

*Western (or "First World") societies continue to be confronted by the ever growing problem of "Third World" poverty. Financial donations from "Western" publics are one possible contribution to seeking remedies, but these partly depend on donor experience and perceptions, which are likely to be indirect and subject to attributional biases. Exposing such biases may help to correct them. This paper compares attributions for Third World poverty between Brazilian "actors" living in a developing economy and Australian "observers" living in a more industrialised one. One hundred textile workers completed Harper et al.'s Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire and Lerner's Just World Scale, with both scales back-translated into Portuguese for the Brazilians. Australians were more likely to stress natural disasters, reflecting the focus of their own media, whereas Brazilians consistently emphasised national corruption. These findings indicate the influence of local perspective, thereby implying that there is scope for donor publics to be sensitised to alternative perceptions of poverty.*

## ***Attributions for "Third World" Poverty: Contextual Factors in Australia and Brazil***

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**With more than** a twist of irony, studies of attributions for poverty have tended to remain focused within the relatively wealthy West, rather than concentrating on developing countries where poverty alleviation is often needed most (D. Sinha, 1990, p. 89). This lack of relevant research is even more apparent when we consider cross-national differences in explanations for "Third World" poverty, between those who actually experience the causes of such hardship directly and those whose experience is only indirect, via the Western media (Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1995). On the twin assumptions that indirect experience of the causes of poverty creates a potential for donor bias (Carr, 1996), and that exposing such biases may—partially at least—correct them (Gergen, 1994), the present study compares attributions for Third World poverty between Brazilian "actors" living in a developing economy and Australian "observers" living in a more industrialised one (see Jones & Nisbett, 1972, for a discussion of actor–observer differences).

### **Evidence and Theory**

One of the earliest psychological studies of attributions for poverty was conducted by Feagin (1972), and focused on domestic poverty in the United States. Feagin was struck by the tendency of 1,000 respondents (from a comparatively wealthy country which could probably afford to be generous towards its poor) to blame the poor themselves (such as attributing poverty to laziness) rather than society (such as attributing poverty to low wages). Moreover, higher educational levels and greater income (arguably correlates of each other) were associated with an even sharper tendency to blame the poor. The clearest indication of this can be seen in the data for African Americans, who constituted a minority of the sample. In direct contrast to the mainstream, most of these participants endorsed societal causes above personality "defects". Overall, in the language of attribution theory, comparative wealth was linked to a tendency to use dispositional rather than situational attributions.

Since Feagin's (1972) original study, this trend has been replicated in a number of different cultural settings within the West. Apart from the United States (Gallup, 1972), these include Canada (Lamarche & Tougas, 1979), England (Furnham, 1982; Townsend, 1979), and Australia (Feather, 1974; Reser, 1991). A study conducted in India found

similar results (Singh & Vasudeva, 1977), linking higher income and years of education to a reduction in the use of situational attributions to explain domestic poverty. Within the same "developing" context, Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, and Tripathi (1982) found that situational attributions were generally stronger than dispositional ones, in direct contrast to many Western findings. Thus, within a variety of social contexts, it is clear that comparative poverty is associated with a greater emphasis on situational rather than dispositional attributions. In other words, the wealthy seem more likely to "blame the victim" (Ryan, 1971) than uncontrollable circumstances.

These conclusions are consistent with a phenomenon known as the Actor Observer Bias (Carr, 1996). While observers of others' behaviour tend to attribute their actions to dispositions, the actors themselves are comparatively likely to rely on situational attributions to explain their own behaviour. If we regard the poor as analogous to actors and donor publics as akin to observers, there are reasons to believe that the bias resides more in the latter. As Smith and Bond (1993) point out, Western observers are relatively prone to overestimate the role of internal dispositions, a bias that is termed their "Fundamental Attribution Error" (Ross, 1977). Apart from individualistic socialisation practices (Kleiner, 1996), this error is believed to be caused by lack of background knowledge about the actor's circumstances (Monson & Snyder, 1977), as well as the tendency of people (rather than environmental features) to fill the human perceptual field (Storms, 1973). Each of these error producing factors tend to become pronounced when Westerners try to imagine life in the so-called Third World, based on scant and sensationalised media portrayals by news and aid agencies (Godwin, 1994).

On the actor side of the issue, people who have grown up in less individualistic societies may also, in the long run, be less likely to self-servingly blame undesirable events or states (like poverty perhaps) on the situation (Smith & Bond, 1993). Added to this, the types of environmental obstacles encountered in developing country settings (tropical diseases, wars, famines, etc.) would be defined by many as inherently overpowering, indicating the veracity of an external rather than internal locus of control (Lopez, 1987). Thus, we may expect actors to give quite a different account of poverty in the developing world, compared to observers of it.

Can this body of findings be connected to more applied research on charitable behaviour? Many field and experimental studies among

Western donor countries including Australia have linked dispositional attributions to a withholding of donations (Commission of the European Communities, 1977; Feagin, 1972; Kelley, 1989; Skitka, McMurray, & Burroughs, 1991; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Furthermore, exposing such biases via the media has been shown to enhance charitable actions (Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, & McQuirk, 1978; Perry & McNelly, 1988). In the West Indies, comparatively wealthy Barbadians (observers) made more situational attributions for regional poverty than their poorer Dominican (actor) neighbours partly as a result of informative and insightful media portrayals of Caribbean poverty (Payne & Furnham, 1985). Thus, media exposure of donor bias may help to reduce it and to augment donation behaviour, largely through sensitising wealthier viewing publics to the situational realities of life in developing countries (Mehryar, 1984).

Is there any record of an actor-observer difference occurring between people living in a developing economy and observers living in an industrialised one? One study has compared attributions for Third World poverty made by 200 weekend marketplace shoppers in Malawi and Australia (Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1995). Using a scale originally developed for administration to a Western (British) donor public (Harper et al.'s, 1990 Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire, or CTWPQ), Carr and associates observed a replication of the CTWPQ factor structure with the Australian shoppers (blame the poor [dispositional], and [situational] Third World national governments [such as corruption], nature [for example, pests], and international exploitation [such as world banking system]). In addition, Australians made significantly stronger dispositional attributions, thereby providing preliminary support for the concept of donor bias (Carr, 1996). Moreover, those Australians who made non-dispositional attributions were also statistically more likely to make actual donations to overseas aid projects.

The same study also made use of Lerner's (1980) Just World Scale (JWS), which measures the belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Wheeler, Deci, Reis, & Zuckerman, 1978). In the study by Carr and associates, belief in a just world was accompanied by a tendency to blame the victim: In a just world, people deserve whatever fate befalls them. The JWS also measures belief in an unjust world, and there was another identifiable group which was relatively strong on this factor, a segment whose scores were associated with donor bias. In an unjust world, people are seen as having

to look after themselves, so that any misfortunes that befall them become their own responsibility.

Since these two factors (belief in a just world and belief in an unjust world) are linked indirectly to charitable behaviour (via dispositional attributions), the JWS was used in the present study. In addition, we expected to find an actor observer bias in attributions for developing world poverty among Brazilians and Australians, with the latter making comparatively strong dispositional rather than situational attributions. This tendency is termed Donor Bias.

## ***Method***

### **Participants**

In Australia, we convenience sampled a total of 50 blue-collar clothing factory employees, working in the industrial city of Newcastle. Respondents included both females ( $n = 37$ ) and males ( $n = 13$ ), with a mean age of 32 years. In Brazil, we convenience sampled a total of 50 blue-collar shoe factory employees, working in the industrial city of Estancia Veina. The sample included both females ( $n = 25$ ) and males ( $n = 25$ ), with a mean age of 31 years.

### **Apparatus and Procedure**

The version of the CTWPQ utilised in previous studies involving samples from developing countries was used. The CTWPQ comprises a total of 16 items, each ranging on a scale from a value of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with 3 (Don't Know) as the midpoint.

The JWS comprises 20 items, each scaled from 1 (Very Much Disagree) to 6 (Very Much Agree), with no neutral point. These items are divided (Lerner, 1980) between those asserting Pro Just World Beliefs (PRO) and those endorsing Anti Just World Beliefs (ANTI).

For the Brazilian group, both scales were professionally back-translated (Brislin, 1970) by the Modern Languages Department at the University of Newcastle. In both countries, each scale was completed under conditions of informed consent and confidentiality, and during company time.

## **Results**

The CTWPQ was subjected to a principal components based factor analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser's criterion. The expected 4 factors emerged, and the solution is presented in Table 1. This result is both clear and parsimonious, and replicates the orthogonal pattern observed within Western cultural settings. Given the apparent reliability of the CTWPQ across these two cultural groups, and the relatively high proportion of variance explained by the vectors, factor scores served as dependent measures of attributions in a MANCOVA (4 cases were rejected by SPSSX due to missing values), with age and gender of participants entered as covariates.

There was no indication that the covariates were related to attributions ( $p = .80$ ). Country, however, produced a significant multivariate effect ( $F_{4,89} = 43.8$ ,  $\text{Lambda} = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Univariate tests revealed that the Australians made stronger attributions to nature ( $F_{1,92} = 61.6$ ,  $p < .001$ , mean factor scores =  $+ .67$  vs  $-.60$ ), while the Brazilians made stronger attributions to national government corruption ( $F_{1,92} = 31.0$ ,  $p < .001$ , mean factor scores =  $-.53$  vs  $+.50$ ).

The JWS was subjected to a principal components based factor analysis with varimax rotation and a Procrustes solution, specifying two factors. The resulting factor solution was not satisfactory, with PRO and ANTI items loading on the same factors, and 68 per cent of the variation being left unexplained. Given this amount of variance unresolved by the JWS factor solution, we conducted a post hoc MANCOVA, with individual items as the dependent variables, country as the independent factor, and age and gender as covariates. To avoid logical and statistical problems associated with multicollinearity, we used BMDP4V. This programme computes pooled within-cell tolerance ( $1 - \text{SMC}$ ) for each dependent variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989, p. 380).

After Bonferroni correction, there were significant differences between the two countries ( $p < .002$ ) on the following items: "It is often impossible for a person to receive a fair trial in this country." "It is rare for an innocent person to be wrongly sent to jail." "It is a common occurrence for a guilty person to get off free in Australian/Brazilian courts." "Although evil people may hold political power for a while, in the general course of history good wins out". On these items, the Brazilians consistently tended to emphasise corruption at both judicial and federal levels.

**Table 1**  
*Orthogonal Factor Solution on the CTWPQ*

| <i>Item</i><br><i>(shortened)</i> | <i>Third World poverty is caused by</i> |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
|                                   | <i>Nature</i>                           | <i>The Poor</i> | <i>Local Governments</i> | <i>Exploitation</i> | <i>Communality (b<sup>2</sup>)</i> |
| Climate                           | .80                                     |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| .67                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Arms costs                        | .75                                     |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| .62                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| War                               | .73                                     |                 |                          | .32                 | .69                                |
| Barren land                       | .71                                     |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| .55                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Pests                             | .70                                     |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| .50                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Disease                           | .58                                     |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| .40                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| No talent                         |   | .80             |                          |                     |                                    |
| .65                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Low IQs                           |   | .79             |                          |                     |                                    |
| .67                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Tradition                         |   | .74             |                          |                     |                                    |
| .63                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| No ambition                       |   | .73             |                          |                     |                                    |
| .58                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Laziness                          |   | .72             |                          |                     |                                    |
| .55                               |   |                 |                          |                     |                                    |
| Inefficiency                      |   |                 | .81                      |                     | .67                                |
| Corruption                        |   |                 | .72                      |                     | .59                                |
| Mismanagement                     | -.35                                    | .43             | .62                      |                     | .69                                |
| Exploitation                      |   |                 |                          | .82                 | .70                                |
| Big Banks                         |   |                 | .32                      | .67                 | .61                                |
| Eigen value                       | 3.6                                     | 3.2             | 1.8                      | 1.1                 | TOTAL                              |
| % Variance                        | 23                                      | 20              | 11                       | 7                   | 61                                 |

Loadings < .30 not presented.

These particular PRO and ANTI items were grouped together on factor 1 of our previous factor analysis, with appropriately positive and negative factor loadings (> +/- .5). Also appearing on the same factor (< +/- .5) were, "Students almost always deserve the grades they receive at school" (+.48); "In any business or profession, people who do their job well rise to the top" (+.40); "Many people suffer

through absolutely no fault of their own" (-.54); and "The political candidate who sticks up for his or her principles rarely gets elected" (-.48). In retrospect, these could all conceivably be connected to institutional corruption.

A MANCOVA ( $N = 97$ ) with our original JWS factor scores as the dependent variables, country as the independent factor, and age and gender as covariates, indicated significant variation between countries ( $F_{2,92} = 10.71$ ,  $\Lambda = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). On the original factor 1, females ( $t = 2.32$ ,  $p = .023$ ) and Brazilians ( $F_{1,93} = 11.73$ ,  $p = .001$ , adjusted means =  $-.32$  vs  $+.36$ ) tended to report more corruption. Moreover, the only other variable with which the factor correlated significantly was local government inefficiency and corruption on the CTWPQ ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### *Discussion*

Our data thus converge on institutional corruption being invoked more by Brazilians than by Australians, in order to explain (attribute) poverty in the developing world. Such differences between the two countries indicate the influence of a local perspective, which has to be analysed carefully if we do not want to become closed into a bias too.

Our cross-cultural difference regarding institutional corruption is consistent with popular opinion in contemporary Brazil. Tamayo (1994), for example, observed that perceived "powerful others" was a principal subjective cause of slum poverty within Brazil itself. Tamayo's finding indicates that our participants relied heavily on their local perspective, and attendant knowledge, when attributing poverty in the CTWPQ's "Third World" generally. Similarly perhaps, Australians may have drawn primarily from their own familiar (but not necessarily representative) media portrayals of the Third World, which tend to focus on the more "newsworthy", war-ravaged and famine-afflicted countries in Africa, reflecting the "blame nature" items in Table 1. As Dorward notes, "Africa is continually written off by the Australian media...[in] crisis journalism. There is another reality" (1996, p. 4).

Instead of a simple actor-observer difference, our findings thereby reflect local concerns. In this particular context, Brazilians made



stronger situational attributions (focusing on government corruption), but Australians were also comparatively likely to blame a situational factor, nature's catastrophes. Insofar as "Western" observers are relatively likely to be less familiar with the real, everyday dramas of developing world poverty, donor bias remains likely in the long run. Its precise *form* and *content*, however, will be influenced substantially by *local* circumstances on both sides.

Contextual factors may partly explain why there was no difference between the two samples in terms of dispositional attributions. As D. Sinha (1990) has pointed out in the Indian context, the cultural socialisation of modesty may encourage the poor to blame themselves rather than their circumstances for the "failure" that poverty may represent. In a South American context, Montero (1990) has detailed how a "process of national self-derogation is...found all over...and in other parts of the Third World" (p. 50). If these observations are correct, then many donor-host comparisons would become confounded. In that event, cultural studies of the *quality* of attributions, perhaps against objective estimates of the contribution to poverty made by each of the CTWPQ's factors, would be more informative and valid. At the very least, future studies of donor publics' attributions for poverty will need to (statistically) control for cultural values and socioeconomic contexts.

Social psychological research on reactions to the fortunes of others has indicated that people are increasingly likely to blame the victim the more they feel unable to help (Wheeler et al., 1978). This is something that may be enhanced in developing countries that are sharply stratified (Moghaddam & Taylor, 1986). India, for instance, has a caste system, while Brazil has an extremely high ratio between top and bottom income sectors (Todaro, 1994, p. 134; World Bank, 1995, p. 221).

Drawing these factors together, Carr (1996) suggests that combining privilege and proximity together (say, among Brazilians who are employed as in our own sample) may sometimes inflate the possibility of making dispositional attributions. This would cancel out any tendency for actors to blame dispositions less than observers and may, therefore, partly underlie the null dispositional findings in this study (the mean scores on dispositional items were 2.4 and 2.5/5 for Australians and Brazilians respectively). The same tendency may have been observed among relatively privileged and proximal Malawian (vs Australian) undergraduates (where the mean scores respectively were 2.58 and 2.13); and may also apply to any aid appeal that relies

on showing others' suffering "in your face" (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; for more details, see Carr, Mc Auliffe, & MacLachlan, 1998).

In conclusion, the central thrust of this study is that local context, and especially local knowledge, do influence attributions. This creates the scope for narrowing the discrepancy between the perceptions of observers and actors, for raising donations (which we do not suggest are a solution in themselves), and possibly for aiding the poor more substantially than is the case at present. The recent development of bilateral "aid partnerships" (Kealey, 1996) could augment still further the potential for applied research on sub- and cross-cultural communication. With the United Nations having declared 1996 a year for the eradication of poverty (Gertzel, 1996), developing a social psychology of poverty reduction is now clearly overdue.

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