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PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF POVERTY COMPARING THREE NATIONAL GROUPS: LEBANON, PORTUGAL, AND SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study compared attitudes regarding poverty among South African, Lebanese, and Portuguese college students (n=563) as measured by the individualist, fatalist, and structuralist dimensions of the causes of poverty. The results showed that South African students were more individualist in their explanation of the causes of poverty than their Portuguese ($t(1,305)=4.62, p=0.00$) and Lebanese ($t(1,417)=-2.85, p=0.005$) counterparts. Perception of the causes of poverty was more structural than fatalistic or individualistic respectively for the three national groups. All combinatorial pairings failed to show significant differences among the three samples on the structuralist dimension. Regression analysis results showed that the main predictor on the perception of poverty was the country on each of the three dimensions: fatalist, individualist, and structuralist dimensions. The study produced similar factor structure to those conceptualized by Feagin (1972).

INTRODUCTION

Grounded in the attribution theory (Harvey, 1984; Heider, 1958) and the psychology of explanation (e.g., Kelly, 1973) a number of studies sought to understand the perceptions of the causes of poverty (PCP). On a priori grounds Feagin (1972) has conceptualized three exploratory poverty indexes: (1) individualistic explanations, which place the responsibility for poverty primarily on the poor themselves; (2) structural explanations, which blame poverty on external social and economic forces; and (3) fatalistic explanations, which cite such factors as bad luck and illness.

A number of within-country studies later reproduced Feagin's poverty indexes (Bullock, 1999; Hunt, 1996; Hine & Montiel, 1999; Furnham, 1985; Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Furnham, 1993; Bowles & Gintis, 1998; Bagguley & Mann, 1992) yielding mixed results and using differentiable social structures, political processes, economic cycles, socio-demographic characteristics and cultural variations as independent variables for predicting the causes of poverty. For instance, studies conducted in the U.S showed that the majority of Americans explained the causes of poverty in individualistic terms (Smith & Stone, 1989; Kluegel & Smith, 1981; 1986; Feagin, 1975), reflecting the strength of the individualistic ideology of that country (Merton, 1968). Race appeared to be a powerful predictor for PCP; White Americans had more negative perceptions of poverty, and were more likely to blame the poor for their own plight than Blacks (Feagin, 1975; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) and Latinos (Hunt, 1996). Furthermore, studies have shown that American middle class subjects were significantly more individualistic than being structuralistic or fatalistic in their PCP (Bullock, 1999; Alston & Dean, 1972; Huber & Form, 1973; Smith & Bond, 1993).

Studies conducted outside the U.S have varied in the degree to which they take account of socio-demographic variables as determinants for PCP. In Britain, for instance, studies indicated that party affiliation and political behavior affected the formation of beliefs about poverty. Furnham (1982) and Wagstaff (1983) found that Conservative voters in Britain rated individualistic explanations for poverty more frequently than their Labour counterparts, who favored structural

explanations of poverty. In addition, Feather (1974) who replicated Feagin's experiment in Australia showed that Australians were less likely to perceive the causes of poverty to individualistic reasons than Americans did. Influenced by the collectivist culture of the Middle East, structural PCP were reported among Turks (Morcol, 1997) and Lebanese (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2001).

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As a reaction to the welfare program during the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S and other Western European countries, there has been a substantial amount of literature dealing with attitudes to welfare (Bullock, 1995). These studies have mainly concerned American, Western European and Australian samples (Hunt, 1996; Bullock, 1999; Lewis, et. al, 1995; Feather, 1974) and yielded important insights into the psychology of explanation. However, focusing on limited range of Western countries runs the risk of generalizing to different national contexts such as developing countries. Hence, within-country studies do not allow quantitative cross-cultural comparisons because of different sampling techniques, questionnaire items, and measurements scales. Moreover, available cross-cultural studies on poverty compare two, or at most three groups on the basis of similarities of their contexts. For example, Singh & Vasudeva, (1977) have studied the perceptions of the causes of poverty in the context of economic recession among Europeans in EU countries. Other studies (e.g., McFadyen, 1998; Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Hine & Montiel, 1999; Furnham, 1985) have compared mean differences among "nationality in transition" immigrants and subjects from Western countries, rather than among national groups in different countries.

To date, there has been no attempt at systematic cross-cultural research on PCP in developed and underdeveloped countries, particularly among countries undergoing unprecedented social, economic, and political transformations. If social psychology aids in the interpretation of historical, social and economic trends (Gergen, 1973), then it is possible that new exploratory indexes of PCP on a Likert scale can be used to compare attitudes among heterogeneous countries. Cross-cultural PCP may be important in promoting public awareness to bring meaning to the concept of poverty and the role of culture and ideology in perpetuating it. Surely understanding the perceptions of causality of poverty phenomena has implications in policy making for its removal (Pandey et al., 1982).

This study compared perceptions of poverty among Portuguese, Lebanese, and South African college students along individualist, structuralist, and fatalist dimensions. The aim of this study

was to examine the type and range of explanation in countries undergoing social, political and economic change. For instance, Lebanon has moved away from war to peace (Khashan, 1992), South Africa from apartheid to democracy (May, 1999), and Portugal has joined the EU (Rodrigues, 1993). Given that South Africa is a relatively wealthy country, which is characterized by economic disparities, Blacks and Colored can be classified as poor or vulnerable to poverty (May, 1999; Bundy, 1992). Like South Africa, Portugal is an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2000) yet it suffers from serious social and economic inequalities (Rodrigues, 1993). In addition, Lebanon is well known for social and economic disparities between Christians and Muslims (Johnson, 1986) as well as for a history of civil strife and political instability, it has had a sharp decline in standards of living (Haddad, 1996).

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While within-country poverty studies have concentrated on standard demographic differences in PCP, it may be equally important to consider PCP among national groups distinguished by class and education. The most difficult task in conducting cross-cultural research, however, is establishing equivalence between socio-demographic variables across different countries (Bynner & Chisholm, 1995) since they are in every society confounded (Furnham, 1982) and tends to have different meanings for participants in different cultures (Carpenter, 2000). This task is particularly problematic when levels and types of education, income, and social class are compared (Jackman, 1979). To avoid such difficulties in interpreting data, a panel of judges from the three research universities has, aligned on a priori grounds three definitions for class, income, and education to be used simultaneously in the three research countries. The present study defined class as a "social prestige hierarchy" based on income, and occupational factors. Similarly, education measured participant's parents' educational attainment level, from elementary to university level. Income was also defined in terms of an individual's holding of property and salary according to the economic situation of each participating country. Respondents were made aware of the established definitions of class, income, and education and were asked to rate each variable from high, to medium, to low. This method has strengthened our confidence in the validity of the subjective socio-demographic variables used in the study.

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do psychometric fatalistic, individualistic, and structuralist factors appear among the three national groups?
2. Are there cross-cultural differences among university students in the three national groups?

3. Are there significant correlation between the socio-demographic factors of subjective educational status, income level, and occupational status with students' PCP?

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METHOD

Participants

Five hundred and sixty three students from three countries participated in the study (251 Lebanese, 120 Portuguese, and 192 South Africans). The administration of the Lebanese sample, consisting of respondents from the University of Balamand and Notre Dame University, occurred over a two-month period during the spring semester of the 1998-99 academic year. Field researchers administered the Portuguese and South African samples in June 1999 in a single exercise. The Portuguese respondents came from the Instituto Politecnico de Leiria, whereas their South African counterparts came from Cape Technikon University. All students (n=563) self-reported their parents class on a three-point scale ranging from high to low and the average taken between them was transformed into a ratio by dividing each of the class status rating of student's parents. In addition, a three level educational status of the parents on a three-point scale was obtained (high, middle, and low). Based on the distribution of the variable with median as the datum indicator, a three level educational level was obtained.

Questionnaire

We prepared a two-part questionnaire in consultation with a panel of academics from the three participating countries. The first part recorded socio-demographic information: age, gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, parents' educational level as well as their occupational status. The second part of the questionnaire requested students to rate 15 items on the causes of poverty obtained from the pertinent literature (Feagin, 1972; Hunt, 1996; Morcol, 1997) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1=strongly agree" to "5=strongly disagree." A panel of judges from the three participating countries volunteered to judge the validity of the poverty items. In addition, panel discussions and open ended-interviews involving students

and faculty from the three participating universities reviewed the questionnaire items for its appropriateness, adequateness, and quality. Based on pilot runs and recommendations presented by the panel of academicians, item 8 of Feagin's poverty index "Prejudice and discrimination against Negroes" was considered inappropriate for Lebanon and Portugal; hence it was removed from the questionnaire. Two additional items as derived from interviews with students (n=19) and faculty from the participating universities were added to the poverty list. The additional items were "acceptance of too many foreign workers" and "Social duties. "

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Procedure

We wrote the questionnaire in English and students appeared to have no problems with the items at all because Lebanese and South African students took their courses in English, and the majority of the Portuguese sample has passed their English Entrance Tests. The questionnaire was completed anonymously in class time and generated a considerable amount of interest among students as shown in the return response rate that reached 96% level.

RESULTS

Correlations and Factor Analysis

We applied the factor analysis procedure for each national group separately, in which they computed component analysis with a varimax rotation using all 15 items. Factors with an eigen-value greater than one were set as defaults.

Three main factors emerged among the three samples with two additional factors providing mixed results. Item 1 of the structuralist dimension (Acceptance of too many foreign workers) loaded highly on the fourth and sixth factors among Lebanese, Portuguese, and South African students respectively. We conceived this factor as status quo. Similarly, item 5 (social duties) appeared on a fifth factor for

the Portuguese and on the fourth factor for the South African samples. The three factors accounted for 40.2% of the variance for the Lebanese sample, 41.7% for the Portuguese and 44.4% for the South African sample. The fourth and fifth factors were labeled societal and status quo respectively as they loaded heterogeneously along the fourth and fifth factors with other items loading slightly lower. Table 1 reports structure variance and eigen value of the first three factors. The last two factors were mixed and cannot be said to have good evidence of a priori classification due to their low communality. Apparently, two items in the structuralist dimension did not provide strong evidence of a dimensional fit-ins; and loaded highly on the last two dimensions were removed from the analysis.

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Table 1 Factor Structure of the 15 Poverty Items for the Lebanese, Portuguese and South African Participants

Items	Loading by Country (Factor)			Factor Variance (Eigenvalue)		
	LB	PR	SA	LB	PR	SA
Structural	(3)	(3)	(3)	11.9 (1.8)	11.1 (1.6)	11.7 (1.7)
1. Acceptance of too many foreign workers	0.05	-0.10	-0.07			
2. Lack of money management by the government	0.33	0.70	0.50			
3. The government's difficulty to provide schooling	0.71	0.75	0.69			
4. Inadequate health services provided by the government	0.79	0.63	0.69			
5. Social duties (gifts, visits, parties) demanded by culture	0.52	-0.01	0.07			
Fate	(1)	(1)	(2)	15.2 (2.3)	17.8 (2.7)	16.1 (2.4)
6. Bad luck	0.58	0.86	0.79			
7. Fate	0.85	0.87	0.73			
8. God's will	0.80	0.65	0.67			
9. Human nature	0.57	0.31	0.55			
10. External forces that we neither understand nor control	0.40	0.73	0.50			

Individualism	(2)	(2)	(1)	13.1 (2.0)	12.8 (1.9)	174.2 (2.6)
11. Lack of effort by poor	0.72	0.44	0.71			
12. Loose morals among the poor	0.74	0.66	0.71			
13. Sickness and physical handicapped	0.65	0.32	0.61			
14. Lack of proper money management among the poor	0.49	0.78	0.73			
15. Lack of education among the poor	0.23	0.67	0.67			
Societal	(3)	(5)	(4)			
5. Social duties (gifts, visits, parties) demanded by culture	0.52	0.91	0.68			
Status Quo	(4)	(6)	(4)			
1. Acceptance of too many foreign workers	0.70	0.89	0.69			

LB=Lebanon
PR=Portugal
SA=South Africa

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Our second objective was to see if such factor structure was associated with the three samples. A correlation analysis of factor loading among the three samples was performed. Low correlation appeared between the Portuguese and Lebanese samples on their rating of the individualist as well as the fatalist dimensions, while a low correlation between the Portuguese and South African samples on the individualist dimension was found. A strong correlation provided evidence of internal consistency for the poverty scale (See Table 2).

Table 2 Cronbach alpha and Pearson Correlation of Factor loading Among the Lebanese, Portuguese, and South African Samples

	Cronbach Alpha			Pearson Correlation	
	Fatalist	Individualist	Structuralist	Lebanon	Portugal
Lebanon	0.67	0.68	0.63		

Portugal	0.77	0.67	0.54	0.62(Structuralist)	
				0.27(Fatalistic)	
South Africa	0.68	0.74	0.64	-0.17(Individualist)	0.73(Structuralist)
				0.93(Structuralist)*	0.49(Fatalist)
				0.73(Fatalistic)	
				0.88(Individualist)*	0.16(Individualist)

* Significant at the 0.05 level, ** significant at the 0.01 level

Means of the Socioeconomic Factors

Table 3 reports the means for the class and parent's education variables. A significant difference was found among the Lebanese and Portuguese samples on class ($t=4.7$, $df=368$, $p<0.001$) and educational level ($t=10.57$, $df=365$, $p<0.001$). Also, differences appeared among the Lebanese and South African sample on class ($t=4.14$, $df=438$, $p<0.001$) and educational level ($t=4.56$, $df=432$, $p<0.001$). In addition, a significant difference was found on the educational level between the Portuguese and South Africans ($t=5.92$, $df=301$, $p<0.001$), while no difference appeared between Portuguese and South African on the class variable. Portuguese and South Africans appeared to share the same class level. The highest class level and educational level of the parents for the Portuguese sample appeared to be the same for the South African sample.

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Tables 3 Means and Standard Deviations for Class and Educational Level for the Three National Groups

	Educational Level		Class	
	Mean (n)	SD	Mean(n)	SD
Lebanon	2.8(250)	0.65	1.69(249)	0.49
Portugal	3.14(120)	0.47	2.31(118)	0.59
South Africa	3.1(190)	0.70	1.92(185)	0.54

Regression Analysis among the Three National Groups

A step-wise regression analysis was calculated on the mean rating of the three dimensions: fatalism, individualism, and structuralism: **The higher the mean rating the lower the agreements on each item representing the dimension.** Nationality was entered as a dummy variable in the regression analysis. Results indicated that class and educational level of parents did not contribute significantly towards the explanation of the variance for all the dimensions. Overall, none of the subjective socio-demographic variables appeared to strongly predict the PCP (See Table 4). However, country differences were the only predictor of PCP for the fatalistic and individualistic dimensions. These results do not support the view that the "Western-oriented Portuguese" and South African students perceive the causes of poverty in individualistic terms. In fact, perceptions for the Portuguese were inversely related on the fatalistic dimension with the Lebanese and South African samples (See Table 4).

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Table 4 A Step-Wise Multiple Regression Analysis on the three Attributions by Social Class and Educational Level

	Beta			R-square	F
	Class	Educational Level	Country		
	Lebanon and South Africa[1]				
Fatalistic	-0.06	0.07	0.2*	0.013	1.81
Individualistic	0.005	0.09	0.24**	0.021	2.90*
Structuralist	0.1	0.14	0.05	0.02	2.3
	Lebanon and Portugal[2]				
Fatalistic	0.102	0.03	-0.3*	0.04	4.4**
Individualistic	0.04	-0.11	-0.25	0.01	1.5
Structuralist	-0.02	0.03	0.06	0.001	0.17
	Portugal and South Africa[3]				
Fatalistic	-0.06	0.007	-0.5**	0.08	8.1**
Individualistic	0.004	-0.09	-0.5**	0.05	4.5**

Structuralist	0.017	0.15	0.12	0.01	1.2
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*p<0.05, **p<0.005

[1] Lebanon coded as 1 and South Africa as 0.

[2] Lebanon coded as 1 and Portugal as 0.

[3] Portugal coded as 1 and South Africa 0.

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Mean Differences in Explanations of Poverty

A mean was obtained for the three dimensions of the factor structure. For the structuralist dimension, item 1 and 5 were removed from the conceived dimension of poverty and the mean found on the rating. Adding the ratings and dividing them by the number of items added determined the mean rating. South African students were more individualists in their explanation of poverty than Portuguese ($t(1,305)=4.62, p=0.00$) and Lebanese ($t(1,417)=-2.85, p=0.005$) students respectively. Among all the combinatorial pairings of national groups, no difference was found on the structuralist dimension among the three samples. Portuguese students were consistently neutral with similar structuralist rating of South African and Lebanese students. In addition, not all samples attributed the causes of poverty to fatalistic reasons. However, near neutral ratings were found between South African students, followed by Lebanese, then Portuguese. These results provide little support to the idea that the more heterogeneous Portuguese and South African students were more individualistic as opposed to the more structuralist perceptions reported by the Lebanese sample. We conducted a 3x3x3 ANOVA on the main effects of country, education, and class. We found that the interaction of country by education had a significant effect on individualism ($F(4,500)=2.88, p<0.05$). Portuguese students whose parents had less educational level had the lowest level individualism, while low educational level of the parents for the South African sample had the highest individualistic attitudes. Comparatively, the mean rating for the Lebanese sample was lowest for high class individualism. Surprisingly, South Africans expressed more fatalistic PCP than their Portuguese and Lebanese students. Cross-tabulation revealed, however, that the most fatalistically inclined South Africans were non-Whites. In addition, within-country differences showed significance between all combinatorial ratings of the fatalist, individualist and structuralist dimensions. Hence, students were

more structuralist than individualist or fatalist, and more individualist than being fatalist (see Table 5).

Table 5 Paired t-test Between the Three National Groups on the Three Dimensions

	Fatalist			Individualist			Structuralist		
	Mean (n)	SD	T	Mean(n)	SD	t	Mean(n)	SD	t
Lebanon	3.4(236)	0.85	-3.02**	2.8(234)	0.81	-1.37**	2.1(243)	0.81	0.53
Portugal	3.6(120)	0.82		3.0(119)	0.79		2.1(117)	0.69	
Lebanon	3.4(236)	0.85	1.99*	2.8(234)	0.81	2.85**	2.1(243)	0.80	-0.05
South Africa	3.2(187)	0.84		2.6(185)	0.82		2.1(189)	0.85	
Portugal	3.6(120)	0.82	4.62**	3.0(110)	0.79	3.71**	2.1(117)	0.69	-0.54
South Africa	3.2(187)	0.84		2.6(185)	0.82		2.1(189)	0.85	

* p<0.05, **p<0.01

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DISCUSSION

The factor analysis results produced five factors, with three of these factors loading on the preconceptualized individualistic, structuralistic, and fatalistic dimensions of the perceptions of the causes of poverty scale. These dimensions were reported in earlier poverty studies (Feagin, 1972; Hine and Montiel, 1999; Furnham, 1982a; Harper & Manasse, 1992). The observed pattern of the first three factors suggests that social factors such as culture and social policies are distinct from government's policies reflecting a pattern of factor structures appearing in other studies (e.g., Bullock, 1999).

The high structuralist PCP among the three national samples reflects a pattern of attributions, which is likely to be activated among different geographical, political, and cultural distinct groups when faced with the idea of poverty. Furthermore, while previous within-country studies have shown that interpretations of poverty firmly entrenched in the dominant belief system, this study suggests that structural attitudes are linked to "blaming-the-system" (Della Fave, 1974) which is frequently expressed in societies undergoing social, political, and economic change (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In particular, the high structuralist PCPs among South Africans or blaming the government and its institutions is a reflection of the attitudes toward economic policy that continues to produce poverty and inequality (May, 2000). As it is the case for

Lebanon where the high structuralist PCPs interprets blaming the system for the current economic problems (Haddad, 1996). Structuralist attributions of poverty among Portuguese students reflect the recent politico-economic changes in Europe, which have moved Portugal from a predominantly agrarian country into the folds of a "modern" European World. On a more important result White and Colored South Africans showed the highest level of fatalistic PCPs in our study. This high fatalism may reflect an adjustment among these respondents that helps them alleviate psychological discomfort resulting of past abuses of Blacks during apartheid and the concomitant economic decay that swept South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Klein, 2002).

There were no significant predictive relation of class and education on the three dimensions of PCP. These results counter those reported by Hunt (1996) who found Latinos and Blacks presented predictive relations with clear socio-demographic variables showing a clear white versus minority effects. Why has our samples shown no clear predictive effects? It may be that other factors as confessional or ethnic affiliation may be acting as a discriminator to PCP. Particularly, that Lebanese society is quite heterogeneous along confessional lines maintaining conflicting ideological stances (Khashan, 1992). Also South Africa's ethnic conflict has stifled the nation's economy and social harmony dogging one ethnic group over another (Klein, 2002). We were limited to include ethnicity and confession affiliation in the study considering that Portuguese students were ethnically homogenous.

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From the perspective of social movements, students ideologically may have shattered the poverty-rich divide. The idealistic beliefs consider the way out of the current state would be through sound governmental policies. Keeping in mind that education looms as a "double edged sword." As a gateway to upward mobility and high occupational attainment, one would expect education to raise the social status of people and reinforce their individualistic attitudes. However, liberal and humanistic education leads to idealism and enhances the appeal of the structural alternative that we see in our sample. Our results were similar to studies that did not find clear class and education effect (Huber & Form, 1973; Feagin, 1972) on the formation of attitudes towards poverty.

The universities included in this study generally attract upper and middle-class students, and only few students from working class backgrounds. To a large degree, this seems to contribute to the explanation of similar patterns of PCP on the structuralist dimension. Apparently, government policy and economic downturn in the three national groups may have contributed to blame the government policies, which they see, leading the country into further economic degeneration. Reflecting European cultural orientation, the Portuguese respondents showed high individualistic attributions in explaining poverty, in comparison to Lebanese and South African respondents.

Compared to the other two national groups, Portuguese were significantly more structural than they were individualistic or fatalistic. These individualistic attitudes counter those reported by CEC in 1990 and may be a reflection of the Western ethos of individualism that is being put to the fore in Western Europe.

Implications of the Study

The importance of comparing the etiological causes of poverty across cultures cannot be overemphasized. While controlling for class and education as essential factors to the understanding PCP, other important factors can be as important in the understanding the levels of attributions. Ideology has the great potential of intervening to alter the dimensions of class and culture, as well as their complex patterns of interaction. Ideology tends to cut across narrow confessional bonds of association. Among other things, it mightily influences the reshaping of basic values, beliefs systems and psychosocial dimensions. Without neglecting the social and economic variables—which so far have dominated research—it would be worthwhile to pay attention to religion as a belief system, as well as political and religious ideologies and see if they impinge, one way or the other on key independent variables. Furthermore, the idea of external and internal attributions (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson & Taylor, 2001) underscores the cognitive emotional scheme and the need to understand research from an alternative methodological perspective of how individuals, based on their personality styles attribute the causes of poverty. In addition, education as a socioeconomic variable when integrated with the occupational status variable may provide a better indicator to socioeconomic subjective measure (Jackman & Jackman, 1973; Nilson, 1981).

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As suggested by Hine and Montiel (1999) future research should be directed at replicating this third factor solution on a larger sample including a confirmatory type of analysis rather than an exploratory one. Because attempts at studying attributions for poverty have been limited to the U.S, Canada, Australia and Britain, few studies have emerged from South Africa, the Middle East and Portugal. Based on the conceptual framework of internal/external perceptions of poverty and in the light of the results of this study, a latent path method should provide a more logical attempt at understanding how different socioeconomic levels give an indication to the perceptions of the causes of poverty.

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