THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF POVERTY AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

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─Abstract ─

As pioneered by Feagin (1972), the literature on the theories of poverty focuses on individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes of poverty. The individualistic perception blames individuals themselves for their poverty situation. In contrast, the structural perception of poverty blames society for poverty, while the fatalistic perception views poverty as merely bad luck. Even although various people have different perceptions of the causes of poverty, these views typically fall into one of these three categories. People tend to ascribe to these perceptions mostly because of their ontological and cosmological views of life, which are influenced by household characteristics. The purpose of this study was to investigate the household characteristics that determine perceptions of household heads with regard to the causes of poverty. Indexes on individualistic, structural and fatalistic perceptions were calculated for each household and used as dependent variables in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. The study found that a household head's years of schooling, grant recipients and food insecurity were strong predictors of the structural perception while as regards the individualistic perception, the study reported a positive strong relationship with the age of the head of a household, the number of years of schooling received by the head of the household whereas there was a negative significant relationship with food

insecure households, and also with female heads of household. Fatalistic perceptions were strongly predicted by food insecurity, grant recipients and years of schooling of the head of household. The implications of the results are that policy makers need to first understand the perceptions of the poor before coming up with mitigating programmes as the perceptions might influence the effectiveness of the interventions.

Key Words: *Food insecurity, gender and poverty, perceptions on poverty, poverty, social welfare*

JEL Classification: A10, A13

1. INTRODUCTION

Addressing poverty in Southern Africa and, more specifically, in South Africa is one of the challenges of this century, yet there are increasing concerns that many of the development interventions do not yield the desired outcome of sustainable development. Sub-Saharan Africa is also the most rapidly urbanising region, with poverty in urban areas increasing. In this regard, about 40 percent of urban residents in Sub-Saharan Africa are poor and if the cut-off income of $2 a day is used, 70 percent of urban areas in the region can be considered as poor (Ravallion *et al.,* 2007). Several poverty alleviation strategies have been implemented during the last two decades in South Africa. For example, a system of social security was introduced that contributed significantly towards social development, including food security, which is an important measure of poverty (Samson *et al*., 2004; Van Der Berg, *et al*., 2009; Case & Deaton, 1996; Barientos & Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002; Booysen, 2004; Manyamba *et al*., 2012). Despite these initiatives, a significant number of households in low-income neighbourhoods in South Africa remain in poverty.

It is not surprising therefore that research on the causes of poverty remains pertinent and essential as evidenced by numerous studies on the issue (Du Toit, 2005; Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014; Small *et al*., 2010; Davids & Gouws, 2011; Clarke & Sison, 2003). Knowledge on how poverty is perceived by households, policy makers and other development stakeholders should be considered as being critical in the design of relevant policies to alleviate poverty. In this regard, Namukwaya and Kibirige (2011) state that "poor people's perceptions of poverty are the basis for aspirations and intrinsic motivation towards positive change, which is the purpose of development interventions".

Household characteristics may be at the core of how poor people perceive the causes of poverty. Consequently this paper reports on a study that analysed the relationship between perceptions of the causes of poverty and household characteristics, such as the age of the head of the household, the employment status of this person, his/her education and the food security status of the household.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have indicated that in order to develop suitable poverty alleviation strategies, policy developers should realise that perceptions of poverty may differ from place to place and society to society (Hulme & Shepard, 2003; Diamond,

2007; Small, 2010). In this regard, culture, interpretation of social reality and the fact that poor people are never a homogenous group should be considered in developing intervention strategies to alleviate poverty. As mentioned, this paper analyses household characteristics and their relationship with the perceived causes of poverty. In this respect, Davids and Gouws (2011) suggest that an understanding of the perceptions of these causes may be important to understanding the latter in its full context.

The first attempt to analyse the perceptions of poverty may be traced back to the work of Feagin (1972). Studies on these perceptions postulate that perceptions of the reasons for impoverishment may be attributed to the individual (Schiller, 1989; Ryan, 1976). In the individualistic perception the victim is blamed for his or her circumstances. The conservative theories of poverty are mostly associated with such positions. "The Culture of Poverty" and similar works by Lewis (1966) represent some of the major contributions to this position. Another perception regards the society or social functioning as being the cause of poverty (Goldsmith & Blakely, 2010; Jennings, 1999). The argument in terms of this structural perception is that the society is structured in an unfair way and that other people are not afforded the same opportunities and support structures. This is a popular perception in countries such as South Africa where the past history of apartheid informs most people's perception of their current situation. The last perception is the fatalistic, where poverty is considered to be a result of forces beyond anyone's control, or fate (Campbell, 2001).

Several studies (Kluegel, 1987; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) found that female-headed households, unemployment status and low income are positively correlated with participants' choosing structural reasons as an explanation for poverty. Contrasting with this, researchers (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Wegener & Liebig, 1995) have found that people who experience upward social mobility point to individualistic reasons for their improved poverty status. Researchers (Robinson & Bell, 1978; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) indicate that higher levels of education are associated with poverty being attributed to structural reasons. Robinson and Bell (1978) posit that while younger individuals blame structural reasons for poverty, older people, who tend to be more conservative in their life outlook, tend to attribute poverty to individualistic reasons.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Sample

The population from which the sample was drawn comprised two low income townships, Bophelong and Sharpeville. These are both situated in the Vaal Region of the Gauteng Province and are under the municipal jurisdiction of the Emfuleni Municipality. For the study, 300 households were drawn from each of the two townships, making the total sample size 600 households. This sample size was considered to be reasonably adequate, based on the historical approach of looking at the sample sizes that are recommended for a similar population size. A household questionnaire was developed and piloted, and subsequently used to collect the data from the heads of households. The households were randomly sampled and six trained enumerators were used to collect the data from the heads of households. After data cleaning, 580 questionnaires were used in the data analysis.

3.2 Methodology

The main objective of the study was to investigate the influence of household characteristics on the perceived causes of poverty in the sample. The expectation was that since most of the households included in the sample were either in poverty themselves or lived in proximity to impoverished households, the responses would be informed by experience as opposed to speculation. Three indexes were calculated based on the responses as regards the perceptions of the causes of poverty. The perceptions were adopted from the existing scale (Feagin, 1972) that contains questions on individualistic perceptions, structural perceptions and fatalistic perceptions as the causes of poverty. Table 1 presents the different statements in the scale used to assess perceptions of poverty.

Table 1: Statements in Perceptions of Poverty Scale

Index	Reasons for poverty
Individualistic	They lack the ability to manage money
	They waste their money on inappropriate items
	They do not actively seek to improve their lives
Structural	They are exploited by rich people
	The society lacks social justice
	Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven
	They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families
	They live in places where there are not many opportunities
Fatalistic	They have bad fate

They lack luck	
They have encountered misfortunes	
They are not motivated because of welfare	

Source: Davids and Gouws: 2011.

Heads of households were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was "strongly disagree" and 5 was "strongly agree". The index therefore implied that a higher score indicated strong agreement with the statement whereas a lower score indicated strong disagreement with the statement. A study by Davids and Gouws (2011) found the scale in Table 1 to be reliable and valid in South Africa.

3.3 Model specification

This paper follows the approach similar to the one taken by Davids and Gouws (2011), where three regression models were run for each perception of poverty. The linear regression model was formulated as follows:

$$Index_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(HH\ Age)_i + \beta_2(HH\ years\ of\ Sch)_i + \beta_3(Grant < 50\%)_i \\ + \beta_4(Grant > 50\%)_i + \beta_5(HH\ Gender)_i \\ + \beta_6(HH\ Marital\ Status)_i + \beta_7(Food\ Insecurity)_i + \varepsilon_i$$

The Indexes were: Structural for Regression 1, Individualistic for Regression 2 and Fatalistic for Regression 3. All three regressions used the same independent variables defined as follows: HH Age was the age of the head of household measured in years, HH years of Sch was the household head's years of schooling, which was used as a measure of education level. Grant < 50% was a dummy variable that was constructed from the categorisation of how much money a household received from grant(s). Hence, two dummy variables were created: the first one for those receiving less than 50 percent of their income from grants and the second one for those receiving more than 50 percent of their income from grants ($Grant > 50\%$). The other three variables were categorical variables, and dummy variables were created for each. For gender, the dummy variable was defined as 1 for female and 0 for male, meaning that the coefficient represented the females. For marital status, the categories were further aggregated into two: living together (that included married, cohabiting, and living with a partner) and not living together with a partner (that included single, divorced, separated and widowed). The dummy variable was therefore defined as 1 for not living with a partner and 0 for those living with a partner. The last one was food security and insecurity, which was also a categorical variable and was defined as 1 for food

insecure households and 0 for the food secure households. The parameter β_0 is the constant or intercept, while β_{1-7} are coefficients for the corresponding independent variables, as explained.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

In answering the research objective set out for this paper, regression analysis was used as the main method of analysis. The results are displayed in tables 2 and 3, beginning with the descriptive statistics of the independent variable and other important household characteristics. This section of the paper contains two subsections, one presenting the descriptive statistics and the other the regression results and the interpretation thereof.

4.1 Descriptive statistics of the households in the sample

The head of household information that was collected in the survey for purposes of relating to the perceptions of the causes of poverty includes gender, education level (measured in years of schooling), and marital status, amongst other things. The descriptive statistics of some of these variables which are used in the regression analysis as independent variables are noted in this section. Table 2 presents a summary of the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the regression.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the sample

| Household Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Household size	580	1.0	11.0	4.16	1.6
Age of head of household	580	22	83	49.4	13.8
Years of schooling for head	580	0	15	9.49	3.6
Household food expenditure	580	305	25900	5324.6	4720.3
HFIAS Score	580	00	27	6.7	6.9

Source: Survey data: 2015.

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 provide an indication of how the variables of interest are distributed in the data. The number of households that were valid for use in analysis was 580; the minimum household size was one whilst the maximum was 11. The table also shows the age of the head of household, with the oldest being 83 years of age. The years of schooling indicate that, on average, the heads of households had received 9.49 years of schooling, which is indicative of the lower level of high school (secondary school).

The household food expenditure is also presented because this is employed as an indication of food security or insecurity. In the regression analysis, food insecurity, measured by the Household Food Insecurity Access Score (HFIAS), was used as an independent variable. The HFIAS is basically utilised as a proxy measure of poverty, where the food insecure households are considered poor, while the food secure households are considered not poor (Deitchler *et al*, 2010).

Another important household characteristic that is considered in this paper, thereby differentiating it from the other studies on perceptions of the causes of poverty, is the categorisation of households into grant recipients and non-grant recipients. Figure 1 illustrates the frequencies of the categorisation, together with how many households are included in each category.

**Figure 1: Grant distribution among the households**
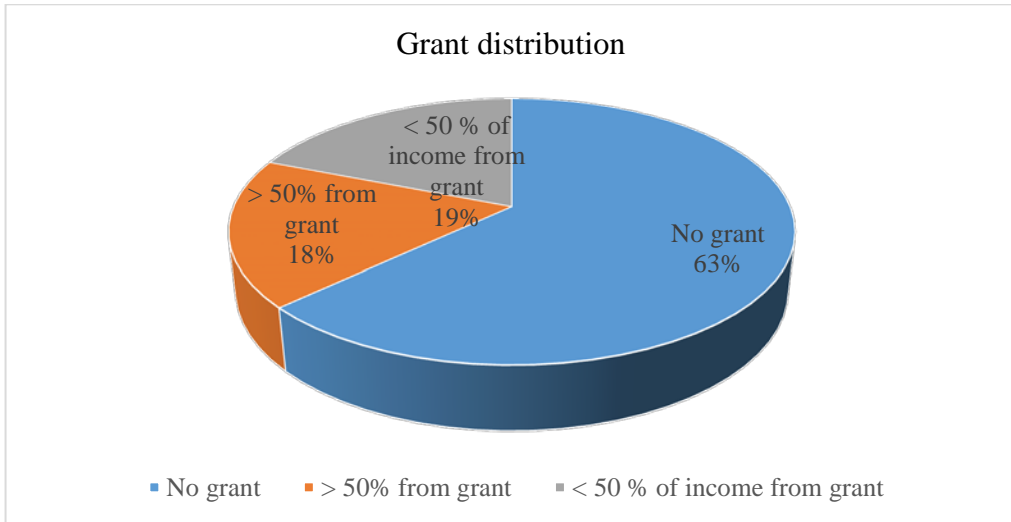
Source: Survey Data: 2015.

Sixty-three percent (63%) of the people in the sample were not receiving any type of grant from government. The households that had more than 50 percent of their income coming from grants made up 18 percent of the remaining 37 percent or 48.6 percent of those on grants. Those that received less than 50 percent of their income from grants comprised 19 percent of the sample or 51.3 percent of those on grants. This categorisation is used in the regression analysis to determine participants' responses to the perceptions of the causes of poverty. The inclusion of this categorisation in the analysis is crucial in determining whether those on grants are complacent, in that they feel entitled to the grant and think that their

circumstances are due to the imbalances in society and fate, or whether they feel that they have some responsibility for their situation and are taking measures to become independent of the grant.

The other aspect important to consider in the analysis of the perceptions, is the food security status of the households. In the same way that poverty status or education level of the head of household explains the perceptions of people, the food security status of the household may explain why certain households hold particular perceptions about causes of poverty. Figure 2 below indicates the distribution of food secure and food insecure households.

Figure 2: Food Security distribution in the households
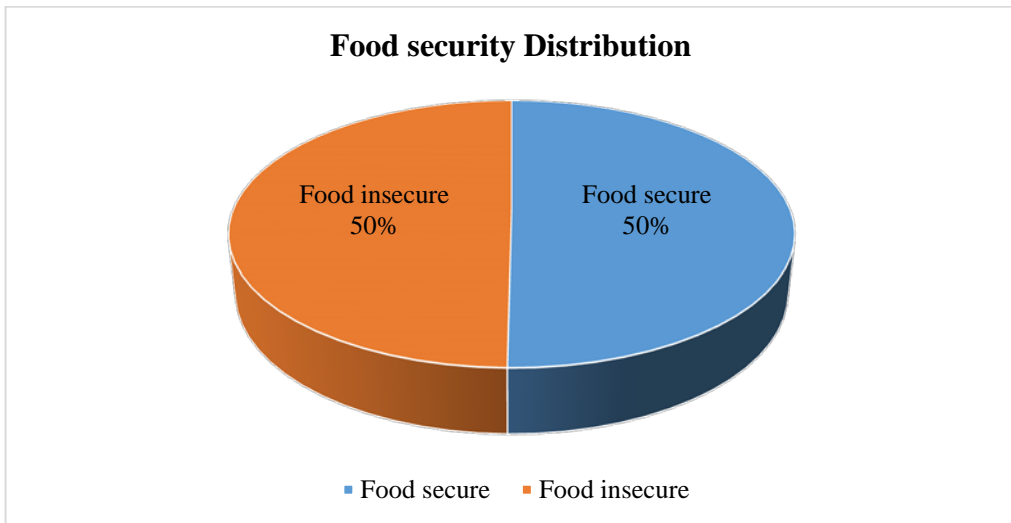
Source: Survey Data: 2015.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the households in terms of their food security status as calculated based on the food insecurity scale. The number of households that are food insecure is 50 percent, which is very high by any standard. This will be explained further in the regression analysis of what these food insecure households perceive to be the causes of poverty.

4.2 Regression results and interpretation

Three regressions were conducted based on the three main perceptions of the causes of poverty, as advocated by Feagin (1970 and applied by Blomberg *et al.* (2013). An ordinary least squares regression was used since the perceptions were

constructed into an index measured on a scale of measure as a continuous variable, where a lower score indicated "strongly disagree" and a higher score "strongly agree".

The three regressions that were run in this study are based on the three main perceptions of the causes of poverty, individualistic, structural, and fatalistic; the results are presented in regressions 1, 2 and 3 in Table 3 respectively.

Table 3: Regression results: Individualistic, structural and fatalistic perceptions of poverty

Variable	Regression 1 Individualistic			Regression 2 Structural			Regression 3 Fatalistic		
	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)		6.111	.000*		11.197	.000*		6.278	.000*
Head age	.207	4.438	.000*	.083	1.646	.100	.036	.709	.479
Years school of head	.265	5.516	.000*	.129	2.470	.014**	.214	4.123	.000*
Receive< 50% of income from grant	-.041	-.957	.339	.181	1.904	.057***	-.015	-.316	.752
Receive> 50% of income from grant	-.091	-1.850	.065***	.202	1.830	.068***	.133	2.505	.013**
Gender	-.074	-1.806	.071***	-.073	-1.628	.104	-.042	-.941	.347
Marital status	.017	.406	.685	.075	1.609	.108	.001	.027	.978
Food insecurity	-.218	-4.741	.000*	.124	2.477	.014**	.165	3.318	.001**

* Significant at the 0.01 level
 ** Significant at the 0.05 level
*** Significant at the 0.10 level

4.2.1 Discussion of the coefficients from the three regressions

The results of regression 1 on the individualistic perceptions of the causes of poverty are presented in Table 3. The conservative theories of poverty to a large extent point to certain deficiencies with regard to poor people. They argue that some are lazy and do not work hard to change their economic circumstances. This is the basis for the individualistic perceptions of causes of poverty. In addition, the results for regression 2 on the structural causes of poverty are reported in Table 3. The reasons as regards structural causes, argued by Feagin (1972) and others (Ditch, 1984; Bullock, 1999; Kreidl, 2000), attribute poverty to society and its

structures, including the ways in which resources and access to opportunities are made available. The contention is that the poor are disadvantaged and that, given a better set-up of the economic structures, their situation would be different (Weiner, *et al.*, 2011). People frequently point to fate in situations that are beyond their control. Issues such as death and accidents are often attributed to fate. Fatalistic perceptions of poverty follow the same line of thinking: that poverty is beyond the control of an individual or society. Table 3 also reports results of regression 3 on fatalistic perceptions of the causes of poverty. The sections that follow discuss the results of the different coefficients for each of the independent variables, comparing the three regressions.

Age

Using the individualistic index where responses that are high indicate agreement with the perception that individuals are to blame for their circumstances, the regression results are reported in Table 3. The results agree with the *a priori* expectation in the sense that individuals who are in the disadvantaged categories disagree, while the better off ones feel the poor have some responsibility for their situation. Age of the head of household that was statistically significant at the 1 percent significance level with a p-value of 0.000 produced a positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.017$), which means that the older the head of household the higher the score on the index, meaning that older people may be more likely to feel the need to blame the poor people more than the younger heads of household. This may be due to the fact that the latter are poorer and hence do not want to blame themselves for their situation. It could also be an indication that older people are more likely to take responsibility and feel that some responsibility should be shouldered by the victims of poverty (Appelbaum, 2001; Bullock, 1999).

The results of the structural perceptions indicate that the age of a head of household is not statistically significant (p value = 0.10) However, the positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.005$) may imply that the older an individual becomes, the more they tend to agree with the perception that poverty is mainly caused by the economic structures that exist in society. This may be so due to the fact that older people have had experiences that may have led to such conclusions.   The coefficient from the fatalist perceptions regression with a p-value of 0.479 was also not statistically significant.

Years of Schooling

For regression 1, the factor, years of schooling for the head of household, is significant at 1 percent (p-value < 0.01) and has a positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.084$) implying that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to agree with this conservative position that the poor are to blame for their circumstances. This outcome is to be expected as the educated may not be poor themselves; thus, agreeing with this statement is easy as they are pointing a finger at someone else and not themselves and may feel justified in living a better life. For regression 2, this factor was also statistically significant at the 5 percent significance level (p-value= 0.014). The coefficient of 0.028 suggests that the longer the years of schooling, the higher the score on structural perception, with a unit change in years of schooling leading to a 0.028 change in the index score. The fact that the coefficient is positive means that the more educated people are, the more likely they are to agree with the structural cause of poverty. The coefficient for years of schooling in regression 3 was also positive, indicating that an increase in levels of education does not stop people from believing in fate. This could suggest that people of all educational levels agree with the fact that some people are poor due to circumstances beyond their control. Children whose parents died and who therefore grew up as orphans could be an example of such fatalistic perceptions.

Grant recipients

In regression 1, the coefficient for the category of households who receive less than 50 percent of their income from grants is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.339). The most important result concerns the coefficient of those receiving more than 50 percent of their income from grants. This is basically a measure of poverty, where it is assumed that those receiving less than 50 percent of their income from grants, though in a poorer situation than those not receiving grants, may be closer to the poverty line, whilst those receiving more than 50 percent of their income from grants are more likely to be deeper and considerably below the poverty line. This is also an indication of dependence on government; a continual dependency can only be justifiable if those benefiting feel they deserve the help or that government owes them the assistance. The coefficients on both these two groups are negative ($\beta_3 = -0.122$, $\beta_4 = -0.273$), suggesting that they do not agree with the perception of poverty that puts the blame squarely on the poor themselves. They therefore feel that being poor is not their fault. It is interesting to note that those who are more dependent on government; that is, those who receive more than 50 percent of their income from grants, have the lowest score,

signifying that they strongly disagree with the individualistic perception of poverty.

In regression 2, on the structural perceptions of causes of poverty, those who received less than 50 percent of their income from grants agreed more with this perception than those that were not receiving any grant ($\beta = 0.181$), while those that received more than 50 percent of their income from grants agreed even more ($\beta = 0.202$) than both those without grants and those with less than 50 percent of their income deriving from grants. The grants categories were all statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level (p value = 0.057 and 0.068) for grants less than 50 percent of income and grants more than 50 percent of income, respectively. This signifies that the grant recipients do not blame themselves for their situation but instead blame society and fate since the p-value (p-value =0.013) for those receiving more than 50 percent of their income from grants in regression 3 is also significant at a 5 percent significance level.

Gender and Marital Status

For regression 1, gender is statistically significant at 10 percent (p-value < 0.1) and the coefficient is negative ($\beta = -0.171$), meaning that females are more likely than males to disagree with the individualistic perception of poverty (dummy defined as 1 for females and 0 for males). This may be expected given that, in most cases, female headed households are more likely to be vulnerable and fall into poverty vis-a-vis male headed households; hence, the females would not want to agree that it is their own fault that they are poor. In regression 2 of the structural perceptions of the causes of poverty, both gender and marital status were not statistically significant (p-value= 0.104 and 0.108).

Food Security status

For regression 1, the results of the grant recipients tie in well with the food insecure group who are also likely to be poor and reliant on government. The coefficient on food insecurity ($\beta = -0.503$) indicates that the food insecure households also strongly disagree with the individualistic perception of poverty. This is an important outcome as it indicates that owing to the belief that they are not to blame for their situation, the poor may be inclined to be dependent on government and that, if they are not careful, may prove Lewis's (1963) culture of poverty theory as their children may be taught to believe that whatever they do, society will always put them at a disadvantage (Lewis, 1963).

For regression 2, the coefficient on food insecurity was statistically significant at the 5 percent significance level (p-value < 0.05). The food insecure households were more likely to agree with the structural perception of poverty than the food secure ones($\beta = 0.197$). In other words, they also feel that the structures of society are not sufficiently balanced for everybody to excel. Hence, being food insecure or being poor is a result of the structure of society which usually leads to dependency on government to provide for these households. This position is also held by the liberal theories of poverty that argue for government's intervention based on the premise that those in difficult circumstances are there due to the authorities' failure to correct the imbalances that exist in society.

On the fatalistic regression position (regression 3) the food insecure households strongly agree ($\beta = 0.306$) with the fact that poverty may be due to fate, and the coefficient is statistically significant at 1 percent (p-vale < 0.01). These are households who are most likely in poverty and as they disagreed with the individualistic perception in regression 1, they would rather point to fate and society as the better explanations of the causes of poverty. This is a confirmation of what is expected of the people who are looking up to government or society to help in their situation.

The results in regression 3 indicate the individual characteristics which identify those who hold the perception of fate as being the cause of poverty. Just those receiving less than 50 percent of their income from grants are the ones who disagree with the fatalistic perceptions ($\beta = -0.035$) which is not statistically significant (p-value =0.752). For those who receive more than 50 percent of their income, while they disagree with the individualistic perception they agree with the fatalistic perception and the coefficient ($\beta = 0.322$) is statistically significant at 5 percent (p-value < 0.05). The food insecure, for example, feel that besides the structures of the society being at fault, fate is also a factor at play.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper has confirmed that as expected, households that are on grants and are food insecure believe that it is not their fault that they find themselves in such situations. They therefore strongly disagreed with the individualistic perceptions of the causes of poverty. Nevertheless, they agreed with the structural and the fatalistic perceptions of the causes of poverty. It is also important to note that female heads of households were more likely to disagree with the individualistic perception of the causes of poverty. Educated people agreed with both fatalistic

and individualistic perceptions. These results are very important as they shed more light on what different categories of people perceive the causes of poverty to be.

The theories of poverty or the perceptions of the causes of poverty as portrayed by Bradshaw (2006) have a major bearing on the policies that are enacted to deal with this challenge. Along the same lines of thought, the effectiveness of the policies and the programmes put into place to deal with poverty should take into account the perceptions held by the beneficiaries; failure to do so may render the programmes ineffective and a waste of resources. If those that are on government grants feel entitled to the grants, this may lead to laziness and promote dependence. However, if they consider the grants as a stepping stone and not an entitlement this may lead to responsible spending of the grant money and even efforts to get out of poverty and fend for themselves. This study therefore suggests that government should invest more in education since those with higher levels of education understand that people's situations can be changed. This research also recommends that grant money should be accompanied with some civic education so as to educate those on grants to aspire for a better life beyond the grant.

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