An Attributional Analysis of Reactions to Poverty: The Political Ideology of the Giver and the Perceived Morality of the Receiver

Bernard Weiner¹, Danny Osborne¹, and Udo Rudolph²

Abstract

An attributional analysis of reactions to poverty is presented. The article begins by discussing the perceived causes of poverty and their taxonomic properties (locus, stability, and controllability). One antecedent of causal beliefs, political ideology, is then examined in detail, followed by a review of the effects of causal beliefs on emotions and behavior. It is contended that helping the poor is a moral issue, but the moral evaluation concerns the targeted recipient of aid rather than the potential help giver. Persons perceived as responsible for their plight, a dominant construal for conservatives, elicit anger and neglect. In contrast, those who are seen as not responsible for their financial hardship, an outlook predominantly endorsed by liberals, arouse sympathy and help giving. Sympathy is the most important proximal determinant of aid. This analysis is extended to reactions to achievement failure, abortion, and rape. Policy implications are also examined.

Keywords

attribution, emotion, helping, prosocial behavior, justice, morality, political psychology, stigma

Helping the needy is often thought to be determined by the moral character of the potential help giver. Will that person be or not be a “good Samaritan?” In this article, we pursue the complementary idea that helping is dependent on the perceived morality (i.e., responsibility and deservedness) of the help receiver. This hypothesis is guided by attribution theory, which provides a conceptual analysis of the perceived causes of poverty, their antecedents, and the subsequent reactions to those causes—topics that are reviewed in this article.

Some of the ideas discussed here have been addressed in prior contexts (see Weiner, 1995, 2006). However, this article pursues in greater detail (a) a definitive list of the perceived causes of poverty and their moderators, (b) a comparison between two taxonomies of causality, (c) the role of political ideology in influencing causal beliefs about poverty, (d) the idea that perceptions about the causes of poverty are motivated social cognitions constructed to be consistent with ideological beliefs, and (e) extensions of the proposed attributional analysis of poverty to other social contexts including reactions to abortion and to victims of rape as well as policy implications. It is our hope that some general rules of social motivation will emerge from these analyses. Individual studies are not discussed in detail; rather, bodies of findings that document the role attributions play in reactions to social needs and transgressions are reviewed and summarized.

Perceived Causes of Poverty

An extensive array of studies have examined the perceived causes of poverty (see, e.g., Bullock, 1999; Ditch, 1984; Feagin, 1972; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982a, 1982b; Hunt, 1996; Morcol, 1997; Nasser, Abouchedid, & Khasham, 2002; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). This research is a subset of a large body of descriptive investigations that assess the perceived causes of success and failure, happiness and depression, and wealth and poverty. In the poverty-related research, participants are usually asked to list their beliefs about the causes of poverty or to rate a number of causes that the experimenters have selected based on either intuition or earlier studies that identified causes from research participants. These studies have been undertaken in a number of countries including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Lebanon, Portugal, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States.

In spite of the diversity of the samples participating in these studies, a rather small list of agreed-on causes of poverty has

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emerged (see Table 1; not listed in order of importance), although many other unique causal beliefs can be identified. As shown in Table 1, the dominant perceived causes of poverty include alcohol and drug abuse, lack of effort and laziness, lack of skills and ability, low wages, prejudice and discrimination, sickness and physical handicaps, and bad luck.

Causal ascriptions vary for different impoverished groups, which exclude certain causes and magnify others (see Appelbaum, 2001; Furnham, 1982a; Iyengar, 1990; van Oorschot, 2000; Wilson, 1996). For example, poverty among the elderly is likely to elicit beliefs about illness, poverty for immigrants could activate thoughts about lack of language skills and job opportunities, and for welfare recipients, laziness is often a dominant perceived cause of need (Henry, Reyna, & Weiner, 2004). Likewise, although low motivation and poor money management skills are perceived to be the dominant causes of poverty for men, poverty among women is more often attributed to irresponsible reproductive patterns and failure to establish a traditional nuclear family (Cozzarelli, Tagler, & Wilkinson, 2002).

Perceived causes also differ as a function of age, culture, gender, income, and other demographic variables. For example, women and Europeans tend to regard low wages and lack of opportunities as more important causes of poverty than do men and Americans, who consider lack of effort and laziness as more causally determinant (see Bullock, 1999; Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Niemela, 2008; Reutter et al., 2006; Shirazi & Biel, 2005; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). Age also tends to be positively correlated with the likelihood of making individual attributions such as lack of effort for poverty (Feather, 1974; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; but see Hastie, 2010; Nasser, Sinhal, & Abouchchedid, 2005).

**Taxonomies of Causality.** It is relatively straightforward to impose a classification system for these causes by specifying that they relate to the individual, society, or fate (from Feagin, 1972; see Table 1). Such a system allows some progress from qualitative to quantitative data by fostering comparisons and contrasts between causes. For example, laziness and lack of thrift are alike in being individualistic causes, and they differ from high taxes and low wages, which are considered to be social causes.

Although this tripartite division is intuitively reasonable and empirically supported (see, e.g., Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982a, 1982b; Niemela, 2008; Smith & Stone, 1989; Wollie, 2009; Zucker & Weiner, 1993), it has serious shortcomings in that causes can be placed into only one of three mutually exclusive categories. This results in a weakly differentiating classification system. For example, both lack of effort and illness are classified as individualistic causes of poverty although they elicit very different emotional and motivational reactions from others, as will soon be discussed.

A more complex classification system has been developed that includes a contrast between the individual causes of illness and effort (see Weiner, 1985). This scheme also includes three causal characteristics or properties (i.e., locus, stability, and controllability), but they are relatively orthogonal causal dimensions anchored at the extremes. Hence, all causes may be simultaneously classified on three dimensions, which promotes quantitative comparisons and extends the analyses that can be undertaken.

**Locus.** One property of causes is that they lie within (internal to) or outside of (external to) the actor (Heider, 1958; Rotter, 1966). That is, locus has been identified as a causal dimension. All the individualistic causes of poverty are located within the actor, whereas societal causes as well as luck are regarded as external causes. Because attribution theory embraces phenomenology, classification depends on how it seems to the perceiver. Hence, if poverty is ascribed to being an “unlucky person,” then luck is construed as internal (rather than external) to the impoverished other.

**Stability.** Orthogonal to the locus category of causes is the dimension of stability or causal endurance (see Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). Some causes, such as physical handicaps or high taxes, are typically regarded as enduring and unlikely to change over time. On the other hand, sickness and bad luck are often conceived as temporary causes. Because locus and stability are independent dimensions of causality, the perceived causes of poverty that are enduring can exist within (e.g., physical handicaps) or outside (e.g., high taxes) of the impoverished other. Likewise, unstable causes of poverty can be construed as internal (e.g., sickness) or external (e.g., bad luck) to the poor.

**Controllability.** The third dimension of causality is controllability. Controllability is particularly important when considering reactions to poverty. Causes such as lack of effort, absence of thrift, or unwillingness to relocate to find work are considered controllable by the person. On the other hand, physical illness and bad luck are uncontrollable by poor individuals in that they are not subject to volitional change.

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**Table 1. Summary of Findings on the Main Perceived Causes of Poverty and Their Classifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic causes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of effort, laziness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of skills and ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of thrift, poor money management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No attempt at self-improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure of society to provide good schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudice and discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sickness, physical handicap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad luck</td>
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[50x75]1972; see Table 1). Such a system allows some progress from that they relate to the individual, society, or fate (from Feagin, 1972; see Table 1). Such a system allows some progress from that they relate to the individual, society, or fate (from Feagin, 1972; see Table 1).
Hence, this dimension of causality is related to concepts such as responsibility and deservedness, according to which people are morally responsible for acts only if they could have done otherwise (e.g., Frankfurt, 1969).

Uncontrollable causes may be internal (e.g., illness) or external (e.g., luck) to the person, whereas all controllable causes, such as lack of effort, are within the individual. That is, there may be no external and controllable causes. To overcome the problem of nonorthogonality of the locus and control dimensions, Weiner (1995, 2006) proposed that some external causes such as prejudice and discrimination be considered controllable by others rather than by oneself. Given this shift in focus, all causes can be classified within a $2 \times 2$ taxonomic system. Examples of causes of poverty within the eight possible taxonomic cells are provided in Table 2. All causes, then, are classifiable into a three-dimensional space.

**Causal Antecedents.** Attribution theorists have often pursued the question of causal antecedents within educational contexts, asking what determines beliefs regarding the failure of others. In this instance, parents and teachers may have information regarding IQ tests, the amount of time the child studies, how others performed on the test, how this person has performed on prior occasions, and the like. Hence, covariation analyses, a fundamental component of the attribution process (Kelley, 1967), are possible. If the student fails an exam and has failed in the past while others are succeeding, then the cause of the failure is perceived to lie within the pupil (e.g., low ability or laziness). In an extension of these ideas to the context of stigma evaluation, stigmas inconsistent with gender-linked norms give rise to biological (uncontrollable) beliefs about causality (Wirth & Bodenhausen, 2009).

In contrast to achievement and failure within the context of the classroom, individuals are unlikely to have a great deal of specific information about the causes of general poverty. For example, there typically has not been direct evidence of lack of thrift or unwillingness to relocate. Hence, a causal belief regarding poverty often has properties similar to an attitude rather than a logical inference. Because of this, attributions for poverty may vary considerably based on individual differences among perceivers.

**Political Ideology.** One individual difference that moderates causal beliefs about poverty is political ideology (see reviews in Weiner, 1995, 2006). A great deal of evidence shows that liberals (i.e., those on the left of the political spectrum) tend to perceive structural causes of poverty (e.g., Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Furnham, 1982b; Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982; Skitka, 1999; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000; Williams, 1984). They point to poor educational opportunities, biased governmental policies, and other shortcomings of the social system as the underlying roots of poverty. This causal understanding of poverty is consistent with the nurturing mother metaphor used by Lakoff (1996) to describe liberals’ beliefs about the role of government in addressing social issues.

On the other hand, conservatives (i.e., those on the right of the political spectrum) place causality within the poor and point to, for example, laziness and drug use as causes of poverty (Bullock, 1999; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Hopkins, 2009; Pandey et al., 1982; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, & Brady, 1986; Wagstaff, 1983). That is, political conservatism is positively linked to blaming the poor for their financial hardships (see Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Hine & Montiel, 1999; Williams, 1984). This causal construal is consistent with the strict father metaphor used by Lakoff (1996) to describe conservatives, which places causality for social problems within the person.

To better understand the relationship between political ideology and beliefs about the causes of poverty, we briefly turn to the literature on the motivational antecedents of political conservativism. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) argued that political conservatism is organized around two distinct elements: (a) opposition to social change and (b) acceptance of economic inequality (also see Conover & Feldman, 1981; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Because victim blaming provides an attributional justification for poverty that legitimizes both the current social system and people’s acceptance of inequality (Kay & Zanna, 2009; Lambert & Raichle, 2000; also see Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), conservatives are motivated to attribute poverty to the poor.

Individual attributions for poverty also satisfy conservatives’ need to reduce uncertainty. Research demonstrates that dispositional attributions for others’ behavior occur automatically (Winter & Uleman, 1984; Winter, Uleman, & Cunniff, 1985).
particularly when such explanations are consistent with the perceiver’s values (Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, in press). Once an initial attribution is made, however, perceivers can proceed to a second, more cognitively demanding stage in which situational information is used to modify the initial attribution (Gilbert, 1989; Gilbert, Krull, & Pelham, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). Because conservatism positively correlates with the need for closure (see Jost et al., 2003), conservatives should be less likely than liberals to consider the situational factors that contribute to poverty. Thus, individual attributions meet conservatives’ epistemic needs by providing a quicker and more definitive explanation for poverty than do structural attributions.

The view that political conservatism satisfies certain motivational needs suggests that conservatives will be motivated to adopt other beliefs that also justify poverty (see Jost et al., 2003). Consistent with this expectation, conservatives have more negative stereotypes and negative feelings about the poor than do liberals (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Wagstaff, 1983). Similarly, variables known to correlate with conservatism—including support for the Protestant work ethic, belief in a just world, social dominance orientation, and other system-justifying ideologies—are associated with both negative attitudes toward the poor and opposition to government assistance to the poor (Appelbaum, 2002; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982a; Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Pratto, Stallworth, & Conway-Lanz, 1998; Stephenson, 2000; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007).

These findings suggest that perceived causality is an essential component of what it means to be a liberal or a conservative (also see Lane, 1962). On one hand, political ideology may be a key determinant of causal beliefs. On the other hand, causal beliefs may in part determine people’s choice to identify as a liberal or a conservative and are thus a core component of the definition of these ideologies. With caution about the direction of causation in mind, it is nonetheless an empirical certainty that liberals are more likely than conservatives to make external and personally uncontrollable attributions for poverty, whereas conservatives are more likely than liberals to make internal and personally controllable attributions for poverty.

### Initial Stages in the Theory

The prior discussion provides the foundation for an attributional theory of reactions to poverty. This theory builds on the literature concerning people’s responses to achievement failure (see Weiner, 1985, 1995). To briefly summarize this literature, the top half of Table 3 shows that failure in an achievement context is followed by a search for a potential explanation that includes an examination of past performance, social norms, others’ performance, and so on. This results in the formation of a causal inference that can be differentiated within the three-dimensional causal space.

A similar analysis can be applied to the causes of poverty. First, people perceive an outcome or state (in this instance, poverty) that calls for explanation. Based on a variety of informational antecedents and personal determinants, a cause is selected by the perceiver. The selected cause will have properties that can be located within a three-dimensional taxonomic space, as shown in the bottom half of Table 3.

As discussed, a liberal person may believe that poverty is caused by the unavailability of jobs. This cause is external to the poor person, unstable, and not subject to volitional change by the poor, yet it may be controllable by others. On the other hand, a conservative might argue that the cause of poverty is laziness, which is internal to the poor person, stable, and controllable by the person.

Although the perceived causes of achievement failure and poverty are likely to differ, they may share similar placements within the three-dimensional taxonomic space. Poverty believed to be caused by a physical handicap, for example, is likely to have the same causal structure as achievement failure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Initial Stages of an Attributional Sequence for Theories in the Achievement and Financial Contexts</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Achievement</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Financial</strong></td>
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caused by lack of aptitude. Both causes can be construed as internal to the person, stable over time, and not subject to volitional control. In this example, poverty and achievement failure have disparate causal antecedents and are associated with different specific causes. However, both depicted sequences end identically with the postulated three dimensions of causality. By specifying the genotypic properties of causes, phenotypically dissimilar causes can be considered similar and subject to the same psychological processes.

The Dynamics of Action

Turning from causal antecedents to consequences, the next issue addressed is the difference it makes when people attribute poverty to, for example, lack of thrift as opposed to lack of job opportunities. This question concerns the dynamics of action and the contribution of attributional thinking to a theory of motivation. Behavioral issues are first addressed by focusing on political ideology and the control dimension of causes because both are unambiguously linked with pro- and antisocial behaviors toward the poor.

Regarding political ideology, it is well documented that liberals endorse more help and public assistance for the poor than do conservatives (see, e.g., Appelbaum, 2001; Bobbio, 1996; Gilens, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008; Jost et al., 2008; Kerlinger, 1984; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Shirazi & Biel, 2005). Consequently, liberals are often thought of as “tender minded” and “providers” (see Janoff-Bulman, 2009), whereas conservatives are frequently labeled “tough minded” and “social Darwinists.”

As noted, liberals and conservatives differ in their beliefs about the causes of poverty, with liberals more likely to perceive environmental causality and conservatives more prone to perceive personal causality. Hence, the relation between political ideology and motivation to help may be at least partially mediated by causal perceptions and particularly by beliefs about personal causal control over a need (see Hine & Montiel, 1999).

Concerning personal responsibility, research has established that perceived control is necessary for inferences of responsibility and is woven into the definitions of deservedness, blame, and fault (for reviews, see Feather, 1999b; Fincham & Jaspers, 1980; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995, 2006). It also has been documented that the main dimension used to distinguish and evaluate stigmas is responsibility (see Feldman & Crandall, 2007). If the cause of a need or stigma such as poverty is regarded as subject to volitional control (i.e., the person causes this plight and is able to respond to reduce the need), then the person has a “guilty mind” and is blamed, faulted, and regarded as not deserving help (see Feather, 2006; Feather & McKee, 2009). This characterizes the lazy, those who are not thrifty, and even the addicted in the view of the layperson. It also applies to people with other behaviorally based causes of stigmas: AIDS because of promiscuous sexual behavior, lung cancer because of smoking, and heart problems because of an unhealthy lifestyle. In these situations, the needy other is perceived to be a moral failure (see, e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Skitka, 1999; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988; Williams, 1984; also see reviews in Weiner, 1995, 2006).

On the other hand, if the person is perceived to have no personal control and is unable to respond to a need such as poverty, then the individual is not responsible, is neither blamed nor faulted, and is regarded as deserving aid. This characterizes persons who are impoverished because of no available jobs, lack of educational opportunities, or poor governmental policies. It also applies to those with personally uncontrollable plights: AIDS because of fetal transmission, lung cancer because of unknowingly living in a polluted area, and heart problems because of genetics. Similarly, widowed women and children, for whom our welfare policies were first established (Katz, 1987), are viewed as having no control over their situation.

Research on the perceived controllability of poverty corresponds with the literature on the controllability of other stigmas. Public support for government assistance is higher for those in need because of uncontrollable causes such as being laid off or having a physical handicap than it is for those in need because of controllable causes such as low effort, quitting a job, or failing to establish stable employment despite being in good health (Appelbaum, 2001; Feather & Dawson, 1998; Gilens, 1999; Kangas, 2003; Will, 1993). Moreover, actively searching for employment although failing to find a job increases the extent to which the public is willing to provide support for the poor (Feather & Dawson, 1998; Iyengar, 1990; Will, 1993). Similarly, perceived responsibility negatively correlates with beliefs about the deservingness of public assistance (Appelbaum, 2002; for a review of the literature on deservingness and responsibility, see Feather, 1999a).

The importance of controllability on perceptions of deservingness is further highlighted by research on the criteria people use to determine if others deserve help. van Oorschot (2000) identified five criteria of deservingness for public assistance: (a) control, (b) need, (c) shared group membership with the giver, (d) gratitude, and (e) reciprocity. Of these five criteria, the controllability of the cause had the largest impact on participants’ level of generosity toward those in need. This is consistent with research on the importance of perceived controllability in support for public assistance to the poor (e.g., Kangas, 2003; Will, 1993).

Perceived deservingness also varies as a function of the particular group of poor under consideration. People express greater concern over the well-being of the elderly than they do for other social groups in need (van Oorschot, 2006). This implies that the elderly are perceived to be especially deserving of public assistance because of the uncontrollability of their need (also see Gilens, 1999). In a similar manner, poor...
women are seen in a more positive light than are poor men (Cozzarelli et al., 2002).

Combining the ideological and control literatures, Farwell and Weiner (1996, 2000) examined the joint effects of political ideology and control beliefs on help giving. In this research, participants were asked to assume that they were members of a charity board dispensing aid to the needy. The potential recipients were described in need because of uncontrollable ascriptions (e.g., physical handicap, lack of educational opportunities, employer went out of business, etc.) or controllable causes (e.g., absent from work, lack of job effort, etc.). In addition, the respondents indicated their political ideology. Farwell and Weiner reported eight studies with various manipulations of control and a variety of dependent variables that capture help-giving recommendations. A summary of the self-reported helping responses as a function of ideology and causal control over poverty is displayed in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the y-axis represents a composite scale that captures the approximate relative magnitude of the effects. The findings presented in Figure 1 demonstrate the overwhelming impact of perceived control or inferred responsibility on help giving. For the possible recipients of aid, those characterized as not responsible (i.e., uncontrollable causality) for their financial plight received more charitable responses than did those regarded as personally responsible (i.e., controllable causality). Second, a smaller albeit significant effect of ideology was also obtained, showing that liberals provided more overall help than did conservatives. Finally, greater differences in the responses of the two ideologies were displayed in the prosocial actions toward the responsible recipients; liberals were much more likely to provide aid to this group than were conservatives (for further supporting data, see Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993).

These findings shed light on some of the labels that have been applied to liberals and conservatives. The prosocial actions of liberals on behalf of those who are perceived to be responsible for their financial hardship capture what is meant by a bleeding-heart liberal—one who gives even to the undeserving (other data points are involved in this label, but the one highlighted is most salient). The responses of conservatives to those who are perceived to be not responsible for being poor depict what is meant by a compassionate conservative—one who gives when it is relatively warranted. In addition, the general funding decisions of conservatives account for the label of stingy—a main effect of withholding support. Thus, Figure 1 displays findings consistent with the construal of a “good” and “bad” conservative (i.e., compassionate vs. stingy, respectively) and a “bad” liberal (i.e., bleeding heart). What is missing is a label for a “good” liberal. One might suggest a caring liberal—one who believes distributive justice should be based on need alone. Or perhaps the label discriminating or equitable liberal is appropriate in that they do allocate more funds to the deserving than to the undeserving needy.

We now turn from political ideology and focus on causal control. This discussion is centered on the dimension of control because it is so strongly related to reactions to poverty and moral evaluations. Two additional linkages to causal control are introduced, as they are also postulated to mediate the relationship between poverty and help giving. One connection concerns the association between causal control and personal responsibility. A second addition relates to the role of emotion in a motivational episode.

**Causal Control and Personal Responsibility**

Thus far, we have been rather cavalier in substituting the concepts of causal control and personal responsibility. Although interrelated, they are not synonymous. If a person has been held responsible for an act, then she or he could have done otherwise (i.e., the person had control over the cause of the action; see reviews in Weiner, 1995, 2006). On the other hand, given personal control, there may or may not be personal responsibility. A number of factors can mitigate the relationship between control beliefs and responsibility judgments. For example, controllable acts by the very young, the mentally ill, or those from a different culture may not result in responsibility (or full responsibility) judgments inasmuch as foresight, intention, and understanding of the cultural norms mitigate beliefs about responsibility (see Malle, 2004). Thus, there are distinctions between murder and manslaughter (viz., intentional vs. negligent actions), and these distinctions affect beliefs about responsibility.

The impact of mitigating factors on perceptions of personal responsibility within the legal system is particularly relevant.
to the current attributional approach to poverty. A central tenet of the proposed attribution theory is that the perceived morality of the target (in this case, the defendant) plays a crucial role in determining people’s affective and behavioral responses to the target. As such, defendants who have a compromised ability to determine the difference between right and wrong should elicit more public opposition to the death penalty than do defendants who are fully cognizant of their actions. That is, defendants who are mentally ill, mentally challenged, or juveniles at the time of the crime should be seen as less personally responsible for a death-eligible crime than a defendant whose mental faculties are fully developed and intact.

Consistent with this assumption, most people feel that it is unacceptable to impose the death penalty on defendants who have compromised mental faculties (Cochran, Boots, & Heide, 2003; Sims & Johnston, 2004). Likewise, people express less support for capital punishment when the defendant is a minor than when the defendant is an adult (Applegate & Davis, 2006; Cochrane et al., 2003; Moon, Wright, Cullen, & Pealer, 2000; Sims & Johnston, 2004; Vogel & Vogel, 2003). Differences in culpability based on cognitive abilities have led the U.S. Supreme Court to rule that it is unconstitutional to execute defendants who are mentally ill (Ford v. Wainwright, 1986), are mentally challenged (Atkins v. Virginia, 2002), or were younger than the age of 18 at the time of the death-eligible offense (Roper v. Simons, 2005). These findings are consistent with differentiations made between targets based on their perceived personal responsibility.

There is an additional reason to include responsibility in this attributional approach to poverty. Behaviors such as help giving are not directed at a cause. Rather, reactions are toward other people who are deemed responsible or not responsible for certain events or states. Hence, the structure of the general theory suggested thus far requires a modification to include inferences about responsibility. The expanded behavioral sequence is now depicted as:

1. State or Event—Causal Antecedents—Cause—Causal Control—Responsibility—Behavior

Specifically, two prototypical sequences are:

1a. Poverty—Liberal Ideology—No Educational Opportunities—Uncontrollable by the Poor Person (Controllable by Others)—Not Responsible for the Need—Help

1b. Poverty—Conservative Ideology—Lazy—Controllable by the Poor Person—Responsible for the Need—Withhold Help

In these two examples, it should be recognized that only one causal determinant is provided, only one cause in each sequence is suggested, only one of the causal dimensions is included, the lone determinant of responsibility is causal control, control and responsibility are identical in value because of the absence of mitigating factors, and the only behavioral response involves general help.

The Role of Emotion

The motivation process as described thus far is “cold.” There is no inclusion of emotion, although emotion and motivation are intertwined. Attributional thoughts about poverty have been specified to elicit actions, yet it also is the case that causal thoughts give rise to emotion. Imagine, for example, that your child fails an exam because of not studying or does poorly at a sport because of a physical handicap. These two events will surely elicit different emotional reactions that are partially guided by the attributions made for the failures.

It is well documented that perceptions of causal control and personal responsibility elicit a set of moral emotions. When perceived personal responsibility is high for a transgression or stigma such as poverty, the dominant emotions elicited will be anger related (see Averill, 1983; Frijda, 1986; Reisenzein & Hoffman, 1990; Roseman, 1991; Weiner, 1995, 2006). We are angry or annoyed when our child refuses to study, when an athlete does not arrive for practice, when a roommate does not clean the dishes, or when our spouse is late for lunch. Likewise, anger and annoyance may arise when poverty is perceived to be because of laziness, lack of thrift, or unwillingness to relocate.

Anger conveys personal responsibility and communicates to others that they “could and should have done otherwise”; the action is unacceptable and should not be repeated. People who believe that others’ anger is justified may feel guilt and regret. Alternatively, they may try to change the emotional reaction of others by providing excuses that convey the uncontrollable nature of the cause and their lack of responsibility for the outcome (e.g., “I did not go to work because I was sick”). Justifications may also be offered to mitigate inferences of responsibility (e.g., “I was late to work because I had to visit my mother in the hospital”; see Weiner, 2006, for a review).

On the other hand, events that involve low perceived personal responsibility elicit sympathy. We feel sorry for the physically and mentally handicapped when a goal is not reached or is unreachable. And we feel sympathetic toward the poor when poverty is because of lack of educational opportunities, lack of job availability, a physical handicap, and so on, just as we feel sympathetic toward children with AIDS because of fetal transmission or persons with leukemia or other cancers of unknown origins (see Feldman & Crandall, 2007). The motivational message of sympathy is prosocial—to support others to alleviate their plight and thus balance the scales of justice.

Emotions are hypothesized to provide the bridge between causal thoughts and behaviors and can be incorporated into the sequences suggested thus far in the following manner:
2a. Poverty—Liberal Ideology—No Job Opportunities—Uncontrollable by the Poor—Not Responsible—Sympathy—Help

2b. Poverty—Conservative Ideology—Lazy—Controllable by the Poor—Responsible—Anger—No Help

As outlined thus far, anger and sympathy are experienced by the potential help giver and directed toward the person in need of help. Other feelings experienced by the potential help giver belong to the category of self-conscious moral emotions. Strong evidence suggests that feelings such as guilt influence behavioral reactions toward the poor. For example, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) argued that guilt is a moral emotion that motivates prosocial behavior (for a similar point of view, see Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Buswell, 1996; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Similarly, Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens (2008) characterize guilt as a “reparation related” emotion, and the need for reparation is positively correlated with prosocial behavior (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Cermak, & Rosza, 2001).

An attributional approach to poverty also stimulates hypotheses related to emotions such as guilt. However, because the focus of the current article is exclusively on other-directed thoughts and feelings, we do not pursue this issue further.

Motivational episodes, given these sequences, proceed from thinking to feeling to doing. That is, causal thoughts elicit distinct emotions, which give rise to action. The theory suggests that if feelings could be blocked, then individuals would act similarly in spite of divergent beliefs about causality. This issue concerns the direct versus indirect paths in a motivational sequence that begins with poverty and ends with some type of social action.

Testing the Motivational Sequence

Many studies have tested the proposed motivational sequence, the results of which were summarized in a meta-analysis by Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, and Weiner (2004). To be included in their analysis, the investigation had to have at least one attribution variable related to control (responsibility), at least one emotion similar to anger and sympathy, and a pertinent helping behavior. First-order correlations were also required. Thus, although the reported studies may not have manipulated or measured every component of the hypothesized motivation theory, the essential concepts concerning attributions of control or inferences of responsibility, emotions, and actions were assessed. Their inclusion criteria yielded 39 usable studies that included nearly 8,000 research participants who came from a variety of cultures.

The financial needs represented in the studies were often associated with environmental disasters such as floods or earthquakes or with stigmas such as physical handicaps and addictions. Poverty was specifically mentioned in some research and implied in others by specifying a need for money, shelter, and so on.

A number of path models were examined, only two of which are presented here (see Figure 2). Model 1 has a direct link only between feeling and behavior such that affect is the sole proximal determinant of action, whereas Model 2 has direct links between both thinking and behavior and feeling and behavior.

Turning to the data, Table 4 gives the raw correlations among the attribution, affect, and behavioral variables as well as the Ns on which they are based. As shown in Table 4, the controllability of a need relates negatively to sympathy (r = −.45), positively to anger (r = .52), and negatively to prosocial reactions (r = −.25). Thus, for example, a need caused by laziness results in relatively little sympathy, much anger, and little help. Sympathy relates positively (r = .42), and anger negatively (r = −.24), to prosocial behavior. The strongest raw correlation with help giving is the emotion of sympathy.

Figure 2 provides the path coefficients between the attribution–affect–behavioral variables, all of which are significant in both models. Models 1 and 2 of Figure 2 show the negative relationship between control and sympathy (β = −.45) and the positive relationship between control and anger (β = .52). In Model 2, control also relates negatively to giving aid, but the magnitude of this relationship is small (β = −.05). Including this link does not improve the fit of the model over Model 1, which has no thinking–acting path. As can be seen in both of the models presented in Figure 2, sympathy relates
quite strongly to help giving, whereas anger has a slightly negative association with withholding aid.

In sum, the findings are consistent with a thinking–feeling–acting motivational sequence—thoughts direct feelings and feelings dictate action. Thoughts do play a role in helping behavior but only as a distal determinant through their influence on emotion. We regard this sequence as a “deep structure” or basic representation of a motivational episode. However, not all emotions have causal antecedents, and there are other determinants of help giving that are not based on affect. Furthermore, positive emotions appear to be more strongly related to prosocial behaviors than are negative emotions, suggesting that the emotion–action linkages are nuanced.

Theoretical Range and Policy Implications

A major strength of the current attributional approach to poverty is its theoretical range. By classifying the perceived causes of outcomes along the dimensions of locus, stability, and control, the theory can be used to explain people’s responses to a broad range of social phenomena. In this section, we focus on people’s responses to three social issues: achievement failure, abortion, and rape. We then discuss the implications this attributional approach to poverty has for public policy.

Achievement Evaluations. The first steps toward an attributional analysis of reactions to poverty as presented here were undertaken by investigating evaluative judgments of achievement behavior. As we pointed out, achievement contexts are typically characterized by the presence of many kinds of causal information (e.g., covariation), which give rise to different causal interpretations of achievement outcomes than do attributions for poverty. Even so, according to this body of research, reactions toward a student failing an exam are strongly influenced by inferences of responsibility. For example, long ago Weiner and Kukla (1970) analyzed achievement evaluations for success and failure given either high or low effort and high or low ability. Results indicated that evaluative judgments were primarily determined by the presence or absence of effort: Success was rewarded more when effort was high (as compared to high ability), whereas failure was evaluated more negatively in the presence of low effort (relative to low ability).

Judgments of responsibility are presumed to mediate the relationship between success and failure on one hand and the corresponding evaluative judgments on the other. Because effort is believed to be under volitional control, people should be held responsible for the amount of effort they invest. Hence, perceptions of low effort should elicit anger, which would in turn increase the likelihood of punishment. In contrast, ability is typically seen as a causal factor that is beyond volitional control. Thus, perceptions of low ability should give rise to sympathy and reduce the likelihood of punishment. The motivational sequence in the domain of achievement evaluations can be summarized as follows:

3a. Achievement Failure—Causal Information—Lack of Ability—Uncontrollable by the Student—Not Responsible—Sympathy—No Punishment, Help
3b. Achievement Failure—Causal Information—Lack of Effort—Controllable by the Student—Responsible—Anger—Punishment, No Help

Abortion. A particularly relevant distinction in the abortion debate is the difference between elective versus traumatic abortions. Elective abortions involve cases where an abortion is sought because the woman does not want the child, cannot afford the child, or does not wish to marry the father of the child. In contrast, traumatic abortions involve cases where an abortion is sought because the woman was raped, the woman’s life is placed at risk by the pregnancy, or there is a strong chance that the child will have a serious birth defect (see Bahr & Marcos, 2003; Cook, Jelen, & Wilcox, 1992; Craig, Kane, & Wilcox, 1992; Craig, Kane, & Martinez, 2002; Osborne & Davies, 2009, in press). Thus, the reasons underlying a woman’s choice to pursue an elective or a traumatic abortion vary considerably.

Presumably, the causes of the pregnancy and problems related to an elective abortion will be seen as more controllable than the causes underlying pregnancy and issues related to a traumatic abortion (for a related discussion, see Sahar & Karasawa, 2005; Zucker, 1999). According to our attributional approach, then, people should react differently to elective and traumatic abortion. Indeed, individuals are more supportive of traumatic than elective abortion (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Cook et al., 1992). Moreover, traumatic abortions elicit more ambivalence from prolife advocates than do elective abortions (Craig et al., 2002). Although the issue of abortion is different from poverty in many ways, our attributional analysis of poverty provides a theoretical framework that links these areas together. The motivational sequence in this domain can be summarized as follows:

4a. Abortion—Traumatic Circumstances—Uncontrollable by the Woman—Not Responsible—Sympathy—No Rejection, More Support, Help

Table 4. Correlations Among Controllability, Sympathy, Anger, and Help Giving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sympathy</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Help</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>7,416</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathy</td>
<td>-.39</td>
<td>5,484</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>6,800</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data are from Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, and Weiner (2004).

Responses to Victims of Rape. A large body of literature has documented that people’s responses to rape differ according to whether or not the victim knew the assailant (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohnet, 2003; Bridges & McGraill, 1989; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Johnson & Russ, 1989; Lambert & Raichle, 2000; L’Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). This distinction between acquaintance rape and stranger rape is applicable to the theory espoused here. Being raped by a stranger is seen as something outside the control of the victim. As such, victims of a stranger rape are usually not perceived as responsible for their victimization. This lack of responsibility is expected to elicit sympathy and motivate perceivers to engage in prosocial action. In contrast, victims of acquaintance rape, by definition, knew their assailant. This increases the likelihood that perceivers will view victims of acquaintance rape as being at least partially accountable for their victimization, thereby decreasing sympathy and promoting victim blame.

Research is consistent with this analysis. When compared to victims of stranger rape, victims of acquaintance rape are attributed more responsibility and are blamed more for their victimization (Abrams et al., 2003; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Johnson & Russ, 1989; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). Moreover, perpetrators of acquaintance rape are blamed less than perpetrators of stranger rape (L’Armand & Pepitone, 1982). These findings are consistent with expectations derived from the attributional approach to poverty outlined here. However, even in the case of acquaintance rape, controllability by the victim is likely to be perceived as being relatively low. Thus, ascriptions of responsibility, feelings of sympathy, and corresponding behavioral reactions to acquaintance rape are not as severe as we have outlined for the domains of achievement failure and abortion. Nevertheless, the resulting motivational sequence can be summarized as follows:

5a. Rape—By Stranger—Uncontrollable by the Woman—Not Responsible—Sympathy—No Blame, More Support, Help
5b. Rape—By Acquaintance—Less Uncontrollable by the Woman—Responsible—(Relatively) Less Sympathy—(Relatively) Less Support, Less Help

Policy Implications

Kurt Lewin is often linked with the belief that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. It could be argued, however, that the dominant theories in social psychology—including dissonance, balance, social comparison, and so on—have had no direct impact on social change (as opposed to social understanding). The same may be said of attribution theory, although the conceptual system presented here has some potential areas of application. Also, the theory presented here is useful in understanding various social policies and legal decisions as well as understanding and predicting the reactions they receive from the public.

That many Americans, and a lower albeit significant percentage of Europeans, regard poverty as a moral failure on the part of the poor has significant policy implications. In America, as well as Europe, accepting welfare often is regarded as a stigma; people who receive welfare are frequently considered lazy and undeserving of help (see Henry et al., 2004). This construal could have in part guided former President Clinton to name his welfare policy the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996). By focusing attention on the personal responsibility of welfare recipients, Clinton implicitly communicated that the poor have causal control over their plight. It follows from this causal construal that those who do not strive to improve their financial situation are undeserving of public assistance. In times of scarce resources, this belief also aids in decisions regarding the distribution of funds (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992).

There is accumulating evidence, however, that giving all poor people money based solely on need can benefit society by lifting some of the poor from poverty, thereby alleviating many of its negative social consequences (see Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010). This public policy appears to be guided by the morality of the giver and/or utilitarianism rather than by a concern with the morality of the receiver. It is doubtful, however, that Americans would adopt such a policy (even if pragmatic), given the public’s focus on the receiver and the underlying construal that, for some, poverty is a “choice.” Consequently, distributed justice will likely continue to be based on an equity principle (responsibility) rather than, or in addition to, the degree of need.

Programs designed to initiate policy change in American could be created that either attempt to alter causal beliefs about poverty and/or argue that policies should be less (or more) guided by moral concerns. Such programs are beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the public’s causal understanding of attributions for poverty.

A similar analysis can be made regarding abortion, although in this case courtroom decisions are involved. However, both public policy and courtroom decisions are informed by a grasp of naive psychology (see Reisenzein & Rudolph, 2008). Attribution theory as presented here suggests that if an anti-abortion measure is adopted, then it is likely to allow abortions in instances of rape and when carrying the pregnancy to term has serious consequences for the health of the potential mother and/or child. Stated less strongly, the measure would be more likely to exclude these uncontrollable causes and conditions from the ban than it would for cases in which the mother merely does not want the child. This would then make laws regarding abortion conceptually similar to welfare policies. At this point in time, the distinctions made between
responsible and not-responsible others that shape public policy are more consistent with a conservative ideology for welfare and a liberal ideology for abortion.

Summary and Concluding Comments

Much is known about reactions to poverty given an attribution perspective:

1. There are a relatively small number of perceived causes of poverty, although there is some specificity when considering various impoverished groups and interactions with the demographic characteristics of the perceiver.
2. The causes can be placed within two taxonomies:
   a. Individualistic, social, or fate
   b. Dimensions of locus, stability, and control
3. Perceived causal control, which relates to inferences of responsibility, is a dominant determinant of help giving; individuals not responsible for their plight receive more aid than those perceived as responsible.
4. One antecedent regarding the cause of poverty is political ideology:
   a. Liberals tend to attribute poverty to social causes
   b. Conservatives tend to attribute poverty to personally controllable causes
5. Political ideology influences decisions to help the poor:
   a. Liberals help more than conservatives
   b. Ideological differences in help giving are most apparent when the cause of poverty is controllable, with liberals being especially prone to offer help (thereby giving rise to the label of “bleeding hearts”).
6. Perceived causal control and responsibility inferences give rise to other-directed emotions:
   a. Control or responsibility for poverty arouses anger
   b. Lack of control or nonresponsibility for poverty elicits sympathy
7. Emotions are the proximal determinants of help giving to the needy:
   a. Sympathy promotes prosocial actions such as giving aid to the poor
   b. Anger, to a lesser extent, gives rise to antisocial reactions such as withholding assistance

Moving from these empirical findings to broader theoretical issues, this review suggests that helping the poor is a moral issue. However, it is not only the morality of the potential help giver that determines prosocial behavior. Rather, characteristics of the recipient of aid, particularly whether that person is or is not perceived as a deserving member of society, are also key determinants of prosocial reactions. Even behavioral economists who question the existence of “true” altruism acknowledge that increasing the perceived morality of the potential recipient of a contribution augments sharing and other indicators of altruistic behavior (see Levitt & Dubner, 2009, pp. 119-120).

Other determinants of aid, such as cost–benefit analysis, evolutionary gain, diffusion of responsibility, reduction of distress, and the like, are not included within this perspective. Also, other emotional determinants of help, including disgust, distress, fear, and guilt, were not incorporated. Rather, motivation to help is characterized as a process that begins with causal thinking, moves to other-directed feelings, and concludes with either prosocial actions or neglect. The emotion of sympathy directed toward the other, elicited by perceptions of uncontrollability and nonresponsibility of the person in need, is the strongest proximal determinant of helping. Anger, on the other hand, plays a significant, yet relatively minor, role in withholding aid.

We have also suggested that disparate phenomena involving reactions to achievement failure, abortion, and rape are subject to the same psychological principles that embrace concepts of perceived personal control, inferred responsibility, emotional reactions, and social behavior. At a genotypic level, poverty has a great deal of company. Hopefully, this knowledge will have value in further exploring the role that attributions play in people’s reactions to their social worlds and the manner in which causal beliefs guide public policy.

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