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Accounting for poverty: From attribution to discourse

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Accounting for poverty: From attribution to discourse

Abstract

In this article it is argued that the attributional literature concerning explanations of poverty is inadequate due to its theoretical presuppositions. It is proposed that a discursive approach is better able to withstand criticism and contribute to a more adequate understanding of poverty accounts. Some examples are given of how a discursive approach might work in practice.

Key words:

Attribution; Discourse Analysis; Explanations of Poverty;

Introduction

There has now been over two decades of research into the explanation of poverty following Feagin's (1972) classic study of Americans' explanations for domestic poverty. Over that time an attributional paradigm has predominated in the poverty explanation literature. It will be argued here that the dominance of this approach has had the effect both of constraining the questions posed by research and of failing to provide evidence useful in social and political action against poverty. This article will not aim to provide an in-depth review of this literature since adequate reviews exist (Furnham, 1988; Furnham and Lewis, 1986) -- instead a brief overview will suffice.

The research context: attributions for poverty

Feagin (1972) interviewed 1,017 Americans and asked them to rate a number of possible causes of poverty. He categorised these responses as individualistic (blaming poverty on dispositional factors within poor people), fatalistic (blaming poverty on fate or bad luck) or structural (blaming poverty on society). In the last twenty years similar research has been conducted in a number of countries: Australia (Feather, 1974); Barbados and Dominica (Payne and Furnham, 1985); Canada (Lamarche and Tougas, 1979); India (Pandey, Sinha, Prakash and Triparthi, 1982; Sinha, Jain and Pandey, 1980; Singh and Vasudeva, 1977); and the UK (Furnham, 1982). In 1992 Gallup/Social Surveys Ltd published a series of polls examining British explanations for domestic poverty finding that a majority blamed environmental ('circumstances') rather than individualistic ('effort') factors (52% and 12% respectively) and that the percentage favouring individualistic explanations had decreased over recent years although 34% agreed that poverty was due to both. This appeared to show that fewer individualistic explanations were given than in the 1977 EEC survey (Commission of the European Communities, 1977) which reported that Britain had the largest number of respondents blaming poverty on 'laziness and lack of

willpower' (43% compared to an EEC average of 25%). According to this study, Britain was below average in ascribing poverty to injustice in society and to luck and nearer the average in blaming poverty on 'progress in the modern world'. A more recent study (Gallup/Social Surveys Ltd 1994) found that 15% of people in the UK ascribed the causes of poverty to individualistic factors whereas 42% ascribed the causes to 'injustice in our society'.

A wide range of demographic variables have been reported to influence the kinds of explanations people give for poverty including political preference (Commission of the European Communities Report, 1977; Furnham, 1982; Griffin and Ohenebasakyi, 1993; Pandey *et al*, 1982; Zucker and Weiner, 1993); nationality (Commission of the European Communities Report, 1977; Feather, 1974; Lamarche and Tougas, 1979; Payne and Furnham, 1985); and income (Feagin, 1972; Feather, 1974; Singh and Vasudeva, 1977; Sinha, Jain and Pandey, 1980).

On the whole, these studies have been interested in the explanations people give for domestic poverty rather than poverty abroad. Three recent investigations, however, have considered perceptions of the so-called Third World¹ by First World citizens. Furnham and Gunter (1989) examined British adolescents' attitudes to developing countries and found that a majority agreed they had unfavourable climates, high population growth, unstable governments and suffered exploitation by rich minorities. A minority agreed that these countries had been exploited by developed countries and that their colonial past had held back development. These researchers noted age and gender differences but reported no other related variables.

In a similar study, Harper, Wagstaff, Newton and Harrison (1990) reported on the factor structure of a Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire (CTWPQ) - similar to that used by

Feagin (1972) -- and its relationship with the Just World Scale (Rubin and Peplau, 1975), an instrument which attempts to measure the extent to which an individual holds a belief that the world is a just place. Harper et al (1990) found that the most popular explanations for poverty included the inefficiency of Third World governments, exploitation by other countries and climate. A factor analysis of the results, reported four factors similar to those of Feagin (1972): 'Blame the Poor'; 'Blame Third World Governments'; 'Blame Nature'; and 'Blame Exploitation'. They reported a significant relationship between the 'Blame the Poor' and 'Blame Third World Governments' factors of the CTWPQ and the 'Pro Just World' factor of the Just World Scale (Rubin and Peplau, 1975). A re-analysis of the data noted that high Just World believers were significantly less likely to agree that Third World poverty was due to exploitation by other countries, war or the world economic and banking system (Harper and Manasse, 1992).

Surprisingly, little of this empirical literature connects with theories of justice (although Cohen and Greenberg, 1982 is a notable exception) or with ideas about why people might make such attributions. One framework which has permeated empirical research is Lerner's (1975, 1980, 1981) desert theory of justice. He has argued that justice is a recognition of a relation between a person's fate and 'that to which he or she is entitled -- what is deserved' (Lerner, 1981, p.12). Lerner argues that people make a preconscious perceptual link between reward and virtue. Thus even a chance reward is interpreted by others as having been merited -- an example of the 'fundamental attribution error'. Similarly, those who suffer misfortune are perceived to have somehow deserved this fate. According to Lerner there is a pervasive human need to believe in a just world where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The motivation for such a belief is the maintenance of a stable organisational information-processing framework through which the environment is perceived. Thus the perception of who is entitled to what

'appears as an intrinsic part of the way people organise their experiences and respond to their environment' (Lerner, 1981, p.33). The Just World theory has led to a wide variety of empirical studies but in their review Furnham and Procter (1989) have argued that the concept is multi-dimensional and that the world is not simply just and unjust but is also random.

The theoretical inadequacy of attributional poverty research

In recent years the attribution paradigm has come under sustained attack. A number of authors, including Parker (1989) have noted a number of problematic theoretical presuppositions in attribution research in general. Here I will focus on four themes which are common to most critiques of attributional theory and methods.

i. Individualism

A pervasive individualism characterises much of the poverty-explanation literature. There are different varieties of individualism but in this literature it is the individual as explainer which is the unit of analysis. This leads to two related effects. First it assumes that individuals' accounts are unitary and internally consistent which is open to question, empirically. Certainly, in terms of pencil and paper tests Schuman and Presser (1981) have noted that even slight changes in the wording and context of questions can lead to great differences in subject responses. Second it means that organisational explanations are not examined. As a result a whole area of potential research materials like government press releases, ministerial statements, political manifestos, multinational corporation annual reports and so on are ignored. Moreover political and ethical ideologies implicit, for example, in the belief in a Just World literature (eg Conservatism, Liberalism, Socialism, equity and so on) are reduced to individualistic concepts of attributional style (eg Furnham and Procter, 1989). In one sense however, this individualism is a false one

since most of the studies compare group means rather than individual scores in an attempt to define abstract factors.

ii. Stability

Another problem with attributional accounts is that they assume the existence of underlying attributional structures which remain stable over time and across situations, with the importance of results being judged by the strength of correlations or weightings of abstract items. If relationships between attributions are not as researchers expect them to be this is not because the hypothesised structures are inaccurate but because research participants are 'unable to distinguish' them (Heaven, 1994). Such variability causes problems for traditional attribution researchers who have to propose complex multi-dimensional attribution models or claim lack of cross-cultural validity in order to explain varied results (Furnham and Procter, 1989). Even research like that of Heaven (1994) and Muncer and Gillen (1995) which attempts to examine the complexity of explanations still rests on an essentially stable abstract causal network.

iii. Constructed nature

A third difficulty with traditional research is that items and factors are taken out of their context and examined individually. As Heaven (1994) has noted this over-simplifies how people make explanations since causes are often interconnected. Furnham, a major contributor to the literature on this topic, has noted that explanations for poverty may be used variably both by different groups of subjects and according to which poor 'target group' is specified (Furnham, 1982). However, people may not only use different explanations for different target groups but also in different contexts. The factor analysis by Harper *et al.* (1990) found that many of the items of the CTWPQ, for example those relating to 'natural' causes (like climate) loaded on a

number of factors (see Table 1). Whilst this might suggest merely that these items lack discrimination, I

Insert Table 1 about here

would argue that one hypothesis is that 'natural' explanations for poverty have the flexibility to be used together with victim-blaming and other types of explanations.

iv. Neglecting the effects of explanations

A final problem with attributional poverty research is a startling lack of curiosity about what effects and functions these kinds of explanations might have. Most studies find relationships between demographic factors and individual explanations but there is little attempt to explain further. Lerner's (1980) account is motivational and is largely individualistic, having recourse to a restricted range of relatively straightforward rational and non-rational motivational strategies. As some writers have noted what is lacking in such accounts is a clear understanding of the role of ideology in structuring our views of the world since explanations have ideological effects.

In ignoring such difficulties, traditional attributional research on poverty explanations has been essentially conservative in its theory and methodology and has failed to deliver findings which might be of use in acting politically and socially against poverty. One might ask what the use is of focusing twenty years of research on the explanations of individual members of the public who have no control over world economic resources as opposed to governments and trans-national corporations who do? In this respect attributional research has made an ironic

'fundamental attribution error' in focusing on the explanations of individuals. What kind of psychological approach could attempt to avoid these kinds of problems? I want to argue here that the turn to discourse offers a way forward.

A discursive approach

Recent work in rhetorical psychology and discourse analysis (DA) suggests that talk is oriented to perform certain functions although this is not necessarily a planned or deliberate process (Potter, Edwards and Wetherell, 1993). When talk is analysed it is possible to elucidate abstract discourses (Parker, 1992a) or 'interpretive repertoires' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Edwards and Potter (1992) have described a number of ways in which speakers use rhetorical strategies to make what they are saying appear factual -- often when there is some disagreement about the facts and when the speaker has a stake in the outcome. Speakers position themselves and others by using such discourses tactically (although, again, this is not necessarily an intentional process) and are positioned by those same discourses since certain linguistic resources impose constraints on what can be said.

It is important to emphasise however that discursive approaches are not homogenous and there are wide differences of view on central issues like reality and the ideological functions and effects of accounts. For Burman and Parker (1993) and Parker (1992a) reality is an important focus since power relations have real effects on people. Adopting a critical realist stance as they do means seeing reality not as an independently existing objective conception in a naïve sense but as a domain of institutional power relations. By contrast, Edwards and Potter (1992) are less concerned with 'reality' and more with how different accounts are made to seem real. Curt (1994) on the other hand worries about the desirability of competing accounts all claiming to be

real, proposing the need for a critical polytextuality. Parker (1992a) claims that DA does not necessarily entail examining the ideological effects of discourse but argues that it should do. He asserts that ideology should be understood not as a belief system or as something 'untrue' but as a description of relationships and effects. On the other hand Potter, Wetherell, Gill and Edwards (1990) argue against what they see as a tendency to reify discourses as ideological objects, asserting that this misses the variability of use in specific contexts. This point is developed further by Wetherell and Potter (1992) when they emphasise the importance of a focus on ideological practice and ideological effects rather than ideologies per se. Here I will be focusing on the ideological effects of certain discourses of poverty-explanation. My intention here is not to offer a cognitive or intentionalist account of poverty explanations but, in describing the effects of these explanations I will be arguing that they serve certain ideological interests. In this respect the argument here is probably closer to critical realism than, say, Edwards and Potter (1992).

The relationship between interest and talk is a central topic in discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992) in that 'the invocation of stake and interest is understood as a rhetorical strategy but not as a motivational explanation for rhetorical moves' (Madill and Doherty, 1994, p.269, emphasis in original). Here, however, I will be using the notion of interest differently to point out that the effect of certain explanations in certain contexts is to serve particular ideological interests. This means moving beyond the text and entails a political commitment on the part of the researcher (Burman, 1991; Burman and Parker, 1993; Parker, 1992a).

Does DA avoid the problems associated with attribution theory? Discourse analysts do not assume that individual explainers produce internally consistent accounts, rather there is an

assumption of discursive variability: it is expected that people will use different explanations at different times (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Edelman (1977) and Billig and colleagues (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton and Radley, 1988) have argued such variation is common in talk about poverty. One of the problems with paper and pencil survey designs is that they lack the ability to examine the dynamics of explanations, for example, to see if people give different explanations at different times. From Table 1 we can see that some items from Harper *et al*'s (1990) CTWPQ, including popular 'natural' explanations, do not load uniquely and significantly on orthogonal factors. This suggests that some explanations may be used flexibly in association with others. Moreover, research consistently shows that people agree with many explanations for poverty and thus have access to a rich pool of explanations choosing to dip into different pools at different moments (to borrow a metaphor from Marshall and Raabe, 1993). Billig *et al* (1988) note that often 'contrary values are asserted, as the same people believe that the state should aid the poor and also that state aid is liable to undermine the moral worth of the poor' (p. 41). A discursive theoretical framework appreciates the complexity of explanations about justice and poverty since people clearly do not blame poor people all the time for their fates but will use different explanations at different times.

Edelman (1977) has argued that there are three ways of explaining poverty, similar to Feagin's (1972) typology, and that the existence of different explanations means that they can be utilised flexibly in accounts. In this respect, some of the findings of traditional studies may be useful and it is likely that the consistent finding of three broad explanations for poverty points to the dominance of these explanations in culture -- it is possible to link factor analytic work with discourse analyses allied to social constructionism (see Curt, 1994 for an account of Q Factor Analysis in this respect). Thus it is important to see that explanations of poverty are active social

constructions which, when employed, have a variety of effects.

DA also helps dissolve the artificial boundary between the individual-as-explainer and the institution-as-explainer. Individuals and governments may use certain accounts in a similar way to warrant their conduct. An individual may not give to charity because, they say, the government should be giving money to that issue. Similarly a government may refuse foreign aid because, they argue, the third world government is corrupt or inefficient.

Interestingly, Edelman (1977) applies his analysis not to individuals but to government explanations of and policies for poverty. Revealing the effects of individual and governmental explanations of poverty illustrates how these explanations are crucially ideological and political. For example, Radley and Kennedy (1992) show how an understanding of ideology helps to account for the relationship between different sectors of society and the notion of giving to charity. It is likely that different discourses of poverty have different effects. Thus an individualistic explanation might justify a lack of governmental attention to poverty whilst a societal explanation might warrant an individual's refusal to give to charity. In exploring what kind of effects such accounts have, varieties of DA which are politically committed are able to describe the specific ideological effects different explanations have at different times. Of course, it needs to be remembered that people do not simply use different discourses, they may be also used by them since discourses also constrain, embed and position people. It is also possible to see evidence of resistance against dominant discourses (Parker, 1992a).

Implications of a discursive approach

One major implication of adopting a discursive framework is that poverty itself is seen as a

social construction. This is not to deny that poverty exists (even Derrida accepts this! -- Derrida, 1994). Rather it is to ask questions about how poverty is defined, described and accounted for. These are political matters and as with the definition of unemployment, the definition of poverty is a hot political topic and is contested both between politicians from different parties, members of the public and even between the poor and professionals (Chambers, 1995). Traditional research has tended to take 'poverty' as an uncomplicated given but in its very definition there are a number of implicit assumptions which have ideological effects. Thus a very stringent definition of poverty setting it at a very low level of income has the effect of suggesting there is little poverty whereas a more liberal definition has the opposite effect. The socially contested nature of poverty is played out in the domain of explanations for poverty: is it down to the poor themselves or society? These different explanations may lead to different policies and practices.

Implications of a discursive approach: I Accounting for explanations

I have argued that a discursive approach provides a more useful understanding of the way people explain poverty. But does it have anything to offer traditional accounts for why people use certain explanations? Here I will briefly sketch out some implications for the two dominant accounts of poverty explanation: perceptual and affective. Here I will not focus on specific texts as is common in many DA reports. Rather I will be outlining the theoretical, methodological and empirical possibilities of a turn to discourse.

i. The weather and other stories - is it just down to honest perception?

Third world poverty is often attributed to the weather (Furnham and Gunter, 1989; Harper *et al*, 1990). One way of understanding this might be that this simply reflects people's perceptions.

White (1992) has examined common sense understandings of the natural order finding a dominant account in which the natural world is seen to have a linear causal hierarchy with anthropomorphic characteristics. At the top of this hierarchy lies the weather and the activities of human beings with an assumption that actions at the top level are analogous to free will. Here the world is perceived to possess natural justice. Drawing on a perceptualist account of the world we are led into a relatively fruitless debate about whether people's perceptions are 'honest' or 'motivated' and whether they are biased by information media. Another debate would be concerned with whether poverty is actually due to the weather. However, regardless of whichever account is 'right'² (and this will depend on readers' political commitments) a discursive approach would ask what the effect is of such an explanation? Clearly, one effect is to remove governmental responsibility since poverty could be seen simply as something fatalistic thus warranting inaction. Such effects might serve a number of governmental interests (eg minimising the overseas aid budget).

ii. Do explanations reflect emotional defences?

Another way of understanding the kind of explanations people give for poverty is to see them as psychological defences against emotional discomfort. Sloan (1990) observes:

[The Third world] is made up of three or four billion fellow human beings who will live and die in conditions that few 'modern' persons would tolerate for more than a few days or weeks. Perhaps it is this unthinkable difference that inclines us to construe their existence as something separate, untouchable, even irrelevant.

(1990, p.2)

Lerner (1980) has described a number of 'rational' and 'non-rational' ways in which people

attempt to eliminate threats to their belief in a Just World. Other researchers have lent credence to such a view in noting that people construct different versions of the world and that most people are motivated to maintain relatively inaccurate views of 'reality' (Taylor, 1991). Cohen (1982) has outlined similar psychological influences on attributions of cause and responsibility in a justice context but appears to remain agnostic about whether these influences are primarily cognitive or affective or both.

What might a discursive approach have to offer in such a context? Firstly it would focus on what implications such accounts have. For example, Radley and Kennedy (1992) do not appeal to emotions as underlying causal mechanisms but simply as another kind of account. They note that some people give to charity out of pity whilst others give despite their feelings. Clearly, 'feelings' then, do not lead in a straightforward sense to action. Moreover, one could give a discursive account of emotion (see for example, Stenner and Eccleston, 1994). Indeed 'guilt' could be seen as one way of accomodating the incommensurable discourses of structural injustice and an ethical ideology of equity. There is thus a need to theorize 'emotional defences' and see them as a rhetorical resource rather than an explanation.

Implications of a discursive approach: II A preliminary analysis of non-individualist research territories

As well as providing a different way of viewing explanations for poverty accounts, a discursive approach opens the door to a whole new territory of research that might previously have been seen as 'non-psychological'. A focus on discourse enables research to bridge the traditional individual/society divide. When we are looking at how discourses work it is, in a sense,

irrelevant whether that discourse is 'produced' by an individual or by a trans-national company. New research territories could then include governmental and commercial rhetoric. Here, I will provide an exploratory account of what a discursive framework might have to offer the analysis of charity and media discourses about overseas poverty. Once again I will not be focusing on specific texts since space would not permit both a detailed exposition of particular texts and a general theoretical argument. The news media and charitable aid agencies are two arenas where poverty-related issues are regularly discussed, yet they have been the focus of relatively little psychological research and what has taken place has largely been focused on individuals' responses to adverts (Eayrs and Ellis, 1990; Stockdale and Farr, 1987) although some discursive work has been done (Radley and Kennedy, 1992). They are also the major sources of information on poverty for the general public -- a recent report by the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project noted that 82% of Britons relied on television as their main source of information on the Third World (Christian Aid News, 1995); they are also groups where the use of images and explanations are used to great effect; finally, they are, as I hope to argue, greatly influenced by a variety of interests which thus influence the way poverty is portrayed.

Reporting poverty

The press and the broadcasters (eg the BBC's fund-raising venture Comic Relief) tend to focus less on any links between the North's wealth and the South's poverty, instead concentrating on poor individuals, the climate or corruption and inefficiency in Third World governments. Some programmes do appear to be changing with, for example reports included in recent Comic Relief broadcasts giving some political context to famine. However, when political issues are focused on (eg in the case of the Ethiopian war) no questions are asked about who the financial backers

and arms-suppliers to the various parties to the conflict are, nor what the history to the conflict is. If questions are raised it is often only in terms of local politics and not links with First World agencies or governments. The effect of such coverage is that famine becomes seen as something which just happens, often immediately and is not seen to be connected to political processes. The Western public have few explanations for poverty which are culturally available. What then are the interests involved in media discourse? One obvious interest is the need for fund-raisers to avoid 'political' topics in order to maintain stable revenue. This is especially true for the BBC which is often under attack by the British Right for having a Left-wing bias. However, this cannot be a full explanation since there is also evidence that 'news-worthiness' and dramatic entertainment value are powerful influences: a recent report indicates that 90% of all television news and current affairs reports on Third World issues focus on conflict and disaster (Christian Aid News, 1995)..

Sorenson (1991) has argued that there are a number of political interests and ideological influences on the way the mass media portray Southern poverty. In his analysis of media discourse on famine in the Horn of Africa he has shown how a number of entertainment, media and political interests were served by particular ways of explaining and portraying the famine. For example a slow-onset to the Ethiopian famine was depicted as sudden and related only to food and famine. Reports did not discuss the conflict or offer a political analysis. Sorenson describes such an account as one of naturalisation:

Naturalisation ignores conditions of poverty, repression and conflict which allowed drought to be translated into famine. Reports explaining famine as natural disaster are reductionistic and overlook growing bodies of work which recognises multiple causation

of famine.

Sorenson (1991, p.226)

As well as such influences, accounts contained political distortions and anti-Communist rhetoric -- many texts ignored previous non-Communist atrocities. Sorenson also described some of the tactics used by the news media, noting the use of 'innoculation' where reports admitted either the extent of the famine or some level of external causation before going on to blame famine mainly on internal factors (eg the actions of the Ethiopians themselves) thus concealing continuing structural inequities. This illustrates how contrasting accounts can be combined to serve particular rhetorical purposes with the effect that responsibility was placed on African governments whilst Western benefactors were portrayed as benevolent. Sorenson linked such discourses on poverty with wider discourses on Africa, with racist discourses and with victim-blaming of Africans seen in the media as 'ignorant' and 'primitive'. The use of racist and colonialist views of Africans as inferior and 'other', as 'primitive', as 'noble savages' and as needing to be converted has a long history (Mudimbe, 1988; Parker, 1992b).

Although written media texts might provide researchers with useful materials, the media's use of images is also potentially analytically worthwhile. Interpretations similar to Sorenson's on media text could, no doubt, be applied to media images. A British TV documentary 'Hard Times' (Channel 4 Television, 1991) explored how domestic poverty was portrayed in documentaries, dramas and news items in the media. It reported that often very simple images of poor people were used and that the media often organised artificial and stereotyped situations for the cameras so that portrayals of poverty fitted public and media expectations and perceptions:

... what you do is find the worst possible example you can think of of somebody who's poor rather than that you find examples that exemplify ordinary, typical, everyday poverty.

(Beatrix Campbell, journalist, in Channel 4 Television, 1991)

Research into the effects of and reasons for the use of certain images might find that influences similar to those important in mobilising certain discourses of poverty explanation are at work in image choice as well as other more commercial interests like maintaining dramatic entertainment value and fostering links with advertisers.

Research such as that of Sorenson reveals how limiting traditional attributional research has been. In focusing on mass media texts, he demonstrates how the media are explainers too. Attribution researchers can only examine 'individuals' or 'groups', not organisational or societal discourse. Moreover, it ignores the fact that individual subjects are not isolated from society: they are everyday exposed to news and entertainment media providing a rich resource of cultural information for people's explanations. Discursive research shows that the use of these discourses has particular effects and serves certain interests whereas attribution research would tend only to offer correlations of demographic variables.

Explaining poverty and campaigning against it: Raising money or consciousness?

A second major area of information for the public comes from Aid Agencies who, in fact, expend a good deal of energy in attempting to 'put the record straight' about what they see as biased news reporting (Oxfam, 1985). But what of charity literature? Recent research questions whether this

is any more value-free, rather it appears to be guided by some similar interests (eg a need to both raise money and consciousness often in dramatic ways) and by some different ones (eg challenging the economic status quo) whilst being limited and constrained by other discourses (eg legal and political). How are these competing interests managed in charity discourse?

Most of the non-structural explanations for Third World poverty used in the Harper *et al.*, (1990) study have been disputed (Haru, 1984; Mehryar, 1984; Oxfam, 1991b; Twose, 1984). Instead, Oxfam (1991b) describes the major causes of poverty as: conflict, the debt crisis, declining prices of commodities like tea, inadequate aid, consumption of resources by the North, environmental damage and lack of accountable government. An attributional theorist adopting a naïvely realist point of view might try to compare individuals' attributions with the 'real' causes of poverty and speculate why there was a difference -- education or political preference perhaps. However such a position would miss the crucial point made earlier that it is the fact that there are differences of view about the causes that is interesting. Discursive research focuses on those differences and variations and looks for the effects of different discourses. Discourse analysts, however, look not only at what is said but also at what is not said, indeed what perhaps cannot be said (Parker, 1992a). What are the constraints on charity discourse?

In an article examining challenges facing Oxfam, Brazier (1992) has noted that the charity exists in a difficult political atmosphere. He cites a recent instance where Oxfam had been reported to the UK Charity Commissioners by a Conservative MP who felt that an Oxfam campaign about poverty in Southern Africa was politically biased. The campaign material drew links between the continuing poverty of that region and South Africa's pre-1994 policy of apartheid. The effect of the investigation by the Charity Commissioners was that Oxfam had to withdraw its

campaigning material and undertake not to be 'politically biased' in future. This demonstrated that not only do explanations of poverty exist in an ideological and political context but so also does the information on which those explanations are based. In other words charities are not 'free' to choose what explanations of poverty to use in their materials but are, instead constrained by legal and political discourses. As the Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara has commented 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist'.

The effect of charities attempting to offer certain explanations for poverty is to be accused of being politically motivated. One constraint on charity discourse then is the need for accounts to appear to be politically disinterested. An effect of this is that such explanations do not challenge the dominant discourses available in culture for explaining poverty. Once again, an ignorance of the politically contested nature of poverty explanation leaves the attributional researcher in a social vacuum when it comes to accounting for the explanations people give, restricted as they are by the constraints of survey methodology. Moreover, it shows how the choice between particular explanations at particular moments is not just an 'individual' one based on age, gender, political preference and so on, rather it is crucially social and takes place in an arena of competing political and ideological interests.

Another influence on the kinds of explanations for poverty given by charities is whether they are aiming to raise money or to raise awareness about the causes of poverty. This kind of dilemma is common to many charities and has proved to be an interesting area for research (Eayrs and Ellis, 1990; Stockdale and Farr, 1987). Aid agencies have increasingly realised that the kind of images

that raise funds often devalue the people portrayed and fail to address crucial issues (van de Gaag, 1992). However, as one advertising executive involved in charity work has noted 'If what my brief is is to make people put their hands in their pocket and come up with some money then one has to - it's quite right to use fairly dramatic techniques in doing that' (Simon Sherwood of advertising company Lowe, Howard-Spink in Channel 4 Television, 1991). Feagin (1972) hypothesised a link between causal explanations of poverty and policies to alleviate it, finding some evidence for this -- if respondents saw poverty as being due to the poor they were antagonistic to welfare payments. Thus agencies may feel that in order to raise funds they need to portray the poor as helpless and powerless although as I noted earlier Billig *et al* (1988) argued that this was not necessarily a consistent link. Burman (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) has argued that charity appeals for children in the South draw on a number of elements: a restricted range of ways of relating rich and poor peoples (in the form of funding or sponsorship to helpless recipients); little scope for reflection on causes of these circumstances or whether they are portrayed accurately; and the use of dominant models of child development. Such discursive strategies have particular effects and can be seen as serving certain interests: pragmatic for charities (in raising money) but also ideological (in policing the relationship between rich and poor and so on). Attribution research can only examine individual perceptions of poverty or Aid agency advertising and is not able to look at the way information about poverty is circulated or explore the discursive dynamics of advertising campaigns.

However, as with the South Africa campaign, Aid agencies' campaigns using such strategies have had the effect of attracting political criticism about their use of images and a call both for more positive images of Third World peoples and an emphasis on education rather than fund-raising (Lyne, 1990). As a result of such pressure, Oxfam has responded by publishing

both a statement of policy about the use of images (Oxfam, 1991a) and a training and educational package examining the effects of images (Oxfam, 1992). However, such changes in advertising policy are taking place in a more difficult economic context for overseas aid charities -- in the UK in 1990 Oxfam was beaten in revenue terms by both the National Trust (a land-owning charity aiming at the preservation of old buildings and the countryside) and the Royal National Lifeboat Association (Coles, 1991).

As a result of such pressures an educational discourse has become increasingly prominent in aid agency literature (Gill, 1988). But what might the effects of such a change of discourse be? Eayrs and Ellis (1990) are more equivocal in their investigation of the effects of charity advertising. Although their study focused on the portrayal of people with learning disabilities, implications can be drawn about charity advertising for other marginalised groups. They argued that more normalising approaches have a cost in encouraging people to feel there are no difficulties to be faced and they suggested that agencies should aim at encouraging people to have direct contact with people with learning disabilities in order to overcome prejudice. They also suggested a pragmatic strategy involving the use of positive images in promotional campaigns which some evidence suggests (Stockdale and Farr, 1987) may elicit donations anyway even if they are not directly requested.

In conclusion then, a discursive approach is useful in elucidating some of the discourses which influence the kinds of explanations of poverty which circulate in culture and in tracing the effects of such accounts and the interests served by them. Particular varieties of DA can also begin to describe the ideological and institutional interests served by different explanations and their use in specific contexts. Moreover it is important for the politically committed analyst to tie their analyses in with social and political critiques. The tendency to relativism in DA could be seen as

a limitation in dealing with 'real' issues like poverty however it can also lead to a more critical appreciation of the way our socially constructed reality both oppresses but also opens spaces for resistance.

Future directions

There have been a number of calls for psychologists to become more involved in the difficulties facing the poor South (Adler, 1990; Martín-Baró³, 1994; Sloan, 1990). However, there is a need to be reflective in responding to such calls given many of the neo-colonialist assumptions in notions of 'giving psychology away' to the Third World (Moghaddam and Taylor, 1986). Previous psychological research on poverty has focused on the poor themselves or on the perceptions of poverty of members of the public. Harper (1991) has argued there is a need to examine the systems that maintain poverty. As part of such research it would be important to explore the public explanations and images of poverty generated by major organisations which I would see as poverty-creating systems (eg national governments, the International Monetary Fund, Trans-National Corporations, the World Bank and so on) and attempt to expose the differences between political rhetoric and actual practice as campaigns surrounding the debt crisis have sought to do.

There is a need, I have argued, for future psychological research into poverty explanations to have a broader focus, utilising a discursive framework. This might provide a more adequate understanding of such explanations and also extend research beyond merely individualistic accounts to include the texts and images both produced by individuals and organisations and in which those individuals and organisations are themselves located. It is to be hoped that future research aiming to de-mystify explanations of poverty and explore their ideological and

psychological contexts will contribute towards conscientización (Martín-Baró, 1994) and the fight of the poor of the South against the institutionalized poverty and racism that has been the consequence of 500 years of colonialism (Parker, 1992b).

Footnotes

1. The terms 'first world' and 'third world' are not intended as derogatory and are used here because they are widely understood. I have also used the terms 'North' and 'South' to refer to rich countries of the Northern hemisphere and poorer countries of the Southern hemisphere.

2. I would agree with Twose (1984) who argues that Britain's winter is as bad as Third World climactic extremes with the difference that Britain is economically able to meet the demands of the winter whilst Third World countries often cannot. Solomon Inquai has commented that 'hunger is about politics, not the weather' (Oxfam, 1983).

3. Ignacio Martín-Baró was a Latin American social psychologist and Jesuit priest. He was assassinated by El Salvadorean government troops from the US - trained Atlacatl battalion on November 16 1989.

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Table 1. The overall means and standard deviations for items of the Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire (from Harper et al., 1990)

	Mean	(SD)
There is poverty in Third World countries because^a:		
1. The people of such countries keep having too many children ¹	3.20	(1.25)
2. Of fate ¹	2.32	(1.01)
3. Their governments are corrupt ²	3.64	(0.94)
4. Of the regional climate	3.76	(0.92)
5. Their governments are inefficient ²	3.82	(0.82)
6. Of laziness and a lack of effort in the population of such countries ¹	2.18	(1.02)
7. Their land is not suitable for agriculture ³	3.42	(1.02)
8. Other countries exploit the Third World ⁴	3.81	(1.16)
9. Of disease in Third World countries	3.56	(0.96)
10. Their governments spend too much money on arms ²	3.64	(1.04)
11. Of war	3.60	(0.96)
12. Of the world economy and banking systems being loaded against the poor ⁴	3.57	(1.11)
13. Pests and insects destroy crops	3.64	(0.78)
14. The population of such countries make no attempt at self-improvement ¹	2.55	(1.09)
15. Of a lack of intelligence among the people there ¹	2.85	(1.26)
16. Of a lack of thrift and proper management of resources by the people there ¹	3.09	(1.15)
17. The people there are not willing to change old ways and customs ¹	3.24	(1.00)
18. Of a lack of ability among the people		

of such countries¹

2.41

(1.13)

a Strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1

1 Items loading uniquely and significantly on 'Blame Poor' factor

2 Items loading uniquely and significantly on 'Blame Third World Governments' factor

3 Item loading uniquely and significantly on 'Blame Nature' factor

4 Items loading uniquely and significantly on 'Blame Exploitation' factor