



Adolescents' understanding of poverty and the poor in rural Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to explore Malaysian adolescents' perception of poverty and the poor. The data consisted of 79 semi-structured interviews with school children aged 12–13 and 15–16 years old from rural and urban areas in Sabah, Malaysia. According to them, poverty is mainly economic. Their responses about the causes of poverty can be categorised as individualistic, structural, fatalistic and other factors (such as age, geography, land and encouragement). Older respondents from rural and urban areas gave more individualistic and structural attributions compared to the younger respondents. While they believed that government is most responsible to help the poor, other parties such as the poor, public and NGO's should also work together to alleviate poverty. They suggested that these parties can contribute in terms of donation, infrastructural improvement, education, attitudinal change and job opportunities. Respondents acknowledged that hard work and education are important to improve their standard of living. However, education is regarded as a ticket to seek their fortune elsewhere. These results emphasised the need for the Malay adolescents to learn about not being dependent on the government for employment in order to avoid mass urban migration in the near future.

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1. Introduction

While there has been a plethora of research in the areas of the economics and sociology of poverty in rural areas, the contribution of psychology has lagged behind. According to [Lea, Burgoyne, Jones, and Beer \(1997\)](#), psychological work in poverty has mainly concentrated on three themes: the impact of poverty on outcomes such as school performance and mental health, psychological factors contributing to poverty and causal attributions for poverty and other attitudes towards the poor. [Lever \(2005\)](#) pointed to some areas where psychologists had contributed to the study of poverty. These studies mainly concerned various groups' perceptions of poverty; psychological aspects of the culture of poverty; the relationship between certain psychological variables and poverty; psychological variables and experiencing upward social mobility; and studies of the well-being of people living in poverty.

A large number of studies in the psychology of poverty (see [Furnham, 2003](#)) deal with how people view the causes of poverty. Most of the studies mentioned above were based on the seminal work by [Feagin \(1972\)](#) who identified a tripartite causal attribution of poverty, where perceived causes fell into the categories of individualistic (blame the poor), structural (blame external social and economic factors) and fatalistic (bad luck, illness, etc.). His and other subsequent studies ([Cozzar-](#)

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elli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Hunt 1996, 2004; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) found that adult middle class respondents generally subscribed to an individualistic view of poverty while lower class respondents were more likely to blame structural factors.

Among adolescents, Leahy (1983) found that the older group (17-year old) saw lack of effort and education as the main cause of poverty while the younger (11-year old) group identified work and use of money. Asked how the poor could become rich, the older age group identified work, effort and education as the most important factors while the younger group suggested work, spend/invest wisely and effort.

Furnham (1982) was the first to study adolescents' attribution of poverty based on the Feagin scale. The results were as expected: public schoolboys favoured individualistic attributions and comprehensive schoolboys endorsed structural explanations. There were no differences concerning fatalistic attributions. On the basis of Furnham's study, Stacey and Singer (1985) looked into the perception of poverty and wealth among two groups of teenagers (average age 14.5 and 17 years old) from predominantly working class urban family backgrounds in New Zealand. Overall, the respondents, both male and female teenagers, rated familial cause as most important and luck as the least important cause of poverty and wealth. In addition, respondents placed a moderate importance on internal and external factors.

Payne and Furnham (1985) conducted a cross-cultural study among secondary school pupils in Barbados and Dominica. This was a replication of Furnham's (1982) earlier work in the United Kingdom. Respondents from both countries preferred societal over individualistic and fatalistic explanations. Contrary to their hypothesis, they found that Barbadian students rated societal explanations as being more important than their Dominican peers. Two possible explanations, according to Payne and Furnham (1985), were the role of the media in Barbados in creating greater economic and political awareness and that there was a higher exposure to economic inequalities in Barbados.

A wide ranging cross-cultural study on children's economic socialization was conducted in 1990. The sample was drawn from 10 countries among 8, 11 and 14 year old children from middle class backgrounds. Overall, the structure found among children in these studies is similar to the three attribution structure proposed by Feagin (1972). Aside from the French sample (Roland-Lévy, 1990), who attribute poverty to structural causes, children from Denmark (Lyck, 1990), Algeria (Roland-Lévy, 1990), Austria (Kirchler & Praher, 1990), United States (Harrah & Friedman, 1990), Yugoslavia (Zabukovec & Polic, 1990) and Poland (Wosinski & Pietras, 1990) generally attribute poverty to individualistic factors. The children's most common responses focused on lack of effort, laziness and not being hard working.

Chafel's (1997) review of children's conceptions of poverty suggested that equity issues (e.g., the link between effort and reward), were increasingly mentioned with age. Additionally, the ideas of older children resemble adult conceptions more than those of younger children. Chafel's conclusions probably reflect the view of adolescents in the United States and are supported by Feagin (1972) but no comparisons were made with other countries. Chafel and Neitzel's (2005) study among 64 8-year old children found that higher socio-economic status (SES) black or biracial are more likely to attribute poverty to structural factors compared to lower SES black and biracial children. The work by Weinger (1998) on middle class children in United States about their perception of economic class found that respondents generally faulted individuals for the causes of poverty. Two-third of the respondents, with ages ranging from 5 to 14 years old, attributed poverty to individualistic factors. Nearly one-fifth attributed poverty to external factors while only a very small number of respondents suggested that both factors were equally important. Financial irresponsibility (i.e., 'they probably like blew their money on one big thing', '... they spend too much money on squirt gun') was the most frequently quoted reason followed by lack of motivation.

Another study by Kopczyska-Sikorska and Szyszko (2001) among private and public school children (7–15 years old) in Poland found that four of the most frequently quoted definitions of poverty were lack of money (39%), accommodation (16.3%), food (15.3%) and clothes (8.8%). When asked about what causes poverty, their responses were lack of a job (30%), lack of money (22%), social pathologies (17%) and lack of education (12%). Finally, when asked about their solutions for overcoming poverty, respondents suggested economic approaches (40%), changes in social policy (36%) and providing more help (14%). Although there were slight variations in terms of how school children perceive poverty, this study did not show whether there was a clear differences of opinion between the two groups. In Uganda, Witter and Bukokhe (2004), found that adolescents aged from 10 to 14 years old identified external factors such as property ownership, conflict, the environment, employment and corruption as the main causes of poverty.

Finally, the work by Bonn, Earle, Lea, and Webley (1999) in South Africa provided a more comprehensive insight on the perception of poverty among 8–14 years old Tswana children in semi-urban, urban and rural settings. When asked about their understanding of poverty, five of the most common responses were having no money, lacking everything, to have no food, suffering and being unemployed. Respondents attributed poverty to external reasons such as unemployment, no money, God's will and lack of education. The study also looked at how age and geographical factors could influence the complexities of explanation. They found that age could better predict the complexities of explanation as opposed to geographical location.

To sum up the findings above, the current literature provides evidence for both Paiget's cognitive-development approach (Bonn et al., 1999; Harrah & Friedman, 1990; Kirchler & Praher, 1990; Lyck, 1990; Stacey & Singer, 1985; Wosinski & Pietras, 1990; Zabukovec & Polic, 1990), which suggests different level of knowledge based on age and also evidence for Moscovi's theory of social representations (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Furnham, 1982; Payne & Furnham, 1985) which maintains that social processes play an important part in the acquisition of knowledge.

Whilst these studies, and others not mentioned here, provide a helpful picture of adolescents' understanding of poverty, they do have a number of limitations. Most studies were conducted in western societies (Shek & Ma, 2008) and input is needed from non-western countries to enhance our understanding of adolescents' view of poverty. We would also point out that most attribution of poverty studies used the term poverty generically (Furnham, 1982; Harper, 2003; Lee, Jones,

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