ASSESSMENT OF IMPOVERISHED INDIVIDUALS

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Introduction

Poverty is a stark and continuous epidemic across the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty in America hit a 15-year high in 2009, with 14.3 percent of Americans living in poverty (Smith, 2010). This figure is based on the poverty line being designated as an income of $21,954 for a family of four (Smith, 2010). With this increase in poverty, the understanding of how poverty is viewed is ever more important.

Before poverty can be addressed by governmental policies, perceptions about the causes of poverty must be understood. No large-scale policy shifts can be made without support from the voting public. Therefore, the attitudes that individuals have about poverty and its causes are a vital research area. Much research has been done on the perceived causes of poverty. This research has focused on how the participants assess poverty, its causes, and qualities about the assessors that can help to explain how one views poverty. Like this research, the current study is concerned with perceptions of poverty. The current study, however, takes this investigation further, incorporating what individuals believe about economic opportunity. Participant beliefs about opportunity are hypothesized to be related to how they assess poverty, specifically how much blame they assign to impoverished persons. Much research has been done on perceptions of failure. In this case, poverty is an economic failure. The previous research, however, mostly investigates personal failure perception. Despite this fact, one’s beliefs about one’s own outcomes should be largely similar to beliefs about outcomes for others, especially if those beliefs are more generalized. That is, if one sees opportunity as largely unavailable for one’s own purposes, an individual likely sees that as the case for others. Differences in attribution styles have been well-studied, especially when it comes to failure. The next
few sections of this paper will examine some of the previous research in both perceptions of poverty and attribution of failure.

**Perceptions of Poverty**

In one previous study, Cozzarelli, Tagler, & Wilkinson (2002) directly investigated attitudes about poverty, as well as the perceived causes to which participants attribute poverty. First, participants were asked to rate their attitudes about poor people. Cozzarelli et al. (2002) were particularly interested in attitudinal differences toward poor men versus poor women, so half of the participants filled out a scale referencing “poor women” while the other half received a scale referencing “poor men.” They found the attitudes toward both poor women and poor men leaned positive, but poor women were seen significantly more positively than poor men (Cozzarelli et al., 2002). Next, participants were asked how important certain factors (e.g. “lack of effort or laziness”) were as causes of poverty. The researchers broke these factors down into three categories: internal, cultural, and external. They found that internal attributions (e.g. “lack of effort or laziness”) were significantly more likely to be made than either cultural (e.g. “being born into poverty”) or external (e.g. “advantages given to the rich”) attributions were (Cozzarelli et al., 2002). In addition to the favor toward internal causes, external attributions were also found to be made significantly less often than cultural attributions (Cozzarelli et al., 2002). For the purposes of strictly internal vs. external studies, the cultural attributions would likely be considered external. The example above, as well as others (e.g. “attending bad schools”), is hardly cultural as many would define the term. It seems the researchers are referencing what might be called background or demographic causes. Their external causes are more distant from an individual’s self, as they are more
structural (e.g. “not enough jobs”), but they are seemingly no more in the control of an individual than are the cultural causes. For this reason, the results of the study involving cultural attributions are treated as more relevant to what is known about external attributions.

The results of the above study demonstrate a type of contradiction in attitudes about poverty. The results show a tendency to see poverty as internally caused, which is a dispositional attribution. At the same time, attitudes toward poor individuals were found to be minutely tending to the positive side. It seems strange that individuals positively view people who are impoverished by causes which are (largely) perceived to be in their own hands. This outcome might imply some degree of pity toward the impoverished, but even pity is not necessarily positive. Pity may be better seen as a lack of negative attitude, not of an inherently positive one. If one assumes at least some of the participants in the study described above had negative attitudes toward poor people, then to get a positive lean in the final results, several others had to have positive views of poor people, and to a fairly strong degree. Complications like this one are somewhat side-stepped by a popular type of attitude research in the area of poverty, which is to determine if information on ideology helps explain attitudes about poverty.

One study of the effects of ideology on attitudes about poverty was conducted by Bobbio, Canova, & Manganelli (2010) in Italy. Using an economic philosophy scale, the researchers measured economic conservatism. They also measured attitudes on social hierarchy using a second scale. The participants were also asked about some internal and external causes of both wealth and poverty and whether those causes were important as explanations of poverty or wealth. The results of the study found economic conservatism
was positively correlated with positive views of social inequality (Bobbio et al., 2010). This result implies that those who favor more conservative economic policies (e.g. free market capitalism) see fewer problems with social inequality (e.g. the wealth gap). A further finding of the study was that economic conservatism was positively correlated with internal attribution of both wealth and poverty, while being negatively correlated with external attribution of both wealth and poverty (Bobbio et al., 2010). This result implies that those individuals who were more economically conservative made more internal attributions across the board. This result might relate to the free market idea that opportunity is available for those who are willing to take it and that economic success or failure is mostly of one’s own making. This belief would make little exception for poor people being unlucky or the wealthy being lucky (i.e. external/situational factors). The notion that individuals are assessing both poor and wealthy individuals from the same ideological standpoint is supported by another result which found that internal attributions for poverty were strongly positively correlated with internal attributions for wealth (Bobbio et al., 2010). An almost identical effect was found between external attributions for poverty and external attributions for wealth (Bobbio et al., 2010). These results seem to further the idea that individuals assess all financial wealth and success from one ideological standpoint, which may favor either internal or external attributions.

A study similar to the Bobbio et al. (2010) study was conducted in India by Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi (1982). In their study, they investigated participants involved in right-wing or left-wing political organizations, as well as a neutral control group not involved in any political organization. They had participants fill out an ideology scale first. Then, they completed an assessment of possible causes of poverty,
grading the contribution of each cause. The study found that participants in the left-wing group scored more to the left ideologically than the right-wing group did to the right (Pandey et al., 1982). In fact, the right-wing group nearly matched the neutral group on the ideology scale (Pandey et al., 1982). This result could be impactful, as individuals on the left-wing (especially in America) tend to champion issues relating to the solving of poverty. The poverty cause assessment found that internal causes of poverty (e.g. self and fate) were significantly more likely to be attributed to poverty by the right-wing and neutral groups than the left-wing group, and that external causes (e.g. government policy and economic inequality) were significantly more likely to be attributed to poverty by the left-wing group than either the right-wing or neutral group (Pandey et al., 1982). In fact, the right-wing and neutral groups did not differ significantly or any of the causes (Pandey et al., 1982).

These results certainly support the notion than those with more left-wing ideologies tend toward external attributions of poverty, compared to even a neutral group. Strangely, the opposite was not found with right-wing assessors and internal attributions, who were only different compared to the left-wing group. This outcome may be more telling of the state of Indian politics in the 1980s than the current American political landscape. Despite this, in present day America, ideology is as strong on the left and on the right, relative to the center. It has been found recently by political scientists that the congressional right-wing has moved more to the right in America than the congressional left-wing has moved to the left (Voteview, 2012). One example of the recent bluntness on the right-wing side of the America political spectrum deals directly with poverty. Failed 2012 Republican Presidential Candidate Herman Cain said in a 2011 interview with The
Wall Street Journal, “Don’t blame Wall Street. Don’t blame the big banks. If you don’t have a job, and you’re not rich, blame yourself” (Sharky734, 2011). If the people of America have moved in a similar ideological fashion as have their congressional representatives and other politicians, one might expect a stronger result among right-wing participants if a study similar to Pandey et al. (1982) were done in America.

Examining the results of the poverty assessment studies mentioned above, two things are clear. The first is that internal attributions are more common toward poverty than are external attributions (Cozzarelli et al, 2002). Second, this favoritism toward internal attributions of poverty is especially true when dealing with non-left-wing assessors (Pandey et al., 1982) or economic conservatives (Bobbio et al., 2010). The important difference which predicts internality of poverty attribution seems to be ideological beliefs about the economic or political system. It has been argued that one reason for the conservative lean toward internal attributions is too justify the economic system as fair (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). The argument for this is that if individuals are poor, and the system is fair, then the individuals are at fault (internal) rather than the system (external).

**Attribution of Failure**

The research on failure and success attribution is almost exclusively conducted on personal (or self) judgments of failure and success. Even with this fact, how individuals view success and failure may give some insight into how success and failure are assessed more generally. For the purposes of poverty assessment, failure assessment is more important, as poverty is viewed as the failure of something (external or internal) resulting in the unfortunate outcome. Most success and failure assessment studies examine
internality and externality of assessment. Zuckerman (1979) published a meta-analysis exploring whether individuals judged their own successes and failures differently. In 27 of the 38 studies examined (71%), individuals took more responsibility for successes than failures (Zuckerman, 1979). Only two of 38 studies, found the opposite, while the other nine found no effect in either direction (Zuckerman, 1979). This result was theorized to be evidence of a self-serving effect, in which one’s outcomes are assessed in the light that best promotes or protects the individual and their self-concept. This might be relevant when it comes to assessing others if one is wont to protect one’s self-concept from comparison to better others. In that scenario, one would see the success of others as less internal, assuring the other is not seen as more capable. The opposite would be true for failures, which would be viewed as internal, leaving the other to be seen as less capable.

Self-serving effect aside, there are other relevant differences found in failure and success attribution. Wong & Weiner (1981) gave participants hypothetical personal success and failure scenarios and asked participants to write down any questions they would ask themselves after such a result. Failure outcomes elicited more attributional questions than did success outcomes (Wong & Weiner, 1981). This result seems to imply that when failure is encountered, individuals look harder for causes. This could be a result of the self-serving effect mentioned previously, but this might be the case for any negative outcome. If the latter is true, it would likely be found for poverty assessments in a similarly designed study.

One further attributional difference has been found involving success and failure outcomes. Feather (1969) gave participants a 10-anagram assessment (five as passing score), and recorded how much of their outcome was assessed to be due to ability or luck.
Extreme scores (0-3, 7-10) were attributed to the internal cause (ability) significantly more than middling (4-6) scores (Feather, 1969). This outcome is possibly a result of the perceived lack of stability in a middling (nearly passing/nearly failing) score (Feather, 1969). A middling score is close to being an opposite outcome. For example, a failing 4 is one away from a passing 5. An extreme score, in contrast, is not very close to being the opposite outcome. A passing 9 is far from failing, and a failing 2 is far from passing. As a result, these scores as perceived as more representative (stable) of true ability, resulting in more internal attributions. This outcome is relevant to poverty in that the extent of the poverty being assessed could affect how it is assessed. The current study is also designed to investigate if this effect holds when assessing others. If it does, more extreme poverty should be assessed as more internal than mild poverty, as it should be seen as more stable and representative of the individual.

**Current Study**

Taking into consideration the previous research on poverty, the current study sets out to answer two heretofore unanswered questions. The first of these questions is what effect do beliefs about economic opportunity have on views of poverty? The current study hypothesizes those individuals who believe economic opportunity in America is more abundant will blame the impoverished more for their condition than would those individuals who believe opportunity is less abundant. That is, because they believe opportunity is more available, they will interpret poverty as a failure to capitalize on accessible opportunity, an internal attribution. This hypothesis will be measured using vignettes, each of which describes an impoverished individual. Each participant will read
these vignettes and, for each, make a judgment of how much blame each vignette character deserves for his or her condition.

The other unanswered question that the current study will investigate is does the level of poverty an individual is in affect the way their poverty is viewed? The current study hypothesizes that individuals in extreme poverty will be seen as more to blame (i.e. responsible) for their poverty than will individuals in mild poverty. That is, individuals in extreme poverty will be seen as more personally responsible, as more extreme poverty will be seen as indicative of more stable, internal traits of the impoverished individual having lead to that failure. This hypothesis will be measured using the same vignettes mentioned above. Half of the vignettes depict mildly impoverished individuals, while the others depict extremely impoverished individuals. The extremely impoverished characters are hypothesized to be judged more internally (i.e. blamed more) than the mildly impoverished characters.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 642 participants were recruited from introductory-level psychology classes, using the university participation pool. Among those who reported their sex, 491 (76.6%) were females and 150 (23.4%) were males. Among those who reported their race, 561 were White/European/Caucasian individuals, 36 were Black/African-American, 18 were Hispanic/Latino/a, 11 were Multiracial, another 11 were Asian/Pacific Islander, and one participant was Native American/Indigenous. The age range of the participants was 18-29 (mean = 18.89, SD = 1.37), with mostly 18- and 19-year olds (80.6%). For
participating, each participant received one research credit toward their class research requirement.

Materials

In the current study, a 20 vignette measure was created. Each vignette was a single sentence in length and had three parts. The first part mentioned whether the character was employed or unemployed, while the other two parts gave information about some effects of the poverty of the character (e.g. living at home with parents). The measure included 10 vignettes depicting an individual in mild poverty, and 10 vignettes depicting an individual in extreme poverty. There were five vignettes of each poverty level depicting a male character in poverty and five vignettes of each poverty level depicting a female character in poverty. Overall, there were 10 vignettes with male characters and 10 vignettes with female characters in the created measure. The names of the characters were chosen from popular names lists from multiple years (1965, 1980, and 1995) to prevent any effect for the perceived age of the characters based on their names.

The measure was piloted using a classroom of upper-level Psychology students. Those students rated the vignettes for how extreme the poverty depicted in each vignette was. These extremity judgments were made on a six-point Likert scale, wherein 1 was “to a small extent” and 6 was “to a great extent.” Results of the pilot study showed that 22 of the 24 vignettes created were mild or extreme to a statistically significant degree. The two non-significant vignettes were removed from the measure. For the sake of having a measure with an even number of vignettes, the two vignettes that were of the weakest
significance were also removed from the measure, resulting in the 20 vignette measure employed. The idea of using vignettes to assess blame was adopted from Knobe (2003).

**Procedure**

All participants completed the entire procedure online, taking approximately 30 minutes each. After signing up through the university participation pool, participants were given a link to the study materials. After completing an informed consent page, participants were asked for three pieces of demographic information. These included sex, ethnicity, and age. The former two gave participants a choice between relevant categories, while age was a blank to be filled in numerically by the participant. After completing the demographic items, participants were asked how much opportunity they believed was available in America today. This item was answered using a six-point Likert scale, wherein 1 was “next to none” and 6 was “nearly endless.” Upon completion of this item, participants were shown 20 vignettes, one at a time. Each vignette depicted an individual in a state of poverty. For each vignette, participants were to read the vignette and then respond to a prompt. The prompt for each vignette was “How much is [vignette character name] to blame for [his/her] current condition?” This item was answered on a six-point Likert scale, wherein 1 was “not at all” and 6 was “completely.” All 20 vignettes included such a prompt, and all were answered on the same type of scale. The 20 vignettes were presented in a random order to each participant. Upon completion of the last vignette prompt, participants were finished with the procedure.
Results

Hypothesis Review

The current study was conducted to investigate two main hypotheses. First, those individuals who believe opportunity in America is more abundant will blame the impoverished more for their condition than would those individuals who believe opportunity is less abundant. That is, because they believe opportunity is more available, they will interpret poverty as a failure to capitalize on accessible opportunity, an internal attribution. Second, that vignette characters in extreme poverty will be judged as more to blame for their poverty than will individuals in mild poverty. That is, individuals in extreme poverty will be judged as more personally responsible, as more extreme poverty will be perceived as indicative of more stable, internal traits of the impoverished individual having lead to that failure.

Sample Changes

The results of the opportunity assessment led to a decision to leave part of the experimental sample out of the larger analysis. The opportunity scale offered participants the choice of whole numbers from one to six to represent the amount of opportunity in America, with one being “next to none” and six being “nearly endless.” The distribution of the assessments was as follows: 1 (n=1), 2 (n=17), 3 (n=74), 4 (n=215), 5 (n=236), and 6 (n=99). Given the low frequency (n=18 combined) of assessments of one and two, those groupings were left out of the larger analysis. Instead, the analysis used only the three through six groupings for the opportunity part of the larger analysis. The reasoning for this was that the relative infrequency of the lowest two groupings was not adequate for assessing individuals that might believe that opportunity is that scarce. The other
groupings had an adequate number of participants to rightfully assess individuals who judge opportunity to be available at those levels.

**Demographics**

Leaving those participants out of the analysis produced the following demographic breakdown of the analyzed sample. A total of 624 participants had their responses used for the analysis. Among those who reported their sex, 478 (76.7%) were females and 145 (23.3%) were males. Among those who reported their race, 547 (87.8%) were White/European/Caucasian individuals, 34 (5.5%) were Black/African-American, 17 (2.7%) were Hispanic/Latino/a, 11 (1.8%) were Multiracial, another 11 (1.8%) were Asian/Pacific Islander, and three (0.5%) individuals identified as Other. The age range of the participants was 18-29 (mean = 18.90, $SD = 1.38$), with mostly 18- and 19-year olds (80.4%).

**H$_1$ Analysis**

To assess the hypothesis that those individuals who believe opportunity is more available would blame the impoverished more harshly, a Mixed Model Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used. The analysis supported this hypothesis strongly [$F(3,620) = 14.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .066$]. This result implies that those individuals who believe that opportunity is more available in America do, in fact, blame the impoverished more harshly for their poverty than do individuals who believe opportunity is less available. Specifically, those participants ($n=289$) who believed moderate opportunity was available (those who marked three or four on the six-point scale), blamed individuals significantly less than did participants ($n=335$) who believed high opportunity was available (those who marked five or six). This result was found using Scheffé post-hoc tests. Those
moderate believers’ blame ratings were significantly different than the ratings of the high believers \([3v5, p < .05, 3v6, p < .001, 4v5, p < .005, 4v6, p < .001]\). Both groups of moderate opportunity believers and high opportunity believers were each found to have similar blame ratings within their opportunity category \((3v4, p = 1.00, 5v6, p = .054)\). This result implies that within each opportunity category, blame ratings were made at a similar level of harshness.

**H2 Analysis**

To assess the hypothesis that those vignette characters in extreme poverty would be blamed more harshly than those characters in mild poverty, the same Mixed Model Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used. The analysis supported this hypothesis strongly \([F(1,620) = 56.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .083]\). This result implies that participants did, in fact, blame the extremely impoverished more harshly for their poverty than they did the mildly impoverished.

**Interaction Analysis**

No interaction between extremity of poverty (mild v. extreme) and opportunity belief was hypothesized, and no such interaction was found \([F(3,620) = 0.89, p = .45, \eta^2 = .004]\). This result was obtained from the same Mixed Model ANOVA as the hypotheses results. This result implies there was no significant effect on blame ratings as a result of the interaction between the extremity of character poverty and the amount of opportunity that participants believed was present in America. This would imply that these main effects are independent of one another.
Discussion

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis investigated in the current study was that those individuals who believe opportunity in America is more abundant would blame the impoverished more for their condition than would those individuals who believe opportunity is less abundant. The reasoning behind this hypothesis was that poverty would be seen as a failure to take advantage of available economic opportunity, an internal attribution, and those believing more opportunity was present would consequently view poverty as more of a personal failing. This hypothesis was found to be the supported, and builds on the results of Cozzarelli et al. (2002) that showed internal attributions were more commonly made toward the impoverished than were external attributions.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis investigated in the current study was that vignette characters in extreme poverty would be judged as more to blame for their poverty than would individuals in mild poverty. The reasoning behind this hypothesis was that extreme poverty would be seen as a greater degree of failure than would mild poverty, resulting in more blame, an internal attribution, being assigned to those characters who “failed” more (i.e. were in more poverty). This hypothesis was found to be supported, and builds on the results of Feather (1969) that showed individuals were more likely to attribute large failures to internal causes than they were to attribute smaller failures to internal causes.

Limitations
Although both hypotheses that the current study investigated were supported, and each built on previous findings, the current study was not without its limitations. The research herein was designed to investigate the judgments that participants make about the impoverished, specifically when no information about the causes of the poverty present are/were given. This allowed for inferential judgments, based on the participants’ attitudes toward poverty, to be made about the blame each character in poverty merited. While this research has provided solid information about inferential judgments, in many cases outside the laboratory, individuals would have some access to information about the causes of a given individual’s poverty. This may not be true of judgments made about impoverished strangers on the street, but would likely to be true of judgments made about impoverished friends or acquaintances. The current research did not allow for any foreknowledge about the impoverished individuals’ situations, as all information given was to show a state of being, not the road to being in said state. Because of this limitation, this research has little bearing on the judgments that individuals make about impoverished non-strangers.

Another limitation of the current study was that opportunity was measured with only a single numeric value, resulting from a single question on a finite (six-point, no midpoint) scale asking participants how much opportunity they saw as available in America. While this value certainly gives an important piece of information to the research study, using only one question does not allow for a thorough understanding of how participants presently view opportunity in America. No larger pre-existing opportunity assessment scale (with multiple questions) was found to use for this research, but if one were to be developed, it would be useful for research of this nature. The
limitation of the finite opportunity scale is also possibly seen in the distribution of the opportunity prompt responses. The majority of the responses were just to the positive (more) side of the scale (choices 4 and 5). This may be the result of more unsure participants not having a midpoint to choose, and subsequently leaning positively rather than negatively. If the scale had had a midpoint, using a 5- or 7-point scale instead of six, indecisive or unsure participants would have had a better option, and the distribution might more clearly show whether there were participants were unsure about whether opportunity was present in small or large amounts.

Future Directions

Including the possible fixes mentioned in the previous limitations section, there are several suggestions for where future research on the topic of poverty attribution should turn. One important factor in any future research is exactly what constitutes poverty. Although all the character vignettes used in the present study depicted poverty, and were pilot tested as to being mild or extreme depictions of poverty, there is still a question about what constitutes poverty. Former Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court Potter Stewart said about obscenity (or pornography specifically), “I know it when I see it.” Poverty is very similar in that individuals likely know poverty when they encounter it. The problem herein lies with poverty not always being readily visible. Those who are unsure of where their next meal is coming from may not be emaciated. Those who cannot pay their bills may not be unshowered or dressed in rags. Individuals certainly recognize poverty once it reaches a certain point, but what about the millions of individuals in and around the poverty line, who seem to a casual observer to be not impoverished, but really are suffering the effects of mild poverty? Future research
should focus on better defining “poverty” so it can be studied at all levels, extreme to mild.

**Conclusions**

The present research had the goals of better understanding attitudes about poverty, judgments of impoverished individuals, and how varying degrees of poverty are differently assessed. This research completed these objectives, leaving researchers to build on these results and leaving those fighting poverty to use these results to better understand how poverty is viewed and judged. If the social problem of poverty is to be resolved, a better understanding of how it is viewed is only the first step. Intervention programs and social campaigns against poverty should use the information in this research and other similar research to create better, more effective solutions to combat the epidemic that is poverty in both America and across the world. If the citizens of the world are better informed about what poverty looks like, its effects, and its causes, then those citizens should make the honorable choice to solve the problem that poverty has become.
References


