score of the three components of AFP scale as a dependent variable. In order to run MANOVA, a new variable for the ATP scale was created and the group was divided into two levels; negative and positive attitude, based on a median split. Hence, Level 1 represents those whose score falls under negative attitude category and Level 2 for positive attitude category.

There was a highly significant main effect on attitude ($F_{3,120}$=15.35, p=.0005, Pillai's Trace=.28) with individualistic attributions ($F_{1,122}$=43.99, p=0.0005) reaching statistical significance. The individualistic attributions mean for those with negative attitudes towards the poor is 3.37 and for those with positive attitudes is 2.39. This suggests that those who have negative attitudes towards the poor are more likely to endorse higher individual attributions for poverty.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first point to discuss in this section is the causal attribution of poverty in rural areas in Malaysia. The results on attribution structure, as generated by factor analysis method, appeared to support the original finding by Feagin (1972) and various subsequent studies on causal attribution of poverty. The items loaded on each factor fitted perfectly with the individualistic, structural and fatalistic pattern of attribution. This study however differs from most previous studies on how respondents rated the importance of each factor. Results suggest that the respondents endorsed the fatalistic factor as the second most important attribution of poverty after structural attribution of poverty. Endorsement of the structural factor was not unexpected based on previous research on students' attribution of poverty (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2001; Nasser et al., 2005; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Sun, 2001). However, only Schwartz and Robinson (1991), using a sample of university students found fatalistic attribution as more important than individualistic attribution.

One possible interpretation of this finding according to Schwartz and Robinson (1991) was that students were not exposed to poverty related policies and thus blamed factors beyond an individual's control. Thus, in this case, respondents' lack of knowledge of and exposure to the current situation of the poor in rural areas led them to view the uncontrollable factors as more important.

Another plausible interpretation was that respondents considered the impact of uncontrollable factors such as sickness or death of the breadwinner as more serious than individualistic factors especially in rural areas. Families that faced such misfortune were more likely to make major changes in their economic life and possibly lose their source of livelihood. In addition, experiencing unfortunate events was more likely to be seen as more serious if fell on the poor rather than average-income family but the public are not likely to make the same distinction about individualistic factors, such as laziness. The recent example of how people generally reacted sympathetically to tsunami victims in Asia as opposed to a lack of support worldwide for Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans could further strengthen this line of argument. In short, the specific type of poor group could influence how the public view the degree of responsibility for poverty per se.

On demographic differences, the only difference found was on gender where women were more likely to endorse individualistic factors compared to men. Previous research (Bullock, 1999; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Rim, 1984; Sun, 2001) suggested that men were more likely to endorse individualistic attribution while women (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sun, 2001) preferred structural attribution. This present finding is similar to that of Morcol (1997) among Turkish respondents. The high individualistic attribution among women was probably due to cultural values among Malaysian respondents, wherein the head of family is viewed as highly responsible and sometimes solely responsible for supporting their family. Thus, individualistic attribution was seen as important although not as crucial as structural factors among women.

On respondents' attitudes towards the poor in rural areas, significant differences were found on marital status, education level, age and occupation. What can be gathered from these findings is that attitude towards the poor improves with upward social mobility. This finding concurred with Rehner et al.'s (1997) study where older social workers tended to have more favourable attitudes towards the poor. One would conclude from this finding that exposure to the realities of life, from being dependent on parents to support them to being independent and having more personal responsibility were likely to increase their knowledge of the society they lived in and alter their attitudes about the poor.

On specific attribution where respondents with positive and negative attitudes differ, the only difference was found on individualistic attribution. Respondents with positive attitudes towards the poor were less likely to blame individualistic attribution for poverty than those with negative attribution. Finally, this study suggests attitudes towards the poor improve with upward social mobility, and respondents score on attitudes scale may influence how they perceived individualistic but not structural and fatalistic attribution for poverty.

One question that has yet to be addressed is whether the attribution structure is similar to those of local Malaysian students. However, past studies (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2001; Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2002; Nasser et al., 2005; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Sun, 2001) confirm the stability of attribution of poverty structure among university students with some differences in

demographics factor. Thus, this study can reliably be generalized among university students but comparisons between local and overseas students may yield an interesting result with regard to their perception of attitudes and attribution for poverty.

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