Attributions for Poverty: A Survey of Student's Perception

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, attribution for poverty have been investigated using 147 marketing students of Sunyani polytechnic who were selected through the use of convenient sample method. The paper is based on exploratory quantitative survey. With the use of self design questionnaire primary data were obtained from the field and analysed using SPSS 16.0. Percentages and frequencies as well as One-Way ANOVA were used for the analysis. The results indicated that individual perspective of poverty attribution dominates among structural and fatalistic explanations. It was also revealed that success depends significantly on the individual effort and that work is one's contribution to society. Future research should increase sample size, and also consider the relationship between educational level and poverty attributions.

1. Introduction

There are many people in need in all economies, developing and developed. Poverty has been one of the issues in development. Governments have introduced many policies to solve the issue of poverty. Some of these policies are intended to reduce poverty levels while others are intended to eradicate poverty. Yet in all societies people are poor. The issue seems to have become intractable in societies.

There are many explanations for the causes of poverty from many disciplines such as economics, Psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, and religion. There are also many attitudes and perceptions of the causes of poverty among countries (Alberkt, 2006; Cerami and Vanhuysse, 2009; Inglot 2008; Szikra and Tomka, 2009; Tomka, 2006; Kallio and Niemela, 2010; Lepianka, 2007; Halman and Oorschot, 2000). People in a society see themselves differently. Some consider themselves to be poor while others also find it difficult to admit that they are poor.

Some researchers (Dudwick et al., 2003) attribute poverty to the type of economic system such as capitalism, socialism, command economy, and mixed economy. African countries are considered poor (Garcia and Fares, 2008), and as such there has been many policy interventions to address the poverty issues. In Ghana, successive governments have introduced various polices to solve the problem of poverty such as the development of infrastructural facilities. Policies (Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy, GPRS II) are put in place to ensure economic growth so as to solve the poverty issue.

Under the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) policy GH¢500,000.00 was released for disbursement to beneficiaries under the LEAP, and about 2,000 households with orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) have benefited from an initial bi-monthly conditional cash transfer of between GH¢6-GH¢8/month to meet their basic needs and other services in health and education. In addition under GPRS II, seven out of the 10 employment modules have been rolled out and are being implemented nationwide. A total of 107,114 youth have been engaged on the seven modules as at August 2007 (Budget statement, 2008). In addition to these, a total of 186 functional women's groups

from 6 regions comprising of 12,255 women were trained in basic book keeping, credit repayment, savings, entrepreneurial skills, and micro-finance to equip them with basic skills that will enhance their output, and reduce poverty in the long run.

The 2008 budget statement of Ghana indicates that "from 3% in 2000, GDP has risen to 6.4% in 2007. Poverty levels have reduced substantially and Ghana is tipped to become one of the few Third World countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of cutting extreme poverty by half by the scheduled date of 2015". The minister of finance stated that the "economy of Ghana has witnessed sustained growth and positive changes in the lives of the people of Ghana by maintaining the broad policy orientation of reducing the country's level of poverty whilst providing the appropriate environment for private business to grow and thrive". It is again reported "that poverty has reduced significantly and Ghanaians are obviously better off today than they were seven years ago. The indicators show a downward trend in poverty from 39.5 per cent in 1998/1999 to 28.5 per cent in 2005/2006" (Budget statement, 2008).

Studies has shown that public opinions shape or influence government policies. Hence, knowing what the lay people think of the causes of poverty will help policy makers to introduce the appropriate policies to solve this issue. To the knowledge of the researcher little work has been done on the public perception of the causes of poverty in Ghana and no such work has been done in the study area. This work intends to fill in the gap.

Also some studies have produce mixed result and this study contributes to the debate. In spite of many policies to solve the problem of poverty in Ghana, there are many people living in poverty. This has motivated the researcher to embark on this study. The focus of this study is to explore public perceptions of the causes of poverty and the determinants of such perceptions. This the researcher belief will help in determining if the various interventions are and will be appropriate in solving the poverty issues.

There are many theories on the causes of poverty. Some researchers indicate individual blame, individual fate, social fate, and social blame, while others also provide theories such as individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Kainu and Niemelia, 2010). The individualistic, structural, and fatalistic explanations are attributed to Feagin (1972, 1975). According to the individualistic explanation one is poor because of him or herself. That is, as a results of certain behaviours or features of the individuals such as laziness, immoral or indecent lifestyle.

The structural theory indicates that one is poor as a result of the structures of the society such as the demand for certificate when looking for employment, attending school and passing an examination, attending interviews, requiring job experience from job seekers. The fatalistic explanation holds that one is poor as a result of uncontrollable, unforeseen factors that one could not avoid such as illness, not having lack or having bad luck (Kainu and Niemelia, 2010; Feagin, 1972, 1975).

According to van Oorschot and Halman (2000) there are four theoretical explanations for poverty which are individual blame, individual fate, social fate, and social blame. The individual blame has it that one is poor as a result of personal attributes or inadequacies such as not been intelligent. The individual fate indicates that one is poor due to individual bad luck.

In the case of the social blame poverty is as a result of social factors which are caused by factors that are impersonal and inescapable by the poor. Economic crisis is an example of such factors which the control is beyond the poor.

The social blame theory explains that poverty results from acts caused by certain groups, institutions or parties in the society and that the poor cannot control the activities of these groups. These groups or parties need to be blamed for the causes of poverty of the individual (Kainu and Niemelia, 2010). There have been many empirical studies on the causes of poverty in developed and developing economies such as the United State of America (USA), Canada, Russia, Estonia, Czech Republic, and Hungary. In all these studies there have been various reasons for the causes of poverty.

In a study by Reutter et al. (2006) on the Canada, it was revealed that there is variation in the public understanding of the causes of poverty and that structural explanation was strongly favoured. Poverty was attributed to government policies and unequal opportunities for citizens. About 30% of the respondents favoured the fatality explanation of poverty with over one half respondents favouring the intergenerational explanation.

In an opinion poll by Ipsos News Centre (1999) the findings were that 30% of the respondent considered the individual explanation of poverty, and that people are poor because of their own

choices and actions, while 51% support the structural explanation of poverty, and stated that people are poor for no fault of their own.

On the determinant of the causes of variation in the responses of respondents, it has been revealed in some studies that demographic variables such as gender and age explain little (Reutter et al., 2006; van Oorschot and Halman, 1999). In a study by Carr and MacLachlan (1998), and Cozzarelli et al., (2001), and Hunt (1996) it was revealed that women support structural cause of poverty than men.

Other variables such as education, income levels have been found to explain the variation in responses significantly (Reutter et al., 2006). Respondents who are rich tend to support the individual explanation of the causes of poverty and provide less support for the structural approach (Reutter et al., 2006; Hunt, 1996; Bullock, 1999). Also, respondents who are rich in a study tend to support intergenerational explanation of poverty (Bullock, 1999; Reutter et al., 2006).

However, other researchers such as Nasser and Abouchedid (2001) indicated that high income earners support structural attribution of poverty than low income earners. Studies have also indicated that respondents who are low income earners expect the future economic life not to be good (Reutter et al., 2006; Stewart et al. 2004). Other researchers have also revealed mixed results or results that are inconclusive in the examination of the determinants of attributions of poverty (Shirazi and Biel, 2005).

In a study by other researchers (Bullock et al., 2003; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Habtamu, 1995; Molvaer, 1980) culture has been identified as the causes of poverty according to respondents.

According to a study by Wollie (2009) the youths in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia, are more inclined to attribute poverty to structural factors and that there are three main dimensions of poverty attributions which are fatalistic, individual and structural. The results also indicated that demographic and socio-economic variables significantly affect attributions of poverty. Gender determines fatalistic attribution whiles education is the main determinants of individual attributions of poverty. Parents' income status significantly determined structural attribution of poverty.

Krediel (1998) and Guimond et al., (1989) studies revealed that respondents are more sensitive to structural basis for poverty indicate that society operates in a way that makes people poor since they are unable to improve their competence levels.

Aside the within country studies of the causes of poverty there has been comparative studies on developing, and developed economies. These have produced interesting results. In a study by Kainu and Niemela (2010), it was shown that in general social blame type of explanation was most popular in European post-socialist countries. This was followed by individual blame, social fate and then individual fate. The study indicated that Ukraine, Moldova, Hungary, and Russia support social blame.

Lepianka (2007), and Lepianka et al., (2010) studies indicated that Czech Republic support individual blame type of explanation. In some studies in US findings indicated that structuralist explanation is less favoured and that the most favoured explanation of poverty is the individual explanation (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Feagin, 1975).

Feather (1974) study shows that Americans are more likely to support individual explanation than Australians. Australians tend to disagree with the individual explanation of poverty. They support the structuralist explanation of poverty (Saunders, 2002). Other studies (Albrekt, 2006; van Oorschot and Halman, 2000) in countries such as Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, the individual explanation are not favoured while it is favoured inaddition to the structuralist explanation in Eastern European countries by other researches (Lepianka, 2007; Gorshkov and Tikhnova, 2006; Stephenson, 2000).

2. Objective Of The Study

The paper aims at contributing to the body of knowledge that exists in the area of poverty by assessing the attributions of poverty from student's perspective. Specifically, the paper seeks among other issues to: i. analyse public perceptions of the causes of poverty, ii. Explore determinants of poverty attribution, iii. Examine respondents Perception of work.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions were asked and answers provided for through the analysis and discussion of the results. What do people attribute poverty to and what variables influence their attribution?

3.1. Hypothesis

From the empirical studies reviewed the following hypotheses are formulated: i) social and individual blame types of explanation will more be endorsed, ii) Individual and social fate types of explanation will be less endorsed, iii) Demographic features will influence poverty attributions, iv) Economic circumstances will influence poverty attributions; v) ethnicity will influence poverty attributions, vi) Values and attributes will influence poverty attributions.

3.2. Scope of the Study and Limitation

The study was conducted in the Sunyani polytechnic using survey. The paper does not look at the policy interventions on poverty and their effectiveness. Respondents were selected using non-probability sample method and hence results may suffer from external validity. There is the tendency that some respondents might have being responding in a socially desirable way would tend to bias results against findings.

3.3. Significance of the Study

The findings of the will study provide information to policy makers as to what the lay person consider as the causes of poverty and that will help to develop the appropriate policy to solve the issue of poverty. The findings are also expected to serve as a reference material for future researchers. The findings will also contribute to theories of poverty.

3.4. Methodology of the Study

The study is based on Quantitative descriptive survey design. The target population for the study is workers and students in Sunyani Polytechnic. Data for the study was collected from the respondents through self designed and self administered questionnaire covering the various reasons provided in the literature.

Non-probability convenience sampling technique was adopted. This study is based on primary data collected in 2011 from the study area and secondary data were obtained from literature. In all 147 respondents were used for the study. The purpose of the study was explained briefly and respondents were made to agree to partake in the study.

A literature review is made on both primary and secondary resources. This covered all the key concepts that were used in the study to provide the theoretical framework and background against which an important tool of the study, the questionnaire was developed. The review in addition, provides the basis for discussions and support for many views that were presented in the study. It also, adds weight to the conclusions drawn, and recommendations made. Data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies of response, percentages, mean and standard deviation. In addition, One-way ANOVA was performed with the use of SPSS 16.0.

4. Results and Discussions

Demographic profile of respondents

Of the 147 students in the study, 100(68%) were males and 46(31.3%) were females, with one missing response. Majority 138(93.9%) belong to the age group of 18-29, followed by 5(3.4%) in the age group of 30-44 with four missing responses. larger number 133(90.5%) of them were Christians, followed by Muslim 12(8.2%), and 1(0.7%) of them not attending church, with 1 (0.7%) missing response.

Most 48(32.7%) of them attend religious service once a week. The rest are: more than once a week 43(29.3%); never 3(2%); every meeting day 40(27.2%); occasionally 11(7.5%); other 1(0.7%); missing response 1(0.7%).

In all of the 147 students, 93(63.3%) were in HND1 and 52(35.4%) were in HND2 with 2(1.4%) missing response. Majority 94(63.9%) belong to middle income group. This is followed by low income group 22(15%), then high income group 11(7.5%), and those who did not know 18(12.2%), with 2(1.4%) missing response.

The sources of income for the households are employment 61(41.5%), social benefit/pension 6(4.1%), private transfer/remittance/gifts 28(19%), other sources 49(33.3), with 3(2%) missing responses. Majority of the households work to obtain income.

Majority 56(38.1%) did not know whether they belong to ethnic minority or not with 53(36.1%) indicating that they belong to ethnic minority, and 35(23.8%) saying they are not. There were 2(1.4%) missing responses.

The ethnic language of majority 115(78.2%) are written and learned in the various institutions. A small number 14(9.5%) indicated that their language is not written with another 14(9.5%) not aware if the language is written or not, and 4(2.7%) missing responses.

Majority of the respondents were from the Ashanti region of Ghana followed by Brong Ahafo 25(17%); Eastern 16(10.9%); Upper West 14(9.5%); Northern 11(7.5%); Western 9(6.1%); Central 8(5.4%); Upper East 6(4.1%); Volta 5(3.4%); and Greater Accra 3(2).

Majority of the respondents 86(58.5%) belief in maintaining order in the nation. This is followed by belief in giving people more says in important government decisions 34(23.1%); fighting rising prices 8(5.4%); protecting freedom of speech 16(10.9%); others 3(2%).

Perception of poverty reduction and life

Significant majority 108(73.5%) agreed/strongly agreed that the gap between the rich and the poor should be reduced in Ghana with 26(17.7%) neutral responses and 13(8.8%) disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A large majority 95(66%) think the state should be involved strongly 95(66%) in reducing the gap. Another 29(17.7%) of them think moderate involvement is good with 9(6.1%) thinking that the state should not get involve. Four (2.7%) did not know what the state should do with 8 (5.4%) missing responses.

On respondents perception of life, majority 64(43.5%) indicated that they are satisfied with life with 41(28.6%) remarking that they are not satisfied with life. There were 39(26.5%) neutral responses and 3(2%) missing responses. In addition, majority 88(59.9%) indicated that they have control over life with 27(18.4%) not having control over life. Another 30(20.4%) were neutral with 2(1.4%) missing responses.

Perception of causes of success

On the factors contributing to success, various factors were identified. The most important variable according to the respondents is personal effort (95.3%). This is followed by skills (93.2%); intelligence (84.3%); political factor (27.2%); and criminal/corrupt ties (7.5%). Popular explanation among the respondents is individualist approach.

Poverty Attributions

On the causes of poverty four main variables were identified. The most important variable is injustice (67.4%); laziness (59.9%); inevitable part of modern life (32.6%); and unlucky (27.7%). These were obtained by ranking of responses. As a control variable a question was asked for only one response. "In your opinion what is the main reasons why there are some people in need in our country today"? Majority 66(44.9%) indicated that people are poor because of laziness and lack of will power. This was followed by luck 28(19%) and injustice in the society 28(19%); inevitable part of modern life 11(7.5%); with 11(7.5%) not knowing why people are in need. There were 3 missing responses.

The results indicated that majority 96(65.3%) considered themselves as not being poor with 15(10.2%) seeing themselves as poor, while 21(14.3%) did not know whether they are poor or not. There were 15(10.2%) missing responses. But when asked if they were rich, majority 54(36.7%) responded No while 50(34%) saying Yes with 30(20.4%) not knowing whether they are rich or not. There were 13(8.8%) missing responses.

When asked if they know poor people within their communities, greater majority 98(66.7%) indicated Yes with 27(18.4%) saying No, and 16(10.9) not knowing poor people within the community. There were 6(4.1%) missing responses. Respondents were also asked if it is difficult for people to admit that they are poor. A significant number 75(51%) said Yes, 44(29.9%) said No with 23(15.6%) indicating that they do not know. There were 5(3.4%) missing responses.

Perception of work

On work, majority 100(68%) indicated that work should come first even if it means less spare time. Also 93(63.3%) said one needs to have a job to fully develop his/her talent. In addition, 128(87%) agreed/strongly agreed that work is a duty towards society with 100(68%) indicating that people who do not work turn lazy. Majority 63(42.8%) indicated that it is not humiliating to receive money without having to work for it. In all respondents have positive attitude towards work. The results are shown in table 2.

Table 1. Responses on Attitude Towards Work

Statements	Strongly Agreed Freq/%	Agreed Freq./%	Neutral Freq./%	Disagreed Freq./%	Strongly Disagreed Freq./%	Missing Response Freq./%	Total Freq./%
humiliating to receive money without having to work for it	19(12.9%)	34(23.1%)	28(19%)	30(20.4%)	33(22.4)	3(2%)	147(100)
People who don't work turn lazy	56(38.1%)	44(29.9%)	11(7.5%)	28(19%)	5(3.4%)	3(2%)	147(100)
Work is a duty towards society	54(36%)	74(50%)	14(9.5%)	3(2%)	na	2(1.4%)	147(100)
Work first if even less spare time	35(23.8%)	65(44.2%)	31(21.1%)	9(6.1%)	5(3.4%)	2(1.4%)	147(100)
You need to have a job to fully develop your talent	50(34%)	43(29.3%)	17(11.6%)	23(15.6%)	12(8.2%)	2(1.4%)	147(100)

Source: Field survey, May 2011.

One-Way ANOVA

One way analysis was used to compare the means of responses given by respondents on the various questions. All the responses given were not even across the sample. Demographic variables significantly affected some responses given by the people. Gender significantly affected the following: 'state involvement in reducing poverty' ($F=2.867$; $p=0.093$); 'if people find it difficult to admit poverty' ($F=2.875$; $p=0.092$); 'if respondents were rich' ($F=3.405$; $p=0.067$); 'satisfied with life' ($F=2.864$; $p=0.093$); 'You need to have a job to fully develop your talent' ($F=6.148$; $p=0.014$). Age significantly affected the responses on 'poor people are unlucky ($F=3.965$; $p=0.048$).

In addition, the year of respondents also affected the responses significantly. 'Skills' ($F=3.895$; $p=0.050$); 'injustice' ($F=3.037$; $p=0.084$); difficult to admit to been poor ($F=3.700$; $p=0.056$); 'need to have job to fully develop talent' ($F=5.905$; $p=0.016$); 'work is a duty towards society' ($F=3.542$; $p=0.062$).

Further, religious affiliation also significantly affected the responses. 'Intelligence' ($F=2.633$; $p=0.075$); 'skills' ($F=3.131$; $p=0.047$); 'criminal/concepts' ($F=5.102$; $p=0.007$); 'unlucky' ($F=2.741$; $p=0.068$); 'people who do not work turn lazy' ($F=4.178$; $p=0.017$). The frequency of attending religious services also significantly affected some of the responses. 'Skills' ($F=3.017$; $p=0.013$); 'individual effort' ($F=2.364$; $p=0.043$); 'control over life' ($F=2.017$; $p=0.080$); 'work is a duty towards society' ($F=2.078$; $p=0.072$).

Furthermore, region of respondents significantly affected the responses. 'the gap between the rich and the poor should be reduced' ($F=2.380$; $p=0.016$); 'Skills' ($F=1.687$; $p=0.098$); 'criminal/corrupt ties' ($F=2.699$; $p=0.006$); 'unlucky' ($F=2.101$; $p=0.033$); 'need to have job to fully develop talent' ($F=1.924$; $p=0.053$); 'people who do not work turn lazy' ($F=2.448$; $p=0.013$).

Further still, household income level also significantly affected some of the responses. 'Laziness of poor' ($F=2.390$; $p=0.054$); 'whether respondents know poor people' ($F=2.460$; $p=0.048$); 'work first' ($F=2.345$; $p=0.058$). The sources of household's income affected some of the responses. 'Injustice' ($F=2.377$; $p=0.073$); 'difficult to admit that one is poor' ($F=4.538$; $p=0.005$); 'whether respondents are rich' ($F=2.171$; $p=0.095$).

Lastly, the type of beliefs respondents hold also significantly affected the responses. 'Whether the gap between the rich and the poor should be reduced' ($F=2.591$; $p=0.039$); 'Skills' ($F=2.926$; $p=0.023$); 'political' ($F=2.292$; $p=0.062$); 'whether respondents know poor people' ($F=2.772$; $p=0.030$); 'if it is difficult to admit been poor' ($F=2.210$; $p=0.071$); 'humiliating to receive money for not working' ($F=2.417$; $p=0.052$); and 'work is a duty towards society' ($F=5.353$; $p=0.000$)

5. Discussion

In this study it has been found that there is variation in how public understands the causes of poverty. Both structuralist and individual, and fatalistic explanations are found in this study. Overall, however, respondents were most likely to favour individualistic perspective that attribute poverty to the individual effort such as laziness (44.9%) and unluckiness, and least likely to support the structural explanation. This finding is contrary to previous finding in other countries (Kainu and Niemela, 2010; Wollie, 2009; Reutter et al., 2006; Ipsos News Centre, 1999; Krediel, 1998). But the findings support earlier findings by other researchers (Lepianka et al., 2010).

All the respondents were in tertiary institution with majority belonging to the middle income group. This might have influenced their attribution to favour the individual perspective. This finding support the Feagin (1972) argument that people within middle income group and are of considerable education support the individual explanations of poverty.

On the keys for success the main variable was personal effort (95.3%). According to Kainu and Niemela (2010) "those who see effort and hard work as a key for success are more likely to endorse individualist explanations". This statement is supported by the findings in this study.

The findings also revealed that demographic variables such as gender, age as well as socioeconomic variables such as household income level, religious affiliation, region and sources of income of households are functions of responses given for poverty attributions, attitude towards success, and work. On demographic variables these findings are supported by some previous studies (Feagin, 1972; Carr and MacLachlan, 1998; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Hunt, 1996).

In the case of socioeconomic variables some earlier studies are in lined with this (Bullock, 1999; Nasser and Abouchedid, 2001). Majority of the respondents belong to the middle income group. Members in this group favour individual explanation. The political belief one hold also significantly affects the responses on attitude towards work and success.

6. Conclusion

The paper has established that the three main poverty attributions operate in the study area. These are individual perspective, structural explanation, and fatalistic concepts of poverty. The primary or dominant view is the individual perspective which does not reflect the general assertion that developing societies place responsibility for reducing poverty on the state. Effort must be put in place to change individual orientation to modify behaviour. The structures of the state must also be looked at since it also impact on poverty. Social environment must also be attended to. Measures to reduce poverty must be holistic to cover all the areas involved in poverty. Respondents have positive attitude towards work and belief that working is ones contribution to society.

Socio-demographic variables significantly affect the responses given by respondents on poverty attrition, attitude to work, and success, which suggest that respondents had different concepts for explaining poverty, success and the reasons people work. The findings will help policy maker's economist, politicians, and other stakeholder to better understand poverty issues and how to solve them. Future studies should look at the relationship between parent education and poverty attribution. Also future research should look at the relationship between levels of education, employed and unemployed sample to enrich the discussion. In addition future study should increase the sample since and employ structural models to establish cause and effect. Future researchers should look at public understanding of the effect of poverty.

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