2015

The Blame Game: Perceptions of Poverty among Hindus and Muslims in India

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Introduction

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." —Archbishop Dom. Helder Camara (as cited by Rocha, 2000, p. 53)

Poverty remains a global epidemic that affects over a billion people worldwide; nearly one-third of those affected reside in India (Olinto, Beegle, Sobrado, & Uematsu, 2013). Global poverty, as defined by The World Bank (TWB), is when an individual lives on less than $1.25 a day, and nearly 291.86 million Indians—23.6% of the country's population—live below this threshold (The World Bank, 2014). Even more dismal are the national poverty standards and statistics. In India, the national poverty standards are $17 a month for urban dwellers and $14 a month for rural citizens—for an average of $15.50 a month or $0.52 a day. More than 271 million Indians live below this poverty level (Zhong, 2014).

Likewise, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University [NCCP] (2014), poverty is the single greatest danger to a child's well-being. This level of poverty is highly correlated with other circumstances such as a lack of food, safe housing, adult supervision, and medical care. All of these factors can have detrimental effects on a child's cognitive abilities, mental and physical health, and emotional well-being. The impact of these negative consequences is all the more momentous in communities with overwhelming levels of dire poverty as experienced within Low-Income Countries (LIC) such as India.

While statistics quantify the afflicted and research exposes the possible negative consequences of poverty, neither address the perceptions people within the community have of poverty or the poor. They also do not explore the possible effects that social constructs such as religious beliefs might have on those perceptions.

This paper will highlight findings from a 2014 pilot study in Goa, India that explores the relationship between religious beliefs and causal attributions of poverty. Extrapolated from this information are the implications these beliefs have on people's reactions to those in poverty. Furthermore, understanding the nexus between religious beliefs and a community's perception of economic stratification can elucidate why some programs or solutions are deemed socially unacceptable in the public arena. As Bradshaw (2007) explains, "Community anti-poverty programs are designed, selected, and implemented in response to different theories about the causes of poverty that 'justify' the community development interventions" (p. 8). In other words, different beliefs in the causal attributions of poverty can lead to the acceptance of dramatically different policies and programs.

Background

Causal Attribution Theory

Surprisingly, as Norcia and Rissotto (2013) noted, literature on the relationships between religion and beliefs about poverty are quite scarce, and research has overlooked how religion affects the social understanding of life with regards to our concepts of who constitutes *the poor* and why such stark inequality exists in our world.

A review of literature indicates that research into the perceived causes of poverty is rooted in causal attribution theory (Heider, 1958). Heider asserts that people are constantly

making attributions in attempts to determine the causes of behaviors and events in order to find cognitive balance. He classifies these attributions into two basic categories: Internal and External. Internal attributions are personal and individual; the behaviors or events are caused by the person's beliefs, actions, or characteristics. External attributions are situational; the behaviors or events are caused by circumstances, societal structures, or a force such as fate or divine intervention.

Initial research regarding the causal attributions of poverty by Feagin (1972) and subsequent research by Hunt (1996) leads to a three-dimensional taxonomy: Internal-Individualistic, External-Structuralistic, and External-Fatalistic. Individualistic attributions correspond with Heider's *Internal* category whereas the Structuralistic and Fatalistic attributions are situated within his *External* category. Individualistic attributes presume that the person's character or actions, or lack thereof, are solely responsible for their circumstances. Structuralist attributions conclude there are larger societal or socioeconomic forces at work in individual lives that result in poverty. Fatalistic attributes assert that there are forces, such as fate or divine intervention, at work in individual lives that are neither a result of the person's character nor larger societal structures.

Furthermore, additional research indicates that in America Christians tend to have very individualistic views of poverty, while other religious adherents gravitate towards more structuralistic and fatalistic views. (Feagin 1975; Huber & Form 1973; Kluegel & Smith 1986; Hunt 2002). Building on that research, this study aims to use similar methods in asking interview questions regarding perceptions of poverty in order to assess the local beliefs. This will allow interventions to be tailored to the specific population rather than basing it on our Western perceptions.

Holy Writings

Hindu

The most important writings in Hinduism are the *Vedas* (Srivastava, Dhingra, Bhardwaj, & Srivastava, 2013). Within the *Vedas*, there are four Purusharthas or goals of human existence. For over 2000 years, Vedic tradition has taught that the Purusharthas are endeavors that all humans should work towards attaining in order to find balance in the world. They are: Dharma (morality), Artha (material), Kama (pleasure), and Moksha (letting go). The first two goals are applicable to any study on perceptions of poverty within Hinduism. Dharma involves fulfilling one's destiny. One component of that destiny is to pay the debts or responsibilities owed, including familial responsibilities extending beyond the nuclear family. The second goal, Artha, is to become prosperous and successful within lawful means (Srivastava, Dhingra, Bhardwaj, & Srivastava, 2013).

In conjunction with the expectation to gain material wealth, Vedic writings also equate poverty and sinfulness via such teachings as "Poverty is a state of sinfulness" and "I do not see the difference between a fallen man and a poor man" (Mahabharata, Santi Parva, Section VIII).

Therefore, within Hinduism,

1. working hard is expected as a way of attaining wealth or status;
2. one is responsible for his or her extended family;

3. becoming prosperous and successful is one of the four human endeavors all should strive towards attaining;
4. one is expected to work towards fulfilling his or her destiny; and
5. poverty is equated with sinfulness.

Islam

In the Qur'an, one is encouraged to work hard because Allah has created each individual to do so (Surah 37:96). There is also an expectation to be generous with what one has explained in the Hadith Al-Tirmidhi (Nawawi☐ & MadniAbbasi, 1983): "The generous man is near God, near Paradise, near men and far from Hell, and the ignorant man who is generous is dearer to God than a worshipper who is miserly" (580). Conjunctionally, Zakāt (almsgiving) is one of the five pillars of Islam, and the Qur'an teaches that these offerings are to be used to provide for the needy and to free people from slavery (Surah 9:60). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the will of Allah—Insha'Allah. There is a belief that Allah determines as He will, and that one must accept the fate that befalls him or her as being of the will of Allah (Surah 18:22-26). Finally, there is also a belief that poverty is Shaitan's (Satan) way of trying to lure the faithful away from Allah. According to Surah 2:268, one must not sin in poverty for Allah will provide paradise for the faithful.

Therefore, within Islam,

1. working hard is expected as a result of Allah's purpose for creation;
2. one is responsible for the poor;
3. giving alms is one of the five pillars, and generosity is expected;
4. one must accept anything that befalls them as the will of Allah; and
5. poverty is to be endured in order to show faith in Allah's provision.

Hypothesis

Based on these different religious beliefs regarding poverty, it is my hypothesis that the perceptions of poverty and of the poor will be vastly different in individuals from different religious backgrounds. I believe that individuals of Hindu backgrounds will have more internal causal attributions and descriptors of guilt or shame associated with poverty whereas those from Islamic backgrounds will have more external causal attributions and less negative views associated with poverty.

Methodology

The data used in this investigation was gathered during a pilot study in the region of Goa, India during the University of North Georgia's 2014 summer semester abroad and during a subsequent trip in December 2014.

In this study, convenience sampling was used to survey residents. Convenience sampling has been found to be an appropriate means of developing questionnaires during a pilot study (Lavarkas, 2008; Wood, 2000). In this study, thirty individuals were interviewed: twenty self-identified as Hindu believers and ten as Muslim believers. While the religious demographics for the state of Goa are different from the rest of India as there is a greater Christian presence in

Goa, the 2:1 ratio of Hindu to Muslim respondents is representative of the country's overall religious demographics according to the Centre for Policy Studies (Joshi, Srinivas, & Bajaj, 2003, p. 9)

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of open, closed, and contingency questions.
Of the closed-ended questions,

- two questions allowed participants to self-report personal religiosity and overall influence of religion in their daily lives, and
- six questions aimed to assess respondents' causal attributions of poverty by asking participants to agree or disagree with specific statements. Of these six questions,
    - one statement was geared towards external-fatalistic attributions;
    - two questions were external-structuralistic in nature;
    - two questions focused on internal-individualistic causes; and
    - one question contrasted internal and external causes.

Of the open-ended questions,

- one question allowed participants to self-identify their religion of faith;
- two questions asked participants to provide self-reflected causes of individual wealth or poverty;
- one question asked participants what causes widespread poverty;
- two questions asked respondents what word or phrase they felt described the wealthy and the poor; and
- respondents were allowed to provide any additional information they felt was noteworthy.

Finally, there were three contingency questions regarding beliefs of societal, governmental, and religious organizations' responsibility or obligation towards helping those in poverty.

Limitations

Because this was a pilot study, the sample size was modest. Likewise, as a convenience sample, multi-dimensional variance for participants was limited; all respondents were between the ages of 19 and 45, from the same state, and of the same caste. Due to both the sample size and lack of variance, the results are not generalizable to either India or the respective religions as a whole. However, the results do indicate that there is a pattern that does not reject the hypothesis. These results were nearly identical during both the summer 2014 and December 2014 surveys. This pattern indicates that further multi-variant research may be of statistical value.

Results and Discussion

As previously stated, it was hypothesized that perceptions of poverty and of the poor would be markedly different in individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Specifically, those from Hindu backgrounds would have more internal causal attributions and descriptors of guilt or shame associated with poverty, whereas those from Islamic backgrounds would have more external causal attributions and less negative views of poverty. In accordance with such, the expectation was that those from a Hindu background would be more likely to believe an impoverished person deserves to be poor while an individual with an Islamic background would look at poverty as being either a result of overarching societal issues or divine intervention.

Eighty percent of the respondents characterized themselves as being either somewhat faithful, very faithful, or devout. Twenty percent indicated they were either not very religious or undecided on how faithful or devout they are to their religion. There was no differentiation between self-characterized religiosity and overall perceptions of poverty. The influence of personal religiosity may have been mitigated by the overarching importance of religion within society as all respondents believed that faith and religion were very important in their daily lives. What is more, multiple participants anecdotally reported that they do not consider themselves to be religious but that religious traditions and expectations permeate their lives.

The respondents were all within the same caste, so caste was not a factor in this study. However, expanded research may reveal that it does influence individual perceptions.

Casual Attributions

Overall, Hindus tended to provide internal-individualistic causes for poverty. As demonstrated in Figure 1, during both the summer and December surveys, eighty percent of Hindu participants agreed with statements such as, "people are most often poor because they are lazy," and "people are most often poor because of their own mistakes or because they are bad (sinful) people."

**Figure 1**: Internal Attribution Responses
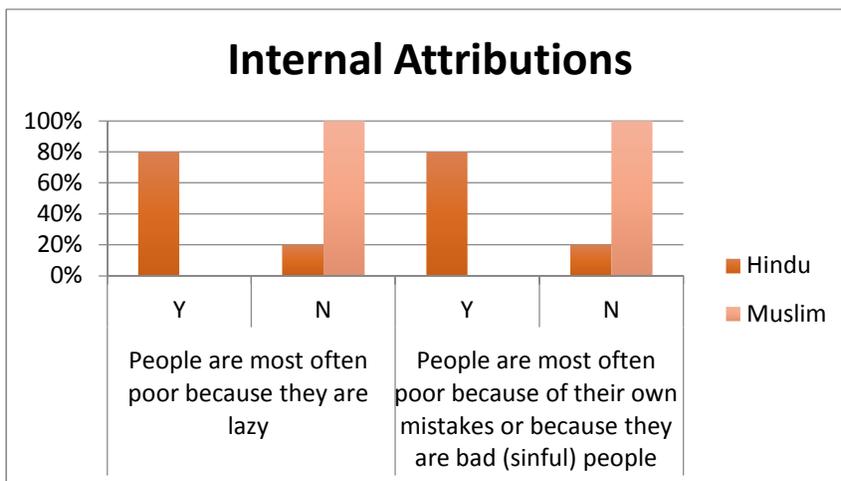
Conversely, all Muslim participants disagreed with these statements. Furthermore, Hindu responses to the open-ended question, "why do you think people are poor?" were congruent with individual attributions. While multiple answers were reported by each participant, the most salient answer was *laziness.* A full eighty percent of Hindu followers used the word *lazy* at least once—and often multiple times—in their response while not a single Muslim follower used this word at any point during the survey. Other common causes provided by the Hindu followers were,

- *poor people do not think first before making decisions;*
- *poor people cannot control their money;*
- *poor people do not have money and they are satisfied with that [because] they do not work for more;*
- *poor people have lots of children; and*
- *poor people are sinful—maybe even in their past lives.*

Juxtaposed to the Hindu penchant for individualistic causes, Muslim participants unanimously provided external causes for poverty. Figure 2 demonstrates that all Muslims but only twenty percent of Hindus agreed with the statement, "people are most often poor because of circumstances beyond their control." Similarly, eighty percent of Muslims versus only twenty percent of Hindus acknowledged that hard work does not always equal success. This is significant because it echoes the previously reported Hindu response that poor people are simply lazy. As opposed to laziness, all of the Muslim respondents provided a lack of access to education as one of the core causes of poverty. Other frequent answers provided by Muslim followers were,

- *most of your money goes to pay rent when you are poor; .*
- *rich people do not allow poor people to move up; and*
- *rich people have money they can pass down [generational wealth].*

Figure 2: External Attribution Responses
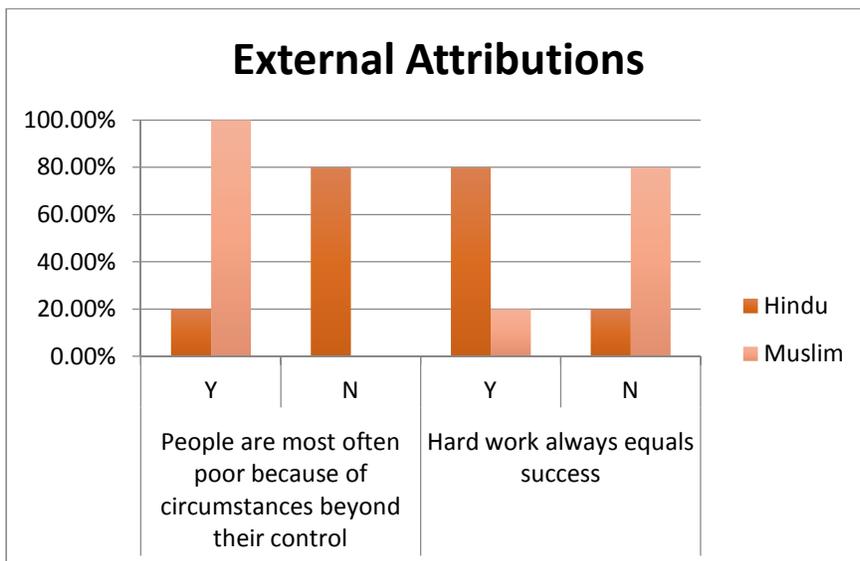
One of the most poignant statements was, "They [poor] work hard but they are not getting work, so they have a mindset they will always be poor. So, they stay poor by giving up." This statement displaying learned helplessness stood in stark contrast with the Hindu responses that poor people do not work or are satisfied with their station in life.

Two surprising findings were the unanimous disregard for luck and the complete agreement with a need to work hard to get out of poverty. None of the participants, regardless of religious beliefs, agreed with the fatalistic statement that "people are most often poor because they are unlucky." Likewise, all participants agreed with the statement that "people should work harder to get out of poverty," which was surprising given that nearly forty-seven percent of those surveyed believed that hard work does not always equal success or wealth.

As previously mentioned, for both the summer 2014 and the December 2014 surveys, fifteen participants were selected for a total of thirty, twenty Hindu and ten Muslim participants. The results of the questions regarding religiosity and causal attributions were identical for both groups. Furthermore, the twenty percent of respondents who described themselves as not very religious comprised the same twenty percent whose data did not support the hypothesis. This suggests that degree of religiosity, and by definition belief in the tenets of the religion, does affect the individual's attributions of poverty.

Descriptors

Beliefs of causation were congruent with how individuals from within the respected groups described both the rich and the poor. Therefore, when asked, "what word would you use to describe someone who is rich?" and "what word would you use to describe someone who is poor?" markedly different descriptors emerged though consistent within religious groups.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the frequency of responses each group provided for the question "what word would you use to describe someone who is rich?" Hindu followers overwhelmingly used positive terms such as hard-working, good, and sharing. Muslim followers expressed both positive and negative terms for the same question. However, the positive responses were often a reflection of external opportunities while the negative responses were used as a reflection of wealthy individuals' character traits.

Figure 3: Hindu Descriptors, Rich   **Figure 4**: Muslim Descriptors, Rich

When asked, "what word would you use to describe someone who is poor?" Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the frequency of responses each group provided reflecting the attributions adherents of each religious group attached to poverty. As previously noted, the word *lazy* was used by all Hindu followers but by none of their Muslim counterparts. Remarkably, this also held true for the word *bad*. When providing descriptors for impoverished people, Hindus provided terms that reflected a negative character trait of the individual. In contrast, Muslims provided terms that reflected structural differences in society. The only negative response provided was that of *helplessness,* and it was always used in conjunction with ideas of learned helplessness as a response to the structural differences. Muslim participants unanimously noted the lack of access to education as one of the greatest causes of poverty. The monetary cost of education in India is of great significance. Indian families must pay for children to attend school through their early primary education. If a student progresses to the fourth grade, the government subsidizes the cost. This explains why education and lack of opportunity dominated responses for those who believed in more external causal attributions.

Figure 5: Hindu Descriptors, Poor   **Figure 6**: Muslim Descriptors, Poor

Application of Findings

It is important to note that neither economic systems nor societal values fully explain the nuanced variances in beliefs of causal attribution from one region to another. Additionally, is there is no one true cause of poverty. Rather a myriad of factors—both individual and structural—creates the reality of poverty in an individual's life. However, research by Nyhan and Reifler (2010) indicated that within the political realm, misinformed individuals rarely change their misperceptions when presented with contrary facts. Instead, people continue to hold onto their beliefs while rationalizing away the new information. Similarly, research by Kuklinski et al. (2000) found a correlation between an individual's perceived facts regarding causal attributions of poverty, perceptions of social welfare recipients, and the same individual's policy preferences. This helps explain why people and communities, collections of similarly minded people, continue to support or fund programs that are proven to be less effective while cutting funding for the more effective organizations. People support programs that are in alignment with their worldview and the corresponding causal attributions to which they subscribe.

The significance of this study is that it indicates there may be a relationship between religion and causal attributions. This research can be expanded to incorporate a random, multi-

variant sample. If subsequent research provides similar results, these studies have the potential to assist a community or state in developing social programs to help mitigate poverty that will be accepted by the local populace because the programs align with the overall perceptions and accepted causal attributions. In turn, such social programs would be more sustainable by virtue of having continued community support. One example from this study is that both sets of respondents noted that education was important for either gaining wealth or at least moving out of poverty. As earlier noted, primary education is not subsidized in India and can be a significant burden to lower caste families thereby further perpetuating the generational cycle of poverty. From an Individualistic perspective, education is a means by which people can work harder to improve their own lot. From a Structuralist perspective, education is a social construct that in its current form magnifies the gap between upper and lower castes, and if modified it could better the lives of those in the lower castes. If the government was inclined to address the issue through tax funds and had a vast array of options before them, an empirically established understanding of the correlation between religious beliefs and poverty could assist in determining which programs would garner the most support and, therefore, would be the most economically sustainable.

Future Research Opportunities

India

The pattern explored by this study indicates that expanding the study to make it more generalizable, by means of including random samples from multiple regions and castes within India, will render valuable insight into Indian perceptions of poverty.

United States

While there are a few notable studies of the relationship between religion and causal attributions of poverty conducted in the United States, these have primarily analyzed Christianity versus other religions (Norcia & Rissotto, 2013).

However, research regarding differences between denominations that follow Calvinistic versus Arminianistic teaching appears to be non-existent. This is surprising considering the presumed influence of capitalism on American causal attributions of poverty. In his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber postulates there is a symbiotic relationship between Calvin's teachings on predestination and the elect and capitalistic economic systems. Furthermore, within American society, there is a widely held belief that a nexus between capitalism and rugged individualism explains prominent individualistic causal attributions for poverty within the public arena. However, such assumptions do not provide rationalization for regional differences in such beliefs. Therefore, further research could compare perceptions of poverty between traditionally Calvinistic versus Arminianistic regions.

A second vein of research that seems to be non-existent is a comparison of Protestant versus Catholic adherents' views on causal attributions. While both are situated within the realm of Christianity, there are notable differences between the locus of teachings of these two sects that is remarkably similar to the previously highlighted differences between Hinduism and Islam. Within Protestant Christianity, there is often more of an overall focus on Calvinistic teachings such as followers being *chosen* or *set apart* whereas Catholic teachings often focus on sacred

text such as, "blessed are those who help the poor," "blessed are those who are generous," and "hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love Him?" (Proverbs 14:21; Proverbs 22:9; James 2:5). As Campolo (2010) explained, once the notion that some are chosen while others are not became accepted, society needed a way to ascertain who was chosen and who was not. According to Calvinists, God blesses His chosen. Therefore, if one is not well-off, then one is not among the chosen. This theological schism provides justification for the distinct beliefs regarding poverty within both Protestant and Catholic teachings. Further research could contrast causal attributions within predominantly Protestant and Catholic communities.

A third aspect of possible research within Christianity would be to analyze differences between adherents of Liturgical versus Non-Liturgical denominations. Liturgy comes from the Greek for "work of the people" (Purcell, 1997). Therefore, within Liturgical denominations such as Lutheran, Episcopal, Anglican, and Catholic congregations, there is a focus on corporate worship with followers standing or kneeling in unison, praying aloud together, and of passing the peace where congregants greet one another with phrases such as, "Peace be upon you," during a religious service. Because Liturgical services revolve around such group dynamics, there may be a greater belief in the interconnectedness of life outside the religious setting. In this case, research into the perceptions of poverty may find that individuals practicing more Liturgical forms of worship might express more external causal attributions and fewer markers of shame attached to poverty as this interconnectedness may also be correlated with a greater belief in social responsibility.

Finally, if any categorical distinctions become salient within the Calvin versus Arminian, Protestant versus Catholic, or Liturgical versus Non-Liturgical denominations, this could indicate a need for further research into correlation or causation. Additionally, concurrent research could explore this relationship in countries that have historically identified with one of these classifications but are considered areligious in post-modernity in order to determine whether such distinction still exists within the society's collective subconscious.

Summary

Preliminary research suggests that the substantial and meaningful differences in both the causal attributions of poverty and the perceptions of characteristics for both the wealthy and poor exist between Hindu and Muslim adherents in India. Specifically, those within the Hindu community reported more internal-individualistic causes for poverty whereas those within the Muslim community reported more external-structuralistic causes for poverty. Congruently, both communities provided vastly different descriptors for both wealthy and poor people. Hindu respondents had considerably more positive views of the wealthy and more negative views of the impoverished than their Muslim counterparts. Additionally, Hindu participants provided descriptors that were often personal characteristic traits while Muslim participants offered descriptors that identified with a person's access to education, opportunities afforded them within society, and status.

Future research will be necessary in order to statistically quantify the findings of this pilot study.

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