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Actors, Observers, and Attributions for Third World Poverty: Contrasting Perspectives From Malawi and Australia

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ABSTRACT. “Actors” and “observers” attributions for Third World poverty were assessed. Dispositional attributions were expected to be linked to the withholding of personal donations to overseas aid. A combined total of 582 undergraduates from the University of Malawi ($n = 251$) and the University of Newcastle in Australia ($n = 331$) completed the Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire, which measures one dispositional factor (Blame the Poor) and three situational factors (Nature, National Governments, and International Exploitation). Strong advocates of donation behavior made the least dispositional attributions, but Malawians blamed dispositions more than did Australians, who blamed situations more than did Malawians. This reversed *observer-actor bias* underscores the critical influence of community context over societal culture and indicates that social cognition may be relevant to international aid efforts.

MEHRYAR (1984), in a major review of issues pertaining to psychology and the developing world, recommended that the role of psychology should be to sensitize Westerners to the realities of life in the Third World. International aid organizations, in attempts to solicit donations from the Western public, often overlook social cognitions that could influence donations (Carr, 1996). Such cognitions

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Both authors were previously affiliated with the University of Malawi. When the data for this study were collected, the first author had just moved to the University of Newcastle, and the second author was at the University of Malawi.

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have not been investigated by social psychologists (Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1995), even though they may provide more accurate predictors of actual support for aid than conventional, demographic markers can provide (Kelley, 1989; Skitka, McMurray, & Burroughs, 1991). In the present study, we explored social-psychological biases in donor cognitions regarding international aid to the developing world.

There is considerable research on attributions for *domestic* poverty. Feagin (1972) found that White, well-schooled, and middle-income members of the public tended to attribute domestic poverty in the United States to dispositions among the poor themselves, such as laziness. In contrast, African Americans, less well-schooled, and lower income respondents were "strongholds" (p. 104) for situational factors, such as low wages. In analogous fashion, "economically colonised" Quebecois used situational attributions more often than their English-speaking neighbors (Lamarche & Tougas, 1979). In England, schoolboys attending fee-paying rather than state institutions preferred dispositional explanations (Furnham, 1982b), whereas in Anglo-Australia, Feather (1974) observed that better education and higher income were associated with dispositional rather than situational attributions. Reser (1991) noted the tendency for Anglo-Australians to make more use of dispositional attributions than Aboriginal Australians did. In India, Singh and Vasudeva (1977) linked higher income and years of education to a reduction in the use of situational attributions for explaining domestic poverty.

Recently, Carr (1996) argued that there is a consistent pattern in those findings, one that links them to a wider body of research on social cognition. The term *actor-observer bias* refers to the tendency of observers of others' behavior to attribute that behavior to dispositions, whereas actors or participants themselves are more likely to focus on situational factors for their own behavior (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). In these terms, the available research on attributions for domestic poverty consistently indicates that groups less likely to be directly affected themselves by poverty (i.e., observers) are more likely to make dispositional than situational attributions (Carr, 1996; Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1995).

That bias has been located in the observer rather than in the actor, at least with regard to Westerners' attributions for poverty in the Third World (Carr, 1996). Westerners tend to overestimate the power of dispositions relative to situational factors, a bias known as "the fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977). Apart from cultural influences (Smith & Bond, 1993), this error is believed to be caused by a lack of intimate knowledge (Monson & Snyder, 1977) and by a lack of attention to environmental cues (Storms, 1973), each of which would be exacerbated by the sheer remoteness of the Third World. Similarly, the poverty of the less industrialized countries, continually portrayed in the Western media, may well exacerbate any tendency to blame the victim (Carr, 1996; Lerner, 1980; Ryan, 1971). On the actor side, however, non-Westerners are relatively unlikely to self-servingly misattribute undesirable events (like being poor) to the situation

(Smith & Bond, 1993). Third World environments are often inherently overpowering (Berry, 1979; House & Zimalirana, 1992; Lobel, 1987).

Reanalysis of data from a large-scale survey conducted in Western Europe (Commission of European Communities, 1977, pp. 72, 79) revealed that attributing poverty to sheer bad luck was closely correlated with willingness to give one's own money ($r = .78, p < .01$). A substantial amount of experimental and field research in the industrialized countries has shown that altruistic behavior, including donations to the poor, is enhanced if people estimate that the person in need is genuinely a victim of circumstances (Kelley, 1989; Lobel, 1987; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Thus, a "donor bias" (Carr, 1996) might influence donations to Third World aid organizations because (a) exposing such biases has been shown to be an effective means of increasing altruistic behavior (Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, & McQuirk, 1978); (b) changes of perspective from observer to actor have prompted a net shift toward situational attributions (Storms, 1973); and (c) the mass media do influence attitudes toward less industrialized nations (Perry & McNelly, 1988). In the comparatively wealthy island of Barbados (West Indies), residents (observers) who had been exposed to an informative media that gave them a greater insight into the perspective of their poorer Dominican neighbors (actors) were more likely than those neighbors (actors) to attribute West Indian poverty to situational factors (Payne & Furnham, 1985).

In short, any confirmation of the presence of an actor-observer effect in Western observers' attributions for Third World poverty could, potentially, be used to sensitize the donor public to their donor bias, thereby facilitating charitable behavior and addressing Mehryar's (1984) call to find a role for psychology in sensitizing the public. In the present study, we measured differences in attributions for Third World poverty in an industrialized economy, Australia, and a less industrialized nation, Malawi. In material terms, the Malawian economy is among the poorest in the world; it is also one of the least well known in the West (House & Zimalirana, 1992). Malawi itself is relatively isolated, with no television and a localized university population. This lack of intercultural contact, we reasoned, would have the effect of delineating observers and actors very clearly (Monson & Snyder, 1977).

Belief in a Just World

Maintaining belief in a just world can sometimes serve an ego-defensive function regarding people who are poor, because such beliefs reassure observers that poor people somehow deserve their poverty (Lerner, 1980). In the West, belief in a just world has been linked to having negative attitudes toward the poor (Furnham & Gunter, 1984) and to making dispositional attributions for poverty in the Third World (Harper, Wagstaff, Newton, & Harrison, 1990). Comparing 12 "developed" and "developing" nations, Furnham (1993) found that people living in the poorer economies tended to believe that the world is unjust. This discrep-

ancy raises the possibility that belief in a just world may be one facet of donor bias (Harper & Manasse, 1992). Therefore, we decided to explore the relationships between belief in a just world, dispositional attributions for Third World poverty, and charitable behavior regarding international aid (Zuckerman, 1975). Our hypotheses were as follows.

1. Consistent with the notion of donor bias, Australians will be more likely than Malawians to attribute Third World poverty to dispositional factors in the poor themselves.
2. Belief in a just world will be associated with dispositional attributions.
3. Among Australians, those individuals who make the stronger dispositional attributions will be less inclined to make personal donations to international aid.

Method

Participants

A total of 641 students from 1st- and 2nd-year psychology classes volunteered for the study, 285 from the University of Malawi and 356 from the University of Newcastle, Australia. Using SPSS-X, we accounted for incomplete data records and accepted 582 cases for analysis, 251 from Malawi and 331 from Australia. The mean age for the combined sample was 22.6 years; the Malawians averaged 21.1 and the Australians 23.6 years of age. Reflecting the student populations in each country, the Malawian sample was predominantly male (71%), whereas the Australian sample was predominantly female (69%).

Materials and Procedure

The Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire (CTWPQ) is an attributional scale that has demonstrated a reliable four-factor structure in the United Kingdom (Harper et al., 1990). In addition to the dispositional factor Blame the Poor, there are three situational factors: Third World Governments (e.g., corruption), Nature (e.g., pests), and International Exploitation (e.g., the world banking system). The CTWPQ contains a total of 20 items; response scales range from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Each item is positively worded, asserting a particular cause for Third World poverty.

The Just World Scale (JWS; Lerner, 1980) contains 20 items; response scales range from *very much disagree* (1) to *very much agree* (6). Ten items reflect the belief that the world is a just place (PRO Just World), and the remaining 10 items reflect the belief that the world is unjust (ANTI Just World).

Because poverty-reduction programs in the Third World have consistently neglected the subjectivity of poverty (Sinha, 1990), we asked both observers and actors to indicate (and explain) their opinions about aid donations. The Aus-

traliens were asked, "Do you believe in giving money to aid programmes for work in 'developing' countries?" In the pilot questionnaire, the nearest approximation acceptable and intelligible to the Malawians was the following: "Imagine that you were born in and are living in a country which is highly developed in the sense of having great industrial capability and a good standard of living. Would you give money to aid programmes for work in 'developing' countries?" In each country, the options for belief in giving were -3 (against, very sure), -2 (against, fairly sure), -1 (against, not sure), +1 (in favor, not sure), +2 (in favor, fairly sure), and +3 (in favor, very sure).

This scale was positioned at the beginning of the questionnaire, with the aim of securing relatively spontaneous replies (Duval, Duval, & Neely, 1979). That positioning may have prompted some observer-like self-reflection among the Malawians, but the dispositional-type attributions predicted in Hypothesis 1 were previously shown to be impervious to change as a result of perceptual reorientation (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Storms, 1973). Nonetheless, we interposed the JWS between the questions on belief in giving and those constituting the CTWPQ. This created a time delay, but dispositional attributions have also proved relatively resistant to change over such periods since reorientation (see Martin & Huang, 1984)

The questionnaire in its entirety was administered and returned during classes, under conditions of informed consent and confidentiality, and on the understanding that the results would provide locally relevant course material. The language used throughout was English, the official language of instruction in both countries.

Results

We subjected the CTWPQ to a factor analysis in which we used a principal components extraction, with an orthogonal (varimax) rotation specifying four factors. Two items were excluded from the final variable list. The item attributing Third World poverty to fate had a low communality (.18), and "having too many children" loaded unexpectedly on blame governments. Britons and Australians may see children as a dispositional matter, but undergraduates in Malawi may perceive national governments as playing more of a role. Although that finding was understandable in the Malawian context, wherein the government actively campaigns for spacing of children, it is equally clear that the item may have meant different things to the two student populations.

The resulting factor solution explained 48% of the variance, with very little factor overlap. The solution also replicated very closely the factor structure found in previous studies, namely, those obtained exclusively within the United Kingdom. Given the apparent reliability of the instrument in our cross-cultural context, factor scores were thereafter used as the primary measures of participants' attributions about Third World poverty.

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted a multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with age and gender as covariates, country (Malawi/Australia) as the independent variable, and attributional factor scores (Blame the Poor, Nature, Governments, and Exploitation) as the dependent variables. The covariates and attributional factor scores were significantly related, $F(8, 1150) = 5.26$, Wilks's lambda = .93. Univariate F tests revealed that these relationships existed in relation to the situational factors, namely, Nature, $F(2, 578) = 4.51$, $p = .011$, adj. $R^2 = 1.1\%$; Governments, $F(2, 578) = 4.74$, $p = .009$, adj. $R^2 = 1.3\%$; and Exploitation, $F(2, 578) = 11.4$, $p < .001$, adj. $R^2 = 3.6\%$. Older participants were less likely than younger ones to blame nature ($t = -2.37$, $p = .018$) and governments ($t = -2.36$, $p = .019$), and more likely to blame exploitation ($t = 4.21$, $p < .001$). Females were more likely than males to blame governments ($t = -2.08$, $p = 0.038$) and exploitation ($t = -2.30$, $p = .022$).

Over and above these relationships, country had a highly significant effect on attributions as a whole, $F(4, 575) = 46.04$, $p < .001$, Wilks's lambda = .76. Univariate F tests revealed that the effect held at each attributional factor, after Bonferroni correction (see Table 1). Malawians made the stronger dispositional (Blame the Poor) attributions, $F(1, 578) = 70.63$, $p < .001$, whereas Australians made the stronger situational attributions, namely, blaming Nature, $F(1, 578) = 52.90$, $p < .001$; Governments, $F(1, 578) = 19.07$, $p < .001$; and Exploitation, $F(1, 578) = 6.94$, $p = .009$. The data in Table 1 indicate that the actor-observer bias was reversed. Hypothesis 1 was therefore rejected.

We subjected the JWS to a factor analysis in which we used an orthogonal (varimax) rotation and specified the extraction of two factors (i.e., PRO and ANTI Just World subscales). Four items with low communalities ($< .11$) were removed. The resulting solution explained 45% of the total variance, with no significant factor overlap. The factor scores from this solution were therefore employed in subsequent analyses.

The interrelationships between CTWPQ factor scores, JWS factor scores, demographic factors, and belief in giving (GIVE) are reported in Table 2. Although Blaming the Poor was indeed associated with PRO just world beliefs, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2, Blaming the Poor was also significantly asso-

TABLE 1
Mean Adjusted Attributional Factor Scores, by Country

Blame	Australia	Malawi
The poor	-.318	.415
Nature	.278	-.361
Governments	.179	-.222
Outside exploitation	.102	-.139

ciated with ANTI just world beliefs (i.e., in an unjust world, "individuals must look after themselves"). Although belief in a just world was linked to belief in giving, the relationship was weak, and it disappeared when the data were analyzed separately for each country.

Regarding the Australian potential donor sample and Hypothesis 3, we conducted a series of univariate ANOVAs, with Bonferroni correction, on belief in giving (independent variable) and blaming the poor, nature, governments, and exploitation (dependent variables). Those tests revealed significant variation on the factor Blame the Poor, $F(5, 325) = 3.99, p = .0016$. A Student-Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that those participants who were very sure (Table 3) could be differentiated from the majority of the sample. Those who tended to blame the poor least tended to be very sure that they believed in making personal donations or very sure that they did not believe in making personal donations. The proportion of participants in the latter category, however, was relatively small (see Table 3). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was broadly supported.

The Malawians' reasons for giving emphasized "I have seen the problems" (33%), empathy (13%), resources being sufficient to be able to give (9%), and developing countries' not being able to survive on their own (5%). For those who

TABLE 2
Correlation Matrix Based on Factor Scores

Factor	The poor	Nature	Govts.	Exploitation	PRO	ANTI
PRO	.299			-.249		
ANTI	.219	-.152		.121		
GIVE					.144	

Note. Reported ratios were significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

TABLE 3
Australians' Giving and Mean Blame the Poor Factor Scores

Attitude	Mean score	%
Against giving		
Very sure	-.70	4
Fairly sure	-.12	8
Not sure	-.27	3
For giving		
Not sure	-.01	19
Fairly sure	-.32	45
Very sure	-.63	21

were against giving, the themes included not knowing what personal problems would result if one gave (reflecting the Malawian adage, "Rich once but begging now"; 22%) and developing countries' misuse of funds (6%). Those whose preference was unclear either explained that their decision depended on whether the recipient country tried to make use of its own resources (4%), or they gave no response at all (8%).

The Australians' reasons for not giving included skepticism that money ever reaches the poor (34%), the belief that charity begins at home (7%), the belief that aid creates dependence (8%), insufficient information about aid projects (3%), and inability to afford donations (1%). In favor of giving, the themes were moral obligation (28%) and Christian beliefs (1%). Those whose preferences were unclear either explained that it depended on the type of aid project and how the money would be used (11%) or they gave no response at all (7%).

Overall, despite their comparative tendency to blame the poor, the Malawians' responses were characterized by empathy. Even the cautious theme "rich once but begging now" probably comes from direct experience of the financial insecurity of life in Malawi. The Australians' explanations, on the other hand, were characterized by skepticism or moral obligation rather than economic or demographic features, such as affordability or Christianity.

Discussion

The three main findings from this study are (a) a reversal of the actor-observer bias among highly educated student populations; (b) a link between blaming the poor and both belief in a just world and belief in an unjust world; and (c) a replication of the finding that donation behavior is associated with situational rather than dispositional attributions by observers, in this case with regard to Australians' attributions about poverty in the Third World.

The observer-actor difference found in this study cannot be fully evaluated without considering evidence that has recently emerged from a study conducted in the same two countries, but with marketplace shoppers instead of university students. Carr, MacLachlan, and Campbell (1995) reported that, using the CTWPQ, they interviewed 200 weekend shoppers in their respective local marketplaces. The Australians were significantly more likely than the Malawians to use a dispositional attribution (blame the poor) to explain Third World poverty. Thus, when nonundergraduate populations were sampled, an actor-observer effect did indeed emerge. This recent finding alerts us to look for some discernible difference or differences between the populations sampled in each study, particularly because the only other study that obtained a reversed observer-actor effect, involving British and Indian participants, also involved college students (Furnham, 1982a).

Another international study failed to find any significant relationship between the demographics of poverty and attributions of responsibility (Com-

mission of European Communities, 1977). This large-scale public opinion survey, focused on domestic poverty, involved approximately 9,000 respondents in nine countries. However, because the data were pooled across societies, the null findings could be attributable to a cultural positioning effect (Bond, 1988). When the data were reanalyzed on a country basis alone, the two countries with the lowest incomes (Italy and Ireland) were, in fact, significantly more likely to blame social injustice, $\chi^2(1) = 10.54, p < .005$, two-tailed test (1979, pp. 7, 71, 79). Thus, the results are broadly consistent with the notion of donor bias as well as with the differences between student life and everyday life in Australia and Malawi.

Perhaps the most obvious difference concerns the nature of higher education—in this case, the academic discipline of psychology itself. In Canada, a person's amount of tertiary education in social science has been directly linked with increased "system blame" rather than "person blame" (Guimond, Begin, & Palmer, 1989; Guimond & Palmer, 1994). Such a link could perhaps explain the previously mentioned findings with Australian and British students and reinforce the argument that potential donors can be "educated" into adopting situational attributions.

There are, however, some problems of interpretation with the Britain-India study. That study's focus was on domestic rather than international poverty. The British respondents were not all psychology students, and the Indian students were all taking a degree in commerce rather than psychology. Although commerce is frequently studied along with the social science of economics, majoring in commerce has been linked with *decreased* system blame (Baer & Lambert, 1990; Guimond & Palmer, 1990). To the extent that commerce education is focused on the practicalities of managing small businesses, such a shift toward person blame is understandable, but it also creates uncertainty about the precise cause of Furnham's (1982a) findings.

The level of control in the Australia-Malawi study was somewhat higher—for example, both groups shared the same instructor. We recomputed the MANCOVAs post hoc, with year of study as an additional covariate. There were no significant links between study year and attributional factor scores, although we cannot know what other courses students had gone on to take in their sophomore year. Many of these options may have been person- rather than system-focused (Guimond et al., 1989, 1994). Unemployment is commonly associated with poverty. In Australia, Feather (1985) found that psychology students had a preference for situational rather than dispositional attributions when making attributions for unemployment; thus, studying psychology in Australia may still conceivably be linked to making comparatively situational attributions.

Evidently, we cannot apply this interpretation so freely to the Malawian students, a limitation that is clearer still with regard to plain "political correctness." Regarding their comparatively low situational attributions, the initial question about belief in giving might have produced a persistent reorientation toward an

observer-like status, artificially depressing situational attributions (Martin & Huang, 1984). In a Western laboratory, Storms (1973) reoriented actors by showing them a videotape of themselves, prompting a dip in situational emphases to below the levels ordinarily endorsed by observers. Yet our Malawian students' explanations for their opinions about giving remained rooted in the Malawian experience; even their reasons against giving were dominated by a well-known Malawian adage. Moreover, just as dispositional attributions may derive resilience from cultural beliefs in personality (Jellison & Green, 1981; Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979), situational attributions may also become resilient whenever cultural beliefs emphasize social context (as they do in Malawi; Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982; Smith & Bond, 1993). Overall, therefore, it seems unlikely that the cross-cultural differences in terms of situational attributions were due entirely to self-reflection on the part of the Malawians.

This shortfall prompted us to consider the more localized, community circumstances of being a university student in a Third World country. In Malawi, becoming an undergraduate involves receiving full board and health care and the likelihood of a reasonable job and income upon graduation. These clear privileges, in local terms, may be sufficient to alter the perspective of the average student from actor to observer. The phenomenology of that change in status, combined perhaps with the sheer proximity of extreme poverty, may have been sufficient to precipitate enough projection of blame to offset any influence of tertiary education in social science. Bringing victims closer to observers has been linked to increased blaming of those victims for their predicament (Berrenberg, Rosnik, & Kravcisin, 1991); a "privilege proximity" hypothesis seems worthy of future consideration (Carr, 1996).

Educational systems frequently make it extremely difficult for students in developing countries to obtain higher education. In Malawi, for instance, there is intense competition for the limited number of places, even at the secondary level (House & Zimalirana, 1992). Perhaps, at that level of competition, university undergraduates are a self-selected sample of inordinately hard-working individuals with a vested interest in viewing effort as capable of overcoming any difficulties posed by environmental circumstances. A disturbing implication of our interpretation is that the dearth of school places in the Third World (Smith & Bond, 1993, p. 30) may sometimes foster tendencies to blame poverty on the poor themselves. Lobel (1987) argued cogently that training to switch to an internal locus of control can be hazardous when it does not coincide with the level of environmental opportunity and therefore the veridicality of an external locus of control in developing countries.

The findings seem to support our initial assumption, that actor-observer differences are directly relevant to the social marketing of international aid. In the first place, it would have been naive to expect any attributional biases to be universal (La Sierra, 1992; Monson & Snyder, 1977). Attributions for poverty have, in fact, already been shown to vary according to cultural and subcultural prefer-

ences for system versus person blame (Commission of European Communities, 1977; Guimond, Begin, & Palmer, 1989). Moreover, the student and shopper findings consistently indicate, and vividly so, that attributions for poverty are driven by specific contextual circumstances rather than by culture per se. Thus, any differences between observers and actors are often attributable to the observers' dislocation from the circumstances of the actors, especially when the dislocation is so total as living in the material comfort of Australia and striving to envisage the everyday conditions of life in Malawi (Carr, 1996). This interpretation is entirely consistent with the position that attributional biases are relevant to a number of aid partnerships between particular "developed" and developing countries.

Our second hypothesis, also, was not directly supported by the data; three possible ways of categorizing donors on the basis of individual differences in the belief in a just world were discerned. At the extremes are those individuals who are either pro- or anti-just world, with both linked to dispositional attributions and thereby to reduced donation behavior. In a just world, one gets what one deserves, and in an unjust world one is responsible for one's own welfare. In between are those individuals who may be neither pro- nor anti-just world in their beliefs. This trifurcation was corroborated in the Malawian/Australian shoppers study (Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1995). Furnham (1993) found that pro- and anti-just world beliefs were positively but not significantly related, raising the question whether some individuals might be ambivalent in terms of their beliefs about justice. However, a post hoc factor analysis of the present data with an oblique rotation revealed that PRO and ANTI factor scores were unrelated (factor correlation = $-.08$). Belief in a just world might, therefore, provide social marketers with three new and distinctive psychographic segments.

Drawing the distinction between three psychographic dimensions would also enable us to interpret at least one case in the literature wherein belief in a just world was *not* correlated with dispositional attributions (Harper & Manasse, 1992). If both pro- and anti-just world sentiments are linked to dispositional attributions, then we should not always expect to find a straightforward, linear relationship between degree of belief in a just world and degree of blaming the poor. This conclusion is of some importance because the present study has corroborated previous findings that dispositional attributions predict some of the variation in donation behavior (e.g., Skitka et al., 1991; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In the last Australian National Social Science Survey, the overriding factor determining support for aid, both international and domestic, was whether the victims were deemed unable to help themselves. Hence, for example, Australians were strongly in favor of giving aid to victims of natural disasters, but they were equally set against "aid for trade" (Kelley, 1989). In short, the acceptable face of foreign aid was welfare for foreigners.

The open-ended question in the present study yielded more data to support that view, because "moral obligation" was chief among the Australians' reasons for giving to overseas aid. The major barrier, on the other hand, was "skepticism"

and, in fact, after this survey the aid organization Care Australia received a barrage of criticism in the Australian media for allowing donated funds to be misappropriated by corrupt agents in the field. At the same time, the reasons given by the Malawians themselves were closely tied, as we expected they would be, to their insider knowledge of, and proximity to, real poverty. "I have seen the problems" was their major response. Persuading the donor to share that perspective may just possibly lie within the ambit of psychology for development.

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