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Poverty attitudes and their determinants in Lebanon's plural society

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Abstract

This paper examines the causal attribution of poverty among Lebanese Christian and Muslim students through a pre-conceptualized scale along fatalistic, individualistic, and structural dimensions. Factor analysis results reproduced the factor dimensions reported by J. Feagin [Psychology Today 6 (1972) 101–129; Subordinating poor persons: Welfare and American beliefs. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1975] explanations for the causes of poverty were more structural than individualistic. The MANOVA regression analysis showed no significant differences between religious affiliations (Muslim and Christian) and students' subjective report of their parents' level of educational attainment (high, medium, low). However, significant mean differences ($F(3, 200) = 3.43, p = 0.018$) are found for class on the individualistic dimension. There was some suggestion that parents of students whose occupational status appeared higher were more likely to favor individualistic explanations for poverty. The high rating on the structural dimension of the poverty scale showed Lebanese student attitudes to the causes of poverty in a rapidly changing society. Recommendations are offered for further research on heterogeneous samples. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Several recent psychosocial studies have emphasized the importance of race as a predictor of beliefs concerning poverty (Kim, 2000; Hunt, 1996). Others have stressed the link between political behavior and explanations for poverty (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Furnham, 1982, 1993), often noting the role of ideology, family socialization, stability, and social stratification (Morcol, 1997; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Studies have also pointed to the relevance of political behavior in its support for or opposition to government-sponsored welfare programs (Gilens, 1995; Feagin, 1975). Utilizing causal attribution theory (Heider, 1958), Feagin (1972) classified the attitudes to poverty into three dimensions: individualistic, which blames poverty on the poor themselves, fatalistic which blames poverty on bad luck and fate, and structuralism which places responsibility on situational factors such as lack of education and low wages.

Studies examining the individualistic, fatalistic, and structuralist dimensions showed that the majority of Americans explained poverty in individualistic terms (Hunt, 1996; Smith & Stone, 1989; Kluegel & Smith, 1981, 1986; Feagin, 1975) reflecting the strength of the dominant individualistic ideology of that country (Merton, 1968). Studies conducted outside the US, however, have shown diminished support for individualism concerning poverty. Feather (1974) who replicated Feagin's experiment, for instance, found that Australians were less likely to attribute the causes of poverty to individualistic reasons than Americans did. Feather's study reported significant differences between the age groups of subjects in his study: the younger subjects were less likely to blame poverty on individualistic reasons than their elders were.

Studies have also examined the attitudes to the causes of poverty from a cross-cultural perspective (McFadyen, 1998; Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Furnham, 1993; Morcol, 1997). These studies have reported mixed results for the causal attribution of poverty. Morcol's (1997) study, for instance, documented greater popularity for structural views among Turks, who tend to be

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