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CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION OF POVERTY AMONG LEBANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This investigation attempts to study Lebanese youth attributions of poverty along Feagin's (1972) structuralist, individualist, and fatalistic dimensions. The explanations for poverty among Lebanese students were more structuralists than individualistic. The ANOVA results showed significant interactions between religious affiliation (Muslim and Christian) crossed with educational level (high, medium, and low) and occupation (high, middle, and low) on the structuralist attribution respectively. Higher educated Muslim students gave structuralist explanation of poverty with a significantly higher rating than their high -educated Christian counterparts and low class Muslims. The results of the study provided an insight to Lebanese students' organization of beliefs on poverty, with recommendations for further sampling among a heterogeneous sample.

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CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION OF POVERTY

Research on the beliefs about the causes of poverty has been influenced by the causal attribution theory (Heider 1958), and by personality style paradigm. Both theories emphasize the internality/externality of outcomes. "Internals" are those who see outcomes as function of what they themselves do, whereas "externals" see outcomes a function of forces beyond their control (Hogg and Vaughan 1995; McCormick and Soleman 1992). Feagin (1972) mapped out internality and externality of the causes of poverty along three dimensions: fatalistic (poverty is blamed on such variables as bad luck and illness); structuralistic (poverty is attributed to situational factors such as lack of education and low wages); and individualistic dimension (lack of education, lack of motivation, lack of abilities, and loose morals among the poor). Kluegel and

Smith (1981, 1986) analyzed the various psychological mechanisms of attribution biases of life experiences, i.e., beliefs about socioeconomic status (income, class, or social status), and demographic variables (age, gender, place of residence, and religion) as determinants for explaining the causes of poverty in psychosocial terms. While, class has been used as an important predictor for explaining causal attribution of poverty, other independent variables such as inter-group political behavior (Furnham 1982), financial status (Williamson 1974), and ethnicity (Hunt 1996) have also been used as predictors for explaining the causes of poverty.

Studies conducted in the United States have shown that causal attribution of poverty by Americans differs from societies in which political and social values permeate an egalitarian behavioral structure. Americans are more likely to attribute poverty to individualistic reasons, blaming the poor for their own plight, while privileging the rich (Feagin 1972, 1975). British adolescents' attitudes to poverty were more egalitarian than being individualistic, with more structural views to the causes of poverty (Furnham 1982). The findings of other studies conducted outside the United States have been mixed. The European (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland Italy, Luxemburg, Holland, Portugal, and United Kingdom) study, ranked the most common causes of poverty to bad luck (fatalistic-status quo), laziness (individualist), lack of will power (individualist), and injustice in society (societal) (Commission of the European Communities 1990). On the other hand, New Zealand adolescents attributed poverty to individual traits as being able to produce and maintain a standard of income (Stacy and Singer 1985). From another perspective, adopting the actor-observer model, Hine and Montiel (1999) showed that Filipinos were more structuralist and individualist than their Canadian university students counterparts. In a similar vein, recent data comparing the attitudes to poverty between Australian and Malawi university students (Carr and MacLachan 1998) they showed that Malawi students favored structuralist interpretations of poverty than their Australian counterparts.

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Evidently, lay explanations of poverty in Third World countries were more structural than those of Western developed ones. This might be distorted given the sampling procedures and what patterns of attribution they reflect. Hence, the level of education of the sample plays a salient role in the way patterns of attributions are presented. In fact, causal attribution of poverty varies across cultures and nations due to different patterns of family socialization (Kluegel and Smith 1981;1986), type of education, and other social and political processes. While sustained research has been strongly aware of the role of social and political institutions in the formation of beliefs about the causes of poverty (Furnham 1982), very little is known about the influence of religious, tribal, and traditional institutional beliefs concerning poverty. In addition, there is a distinct paucity of evidence on the impact of family socialization practices, personality characteristics, cognitive styles, and education on the formation of poverty attitudes.

In the light of cross-cultural studies on poverty, Hunt's (1996) control of the ethnic dimension as a predictor for explaining the causal attribution of poverty comes close to generalizing about how a cross-national confessional system as is the case of Lebanon can influence individuals' attribution of the causes of poverty. Hunt's study has showed a pattern among Afro-Americans of greater individualistic attribution of poverty than Whites did. Latinos ranked highest on the

individualistic scale followed by Afro-Americans and Whites. As religious or ethnic affiliation cuts across subjective socioeconomic measures such as education, income, and occupation; these being low or high, combined with religious identifications provide two discernible perspectives of attribution of responsibility for poverty. The first is what is considered the *culture of poverty hypothesis*, which explains poverty as a characteristic of the poor, and a permanent case of cross-generational way of life (Bullock 1999). This hypothesis attributes the causes of poverty to the poor and hence considers attributions as individualistic irrespective of confessional or ethnic affiliation. The second perspective is known as *system blame hypothesis* which is a more compatible notion with societies of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural systems (Della Fave 1974). The *system blame hypothesis* suggests that individuals belonging to a certain group believe whether correctly or incorrectly they have been discriminated against, they will tend to deflect responsibility of a negative event on the system.

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Social scientists have also looked at attributes to poverty separated along factors of socioeconomic status, and group consciousness (Huber and Form 1973; Vanneman 1980; Guest 1980). A number of studies drew the relation between class and attributions to poverty. These studies, (e.g., Furnham 1982, 1985) have showed principal individualistic attributions (i.e., blame the poor) of poverty among middle class individuals. Bullock (1999) found similar attributions in her American sample indicating a middle-class individualistic attribution. Kluegel and Smith (1986) showed rather a weak correlation between most standard socio-demographic variables and beliefs about poverty. On the other hand, Nilson (1981) in his use of education, income, and occupational status measures, found income to have a small effect on the individualistic dimension. As alluded to earlier, many of the inconsistent results regarding poverty may be due to sampling procedures and sample representation: particularly, in the selection of non-homogeneous samples being of high middle class and low middle class. This study first explores the patterns of attributions among class gradients in a Middle Eastern societal context. Specifically, it will look at the extent to which explanations of poverty can be classified into fatalistic, individualistic, societal, and structural attributions. Factor analytic studies (Feagin 1972; Feather 1974; Furnham 1982; Morcol 1997) have supported the latter three-factor structures. This study will also attempt to adapt the operational measures of poverty analysis in order to derive a pattern of attribution reflecting the three-factor structure.

In reviewing the extant literature of poverty, very little is known about how the university students in Middle Eastern societies (the case of Lebanon) attribute the causes of poverty. The *culture of poverty hypothesis* suggests that relatively disadvantaged individuals who have some interest and benefit in structural change could make more structuralist attributions of poverty. This relationship is not quite evident in societies characterized by a high level of alienation and wide gaps in socio-economic statuses. Khashan (1992) reports that Lebanese youth approach their institutions with ambiguity, manifesting low levels of trust in them. The separation between the individual and the state compounded by a prolonged social and economic crisis tends to lead to a structuralist explanation of poverty, a process of externalizing blame (Kluegel and Smith 1981). In our view, the explanation of poverty in Lebanon could reveal a different perspective than that supplied by the *culture of poverty hypothesis*.

Since racial or religious distinctiveness cut across social classes, interactions with socioeconomic factors offer two discernible hypotheses for this study. In the context of Lebanon's multi-confessional society (Khashan 1992): The more affluent, high status, and powerful Christians would tend to endorse individualistic attributions of poverty, while the less to do Muslims will be more agile to endorse structuralist attributions. This is comparable to the analysis and patterns of poor ethnic minorities who would generally make structural attributions of poverty (Bullock 1999). In order to test for this hypothesis, the authors empirically examined the relation of socioeconomic factors of income, parental level of education and occupational status with religious identification on Lebanese students' attribution of poverty.

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METHOD

Participants

A sample of 232 students enrolled in two private universities in Lebanon was selected for the study. One hundred and thirty nine students were female (61.2%) and 88 were males (38.8%). In terms of their religious background, n=123 of the respondents came from Christian groups 107 from Muslim groups. Students self-reported their parents' level of occupation on a three point scale ranging from high to low. This was transformed to a ratio by dividing each of the mothers' and fathers' occupational statuses by 3, and average taken between them. Based on the median of the distribution of the single occupational status variable, a three level occupational status was obtained (i.e., high, middle and low). The same algorithm was used to obtain the parents' level of education. Based on the distribution of the variable with median as the datum indicator, a three level educational level was obtained. Similarly, self-reported average father's and mother's income was recalculated into one family average income and re-coded into a three level variable (high, middle and low).

Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of 29 variables was prepared and administered by the authors. The variables on the questionnaire were obtained and adapted from the pertinent literature (Feagin 1972; Hunt 1996; Morcol 1997; Griffin and Oheneba-Sakyi 1993; Williamson 1974). Several procedures were employed to ensure the reliability of the data and the validity of the instrument. Panel discussions and open ended-interviews involving students and faculty were organized to deal with the various aspects of the questionnaire. A pilot test was administered to 19 students outside the main sample frame to ensure the clarity of the variables, and required changes were added to the final format of the questionnaire. Factor analysis employing varimax rotation with an eigen cut-off value of 1.0 was used to obtain the construct validity of the instruments (Can you report the Cronbach Alpha).

The structure of the questionnaire was divided into two sections (see appendix I). Section one included the following background information: gender, sectarian identification, social class, employment, parents' (father and mother) occupational status, educational background, and family annual income. Section two of the questionnaire requested students to respond to 15 statements on the causes of poverty (fatalistic, individualistic and structuralistic) using a five-

point multiple-choice scale: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) do not know, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree.

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RESULTS

Factor Analysis Results

Data collected on the poverty scale were factor analyzed using principle component analysis with units in the diagonal, an eigen cut-off value of 1.0, and varimax rotation. Analysis of the 15 items was reduced to four factors: the first factor accounted for 17.6% of the variance, the second 13.8%, the third 6.2%, and the fourth 4.0%. These results were considered to provide an easily interpretable inference corresponding to the scales devised.

Table 1, presents the factor analysis results: the distributed loading on all rotated factors provides good evidence for the validity of items in *a priori* of the conceptualized scale. The first factor loading appeared for items 1 through 5, which is the structure scale. The second factor showed a high loading on items 11, 13, 14, and 15 conceptualized as individualistic. Two items from the second factor: "too many children per household and sickness" and "physical handicaps" were considered as conditions that cannot be drawn out easily as separate characteristic of the poor but as status quo conditions. Hence, this dimension was considered to be as individualistic attribution with a status quo explanation of poverty. The third factor showed high loading on items 8 and 9 which explained the fatalistic dimension. The fourth factor had high loading for items 6, 7, 10, and 12, items 6 and 7 considered lack of skilled workers in society and immigration from the country as societal explanations of poverty. This particular factor had a 4.0% of the variance explained and could not be said to have *a priori* classification. This factor produced a level of heterogeneity not evident in the other three factors (structuralistic, individualistic and fatalistic) and provided little significant change in the overall factor analysis results. However, we labeled it as individualistic because blame was directed at the individual's status quo. The overall composition of the scale in the test was psychometrically valid and showed that the general structure from an internal or external attribution perspective was interpretable from the factor analysis results.

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Table 1. Factor Analysis of the 15-Item Poverty Scale

Factor	Poverty Items	Loading	h2 Comm	Variance	Reliability
Structuralist	1.The government's difficulty to provide jobs	.59297	.40	17.60%	0.70
	2.The government's difficulty to provide housing	.69087	.53		

	3.The government's difficulty to provide education	.65037	.42		
	4.The government's difficulty to provide health services	.71591	.53		
	5.The government's difficulty to support agriculture	.54542	.39		
Individualist (status quo)	11.Too many children per household	.44815	.34	13.80%	0.60
	13. Sickness and physical handicapped	.42818	.29		
	14. Lack of proper money management amongst the poor	.60368	.42		
	15. Lack of education among the poor	.68196	.47		
Fatalist	8. Just bad luck	.80497	.67	6.20%	0.70
	9. Fate	.75346	.60		
Individual (blaming the poor) (societal)	6. Lack of skilled people in society	.49066	.26	4.00%	0.50
	7. Immigration from the country	.55200	.32		
	10. Lack of effort by the poor	.40914	.29		
	12. Loose morals among the poor	.37953	.29		

Rating the Poverty Scales

Three empirically validated scales, which explained poverty, were adapted in the study (fatalistic: items 8 and 9; individualistic (status quo): 11,13,14, and 15; individualistic (societal): 6,7,10, and 12; and structuralistic: items 1-5). In each of these scales a mean score was obtained by adding the rating on each item for the scale, then dividing by the number of items for that particular scale. Table 2, presents a paired-t scores for the analysis. Consistently, individuals rated the structuralistic scale higher than all other scales (the higher the ratings the higher the agreement on the aggregate scores).

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Subjects consistently rated the causes of poverty being less fatalistic than being individualistic or structuralistic. Past research (e.g., Hunt 1996) viewed the individualist versus the structuralist dimension at two extreme bipolar ends in which two beliefs either structural or individualistic were inconsistently held together. The individualistic (societal) may underpin two external attributions: fatalism and structuralism as it presented a rather weak and non-homogeneous factor explaining little variance in the overall factor structure.

The mean difference between all four combinations of poverty ratings (fatalist, individualist (status quo), individualist (societal), and structuralist) is highly significant. These findings indicate that during times of social change or turmoil, as is the case of Lebanon, structural beliefs may actually dominate the ideological beliefs of society (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Significant difference was found by all combinatorial differences on the attributions of poverty. The lowest rating was obtained on the fatalistic dimension; subsequent analysis would have to question the differences between socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables.

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Table 2. t-test scores difference between all four explanations of poverty dimensions

Explanation	Mean	N	T
Fatalistic	2.21		
		232	-13.28***
Individualist (societal)	3.18		
Fatalistic	2.21		
		232	-20.73***
Structuralist	4.02		
Fatalistic	2.21		
		232	-16.24***
Individualist (status quo)	3.47		
Individualist (societal)	3.18		
		232	-11.72***
Structuralist	4.02		
Individualist (societal)	3.18		
		232	-4.92***
Individualist (status quo)	3.47		
Structuralist	4.02		
		232	8.47***
Individualist (status quo)	3.47		

* p<05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

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Effects of Socioeconomic Subjective Estimates and Socio-demographic Variables

The ANOVA analysis of two independent variables of socioeconomic status crossed by the religious identification on the dependent variable of causal attribution yielded several important results. The first analysis was 3x2 ANOVA which included factors of educational level of high, middle, and low crossed by religious identification (Christian and Muslim) on the four mean ratings on the dimensions of fatalism, status quo and societal individualism, and structuralism. No significant differences were found between and within the three dimensions for educational level, with exception to main significant effects of religion on the fatalistic dimension. Muslim students gave more fatalistic attributions than their Christian counterparts ($F(1,190)=4.61$, $p=.033$). Interaction effects were found between religious identification and educational status. Highly educated Muslims were more structuralist in their rating of the poverty scale than their Christian counterparts (Bonferroni *post hoc* test: $t=2.29$, $p=0.02$). Highly educated Muslims were also more structuralist than middle class Muslims ($t=2.43$, $df=43$, $p=0.02$).

We further investigated two other designs involving socioeconomic variables: parents' occupational status crossed by religious identification and family financial income crossed by religious affiliation on the four attributions of the poverty scale. No main socio-economic effects of religious identification and socio-economic levels of income and occupational status were found in the analysis. However, significant interaction between religious identification and occupational status were reported on the structuralist dimension ($F(2,176)=5.46$, $p=0.05$). A post-hoc Bonferroni test showed that Muslim students from middle occupational status were more structuralists in their attributions of poverty than their Christian counterparts ($t=3.26$, $p=0.003$). Also Muslim students from high occupational status parents were more structuralist than low class Muslims ($t=-2.35$, $df=48$, $p=0.02$). No significant main effects were found for the third design of occupational status and religious identification on the three other dimensions of poverty. Given the distribution of occupational status, and income, the present results indicated little or no support to any main effects. However, the effects of interaction lead us to believe that parental educational level and occupational status crossed with religious identification on the rating of the structuralist dimensions provide significant interaction on the group's position towards structuralism. While main effects were minimal with exception to religion on fate ($F(1,195)=4.61$, $p=0.03$), Muslims like Christians disagreed on the fatalistic dimension, but the difference between them was significant with higher disagreement rating among the Christians. No significant differences on all other dimensions were found between Christians and Muslims. The socio-economic status of education and occupational status discriminated between Muslims and Christians on the structuralist dimension. Differences were apparently in the direction were Muslims were more structuralist and fatalist than Christians. Significantly, Muslims of high socio-economic status were more structuralist than lower middle class Muslims.

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DISCUSSION

The dimensions derived from the factor analysis provide a consistent construct validity of the poverty scale as originally conceptualized by Feagin (1972, 1975). The embodiment of these factors among Lebanese students provides evidence for the construct validity of the poverty items and the universality of the psychometric properties. However, there is evidence that the three-factor structure originally conceived by Feagin (1972) has in fact a sub-dimension. For instance, the individualistic dimension appeared to be divided and meshed with societal and status quo factors not accounted for in Feagin's (1972) study. Furthermore, our results may complement those of Morcol's (1997) five factor analysis results which showed similar structural properties of the poverty scale with the highest account for the variance for the structuralist dimension, followed by the individualistic and the fatalistic one. The study also indicates that occupational status which is traditionally regarded important to assessing one's social class (Jackman and Jackman 1979) is related to structural attributions.

Previous research (Bullock 1999) reported that poor participants endorsed structural attributions more strongly than affluent groups. The patterns of attributions of poverty among Lebanese university students differed from those progressed in Western countries such as the US. High educated and middle occupational status participants' explanations of poverty were not free of interaction effects of confessional or religious affiliation. Although structuralist attributions were the highest across the board, surprisingly, low class Muslims did not give a higher structuralist attribution than did the high-class participants, negating the *system blame hypothesis*. However, examination of within group differences on the individualistic (societal) and individualistic (status quo) factors revealed that middle occupational and middle income groups had a higher rating of poverty than low or high occupational income groups respectively, but not at a significant level. The middle class students' individualistic attribution of poverty is perceived to benefit the person's own achievement and motivation. In cases where individuals are actors and see themselves as operative, with a foreseen gain from their actions they may actively perceive a negative outcome like poverty by externalizing blame on the object of effect (Jones 1976; Locke and Pennigton 1982; Schoeneman and Rubanowitz 1985). Keeping in mind that Lebanese youth live in a collectivist society with an in-group thinking about outcomes, they reflect a kind of thinking of "them" against "us". Hence, attributions of domestic poverty are infrequently attributed to the individual because the individual is part of a group, and stereotyped by some features of it.

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Our results departed from the *system blame hypothesis* as well as the *cultural of poverty hypothesis* since high-income groups were more individualistic in their attributions of poverty than low-income groups. Neither of these hypotheses is appropriate to be generalized to Middle Eastern society, such as Lebanon. However, there is certain level of externality of attributions among Muslims not evident among Christians. For instance, the significant and high level of structuralism was not evident among Christians perhaps because the Muslim community of Lebanon has been marginalized from the process of institutional building, in particular in governmental ministries. Specifically the high structuralist attitudes among the high-class Muslims, provided a reverse perspective of the *system blame hypothesis*. Perhaps the dynamics of neopatriarchal society (Sharabi 1987) has some role in the way individuals perceive themselves as actors and pursuits of change in a collectivist society. Hence, Lebanese youth

resolve psychological discomfort of negative events by deflecting responsibility as a defense mechanism for protecting the internal core of patriarchal society extended family, tribe, or community.

A fresher note about poverty in Middle Eastern society suggests there is wide skepticism about religious fatalism. Youth in Lebanon have in turn become more realistic and cautious about hegemony and institutional failure to eradicate poverty. The general case of dissatisfaction with the current government role in alleviating suffering from individuals has reached disparaging stages, as economic dismay has affected and expanded to encompass the middle class. Perhaps, there is a kind of social awareness with a strong feeling of social justice (*social justice hypothesis*) overriding the religious demagoguery of subservience and fatality.

This study opens a number of opportunities for researchers in the field. Given the multiplicity of confessional communities in Lebanon, our results could be generalizable to other multi-ethnic or multi-confessional countries with historical parity as of Lebanon. Furthermore, we view that self-perception measures as correlates with attitudes towards poverty, would give a better direction in our research with predictive validity for the poverty scale, as well as, validity of the structuralist view of the causal attribution of poverty. Those individuals who may have a self-concept that is global may be more structuralists than individualistic. Conversely, those that have a self-concept that is self-referential may be more individualist than structuralist.

Several limitations in this study should be reported. First, the socioeconomic statuses of respondents was not an objective measure but a subjective one since students rated their parents' occupational statuses and income levels not their own. Second, while the sample studied was representative of universities in Lebanon, it was not representative of the sectarian distribution of the nation or of the geographic characteristic features in which the two universities were situated. Third, the fact that the mean age of the sample was 19, the sample may have limited experience in understanding the phenomena of poverty in society. Future studies in the field should account for a more heterogeneous sample from labor unions, political parties, and other social groups. Such a heterogeneous sample might generate previously unexplored findings related to the causes of poverty.

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