

PERCEPTIONS OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS ON THE CAUSES OF CHILD POVERTY IN BOIPATONG TOWNSHIP

Steven H. Dunga

North-West University (Vaal Campus), South Africa

E-mail:Steve.Dunga@nwu.ac.za

Jabulile L. Makhalima

North-West University, South Africa

E-mail:20115911@nwu.ac.za

-Abstract-

Children experience poverty within the context of the households they live in. Methodologically and ethically, it is not permissible to ask children what they perceive to be the cause of their poverty status. The possibility of obtaining incomprehensible data is high if children and minors are included as respondents in any data collection process. Reliance, therefore, is placed on the adults that are either guardians or parents of the children to speculate on what they perceive to be the causes of child poverty. Using data collected from Boipatong Township in Gauteng Province, South Africa, a multiple regression is used to determine characteristics of the of household associated with the perceptions on causes of poverty. The perceptions are divided into the categories common to the traditional causes of poverty as pioneered by Feagin, namely fate, structural and individualistic. The unique twist of the paper, however, is the replacement of the individual child with the adult responsible for the child. The results show that household income, qualification of the household head and household size were some of the significant determinants of perceptions of the causes of child poverty.

Key Words: *Child poverty, perceptions, households, multiple regression, individualistic, structural, fatalistic*

JEL classification: A10, A13.

1. INTRODUCTION

Consensus exists in the view that children are the most vulnerable group of people to poverty, food insecurity, HIV and Aids among other challenges plaguing the planet (Drimie & Casale, 2008; McKendrick *et al.*, 2007; UNICEF, 2005). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2005) argues that the elements that differentiate child poverty from general poverty often are overlooked and neglected. Poverty in children is a derived situation as it is passed on or inherited from the parents or those that bear responsibility over them. Child poverty, as a concept, has certain factors that are attributable to it and should rather be differentiated from the more general attributes of poverty such as lack of income, shelter, clothing and the like (Makhalima, 2016). Children experience poverty within the context of the households they live in. Methodologically and ethically, it is not permissible to ask children what they perceive to be the cause of their poverty status. One could even obtain incomprehensible data if children and minors were involved in a data collection process. Therefore, reliance is placed on the adults that are guardians or parents of the children to speculate on what they perceive to be the cause/s of child poverty.

The literature on the perceptions of the causes of poverty identifies three main perceived causes of poverty as pioneered by Feagin (1972), namely individualistic, structural and fate. Previous studies conducted on the perceptions of poverty have concentrated on the perceptions of poverty in general and not perceptions of child poverty (Grobler & Dunga, 2014; Maseko *et al.* 2015;). Few studies have looked at the perceptions of child poverty (Weinger 1998). The unique twist of this paper, however, is the replacement of the individual child with the adult responsible for the child. The view that a child has no control of his or her own circumstances exacerbates the vulnerability. The situation can become worse for the child if the guardian does not realise the responsibility that lies with the interconnections of his/her own situation to that of the child. The issue of child poverty is also essential and pertinently so due to the consequences associated with the situation, which in most cases may affect a child's adult life.

The aim of this paper is to investigate perceptions of household heads in Boipatong Township on the causes of child poverty. The paper progresses as follows; the next section will discuss the literature on child poverty and the causes

of poverty in general. Thereafter, the data collection method and the statistical model used in the data analysis are presented. This is succeeded by a presentation of the results and discussion. The final section of the paper outlines conclusions drawn from the results. However, the results of the study as well as the conclusions can only be generalised with caution since different areas have varied idiosyncrasies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY

2.1 Conceptualisation of poverty

Poverty is an unsettling phenomenon worldwide, particularly for the young who have neither contribution nor control over their circumstances as they depend on their parents for their livelihood. Children living in poor households are vulnerable to the scourge along with its consequences (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). According to Minujin and Nandy (2012:58), the 1997 United Nations World Summit's definitions on absolute and overall poverty are considered the only generally accepted definitions of poverty. In that context, absolute poverty is defined as "a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information". It can be emphasised in this definition that poverty depends not only on the income of the individual or household, but also on access to social services and on needs far separated from income. This poverty is, therefore, as a result of both household level deprivation and societal level absence of services like health and education.

Overall poverty is defined as the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods, prevention of hunger, malnutrition and ill health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services. Poverty in this sense is associated with increased morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness, inadequate housing, unsafe environments, social discrimination and exclusion (Gordon, 2005:3). The absolute definition of poverty is more inclined to basic needs and hence is easy to understand and it can be applied in an effort to compare people of different contexts. The general definition can suffer from contextual differences as basic needs or necessities may vary by context.

2.2 Child poverty

Turning the spotlight on the child poverty phenomena does not necessarily mean that other aspects contributing to poverty, such as lack of sufficient employment in the job market, political risks, violence and lack of assets, are less important. These issues also affect children as much as they have an effect on the rest of the household. However, it is necessary to emphasise that child poverty differs from adult poverty and it is important to address the differences between child and adult poverty so as to make informed decisions about how to alleviate it. Therefore, the concept of child poverty has to be defined clearly and the causes and consequences identified (Boyden, *et al.* 2005:2).

According to Saidov (2007:25), child poverty is the lack of access to social services such as a safe environment for a child to play. This definition further illustrates that children experience poverty physically, intellectually and emotionally. For instance, lack of proper nutrition leads to malnutrition and poor academic performance. Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal (2009) contend that children living in poor households are likely to have low educational outcomes and are more likely to drop out of school when compared to children from non-poor households. Such children may also have a higher likelihood of struggling to relate with their peers and they are often aggressive. The Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Centre (CHIP) (2004) explains that childhood poverty means that children and young people grow up without access to different types of resources that are vital for their well-being and for them to fulfil their potential. Such resources may be of an economic, social, cultural, physical, environmental and political nature. Gordon *et al* (2003:6) further argues that insufficient investment in social services such as education and healthcare facilities is likely to exacerbate child poverty.

Minujin *et al* (2005) and UNICEF (2007:1) argue that one of the conventional approaches to measuring poverty, the monetary approach, does not fit in with the scope of measuring child poverty. This is because the monetary approach does not pay heed to the structure of households, gender and the ages of household members. The monetary approach is also oblivious to the view that the needs of a child differ to those of the adults in the household, particularly basic social services that are pertinent to a child's wellbeing. Minujin *et al* (2006) further argue that an increase in income levels within a household does not necessarily

ascertain that vulnerable groups are guaranteed a portion of the increase in income. The benefits of this increase may be unevenly spread. A multidimensional measure of child poverty is one that examines the different elements of a child's experience. The multidimensional measure of child poverty serves to be a useful measure of child poverty as it considers the non-monetary aspects that may cause child poverty. This measure goes far beyond the income variable to emphasise the effect of other dimensions such as current poverty and life chances as other measures of poverty (UK Government, 2012:15).

2.3 Perceptions of poverty

Feagin (1972) is the pioneer behind the concept of perceived causes of poverty and his argument is that the causes of poverty are made up of three categories, namely the individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes. With the individual perception of poverty, individuals are to blame for their deprived situation. Davids (2010:8) argues that with this category, there are two sub-category theories, namely the subculture theory by Lewis (1966) and the theory of the underclass. Under the subculture theory, the poor are perceived to have accepted their poverty situation and lead a lifestyle that worsens their poverty situation (Duvoux, 2010). The theory of the underclass refers to a minority group of people living in poverty with their own set of unique values coupled with criminal and socially unacceptable behaviours. An important characteristic of the underclass is that they do not want to work and would rather be involved in illegal and criminal activities (Murray, 1989). The two theories are similar in that the poor are responsible for their own self destruction. Liberal theories of poverty disagree with this 'blame the victim postulation', arguing that no person desires to be poor and that the society contributes to the marginalisation of the deprived.

The structural cause of poverty emanates from the poor blaming the system for their situation (Addae-Korankye, 2014). The incidence of structural poverty occurs when certain groups in society benefit, in some instances, at the expense of others. The societal hierarchy often displaces the poor, which leaves them in a worse-off position due to the fact that they are denied access to basic facilities such as proper healthcare, education and transport. Lack of employment is perceived by the poor as a structural failure by the state as they are unable to escape poverty if they have no work (Niemela, 2008:25). A trait of the underclass

theory, which redeems the structural perception of poverty, is that when unskilled work is available to the poor, particularly those residing in the cities, they are reluctant to take those jobs. These are individual choices that exacerbate the unemployment situation, which in turn leads to increased poverty (Price-Wolf, 2006:9). Just as the poor blame the system for its structural failures to provide basic services, they are also likely to view unfair discrimination or social injustices towards them as bad luck or misfortune. This relates to the fatalistic perception of the cause of poverty (Davids, 2010:53).

The application of the theories of poverty has widely been done in the more general poverty studies but not so much on child poverty. A study done by Tafere (2012:10) in Ethiopia provides the perception of children concerning what they perceive to be the causes of poverty. The children perceived their parents and the household at large to be poor because they did not want to take any available employment such as domestic work and gardening and preferred employment that was suitable for more qualified individuals. Instead of taking up low income jobs, they opted to depend on financial aid, which is not consistently available. A second cause was that of extravagance. Children felt that their parents spent the little they had on unnecessary items such as alcohol and gambling instead of buying food or paying for their children's school fees. The children thus blamed the parents for their own poverty and misfortunes, which ultimately affects them (Tafere, 2012:10).

The results from a study conducted in Britain in 2012 and in Scotland in 2013 provide insight on three of the four perceptions of the causes of child poverty as perceived by the general public. With regards to the individualistic perception, at least 73 percent of the respondents in Britain perceived that child poverty may be caused by the parents themselves particularly those who engage in the abuse of substances such as drugs and alcohol. These results are parallel to those of the study conducted in Scotland where 73 percent of the respondents had similar perceptions. From a societal and structural perspective, the British had a general consensus that child poverty may be caused by the lack of equality in society along with the lack of affordable housing (30% and 28% respectively). Similar results were found in Scotland where 28 percent perceived the lack of affordable housing as a cause of child poverty. Respondents from both Britain and Scotland also identified the fatalistic cause of poverty as a cause of child poverty where for

some families the scourge of poverty is a generational curse (Clery, 2013; Scottish Government, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The anthropology of poverty, over time, has been generated by visitors to the situation and seldom have those experiencing this scourge been involved in explaining what it is and what they perceive to be the cause. The reason could be that the literate write the literature and the poor seldom belong to that class. Nevertheless, over the years, especially with the proliferation of the trans-disciplinary research, there has been a change in the method of gathering data where more and more information collected from the 'man on the street' concerning very complex issues that hitherto were only the forte of the bourgeoisie. Cosmologically, poverty, or the origins of poverty, would easily be understood through the vantage point of the conservative theorist who in essence believed and so propagated the intrinsic failures of the poor people to help themselves. In this paper, the data used were collected from household heads in Boipatong Township, a low-income township in the Vaal region of the Gauteng province in South Africa. Rather than to tell the poor the cause of their situation, this was an attempt to allow them the opportunity to explain what they perceive to be the cause of child poverty. Thus, those with children or those without children were allowed to speculate about the cause of other people's children's situation.

3.1 Data

The household survey was conducted in such a way that maps were obtained for Boipatong Township and a sample stratification was designed according to the geographical distribution and the concentration of people in the township. A questionnaire was designed for purposes of collecting the desired information. The area was divided into different segments and questionnaires were distributed evenly among the inhabited sites. Plots/sites at which the fieldworkers completed the questionnaires were identified individually from the map before the field workers went out. However, where people could not be found, or where it was impossible to trace the house, a next preselected household was interviewed. The sampled population was 300 households. This sample size is in line with a similar study done by Dubihlela (2012) with similar characteristics as those of Boipatong

Township.

3.2 Model specification

Based on the data collected on the perceptions of child poverty, three main broad categories emanate as options available in the categorisation of the perceptions, namely fatal, structural and individualistic perceptions of causes of child poverty. These perceptions were adopted and adapted into questions about child poverty as opposed to poverty in general. In a study by (Grobler & Dunga, 2015) in a similar township in the Vaal region, three regressions were modeled for each perception. In this study, a similar approach has been adopted where three multiple regression models are also estimated for each perception. The dependent variables are calculated as an index from the responses of a set of questions that were asked to the heads of households pertaining to their perception of the cause of poverty. Statements like ‘their parents lack ability to manage money’ were asked to the respondents to rate on a Likert scale of zero to five, where zero indicated do not know, one indicated strongly disagree and five indicated strongly agree. The higher the score, the more the respondents associated child poverty with parental irresponsibility or individualistic perceptions of poverty. The process was done for the structural perceptions of poverty, which had four statement, meaning that the highest score was 20 and the lowest score was zero. The fatal perceptions had four statements, making the highest score 20 and the lowest score zero. Table 1 presents a summary of the responses in terms of percentages.

The responses in Table 1 were calculated into indices for each perception category and the index for each perception was used as a dependent variable in a multiple regression. The multiple regression equations are specified as equations 1, 2 and 3.

$$IP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \dots \beta_n X_{in} + \varepsilon_i; \text{for } i = 1..to\ n \dots \quad (1)$$

$$SP = \phi_0 + \phi_1 X_{1i} + \dots \phi_n X_{in} + \phi_i; \text{for } i = 1..to\ n \dots \quad (2)$$

$$FP = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X_{1i} + \dots \alpha_n X_{in} + \varepsilon_i; \text{for } i = 1..to\ n \dots \quad (3)$$

Table 1: Percentages of the responses by statements

The statements for the perceptions	Do not know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Parents lack ability to manage money	2.4	51	32	8.1	5.1	1.4
Parents waste money	3.7	13.5	56.6	16.5	9.1	0.7
Parents do not actively seek to improve their lives	3.1	28.5	30.5	26.8	9.5	1.7
Parents lack motivation due to welfare	26.7	8.6	14.7	13.4	17.5	19.2
Exploited by the rich	3.7	13.9	31.4	35.1	14.2	1.7
The distribution of wealth in the society is uneven	3	13.9	24.3	27.3	25.7	5.7
Parents lack opportunities	2.7	11.6	25.3	21.2	25.3	13.7
They live in places with no opportunities	4.8	14.3	18.7	20.7	27.2	14.3
They had bad fate	11.9	13.6	22.4	22.7	19.3	10.2
They lack luck	11.6	10.3	20.1	22.8	19.0	16.0
They have encountered misfortune	15.2	11.7	15.5	23.4	21.0	13.1
They are born inferior	51.2	10.8	8.7	10.1	8.4	10.8

Source: Survey data: (2013)

IP is the index for the individualistic perception, or the conservative approach of blaming the victim, in this case the parent of the poor child. SP is the index for the structural perception of poverty, where child poverty is seen as being perpetuated by social injustices. FP is the fatal perception index, where child poverty is seen as a consequence of powers beyond control. Thus, equations 1, 2 and 3 are regressions for individualistic perceptions, structural perceptions and fatal perceptions, respectively.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in Table 1 presented an overall picture of the response in terms of the percentage in the category. IP, SP and FP were calculated by adding the numerical

representation of the categories, thereby calculating a continuous variable. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the three dependent variables.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the indices

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
Structural index	283	20.00	.00	20.00	10.6855	3.26762	10.677
Individualistic index	289	18.00	.00	18.00	8.4291	3.08941	9.544
Fatalistic index	276	20.00	.00	20.00	9.4022	4.10869	16.881

Source: Calculations from survey data

The results in Table 1 indicate that the most unpopular perception in the sample was the individualistic perception where the blame is put on the victim. This is expected as the sample was drawn from a low income township and the parents were thinking of themselves as they responded to the statements. It is very unlikely that the poor parents would agree with the statement that makes them take the blame for their child's poverty situation.

4.1. Regression results

The results presented in the tables that follow are step-by-step follow ups of the equations 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The dependent variable was defined in the sense that the higher the score the greater the degree of agreement by the respondents. A positive coefficient means there is a positive relationship between the independent variable and the perception in question. The log of income is a significant explanatory variable for the individualistic perception of causes of child poverty. The coefficient for income is significant at 1 percent significance level with a p-value of 0.005, meaning that an increase in income is associated with an agreement with the individualistic perception. It can, therefore, be argued that the non-poor household heads perceived that parents are to blame for the poverty status of children.

Table 3: Regression results for Equation 1

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF

1	(Constant)	1.020	2.405		.424	.672		
	Age	.003	.022	.014	.157	.876	.448	2.234
	Log of income	.768	.270	.248	2.84 2	.005	.487	2.053
	Qualification	.222	.079	.254	2.82 4	.005	.457	2.189
	Household size	.079	.123	.043	.639	.524	.803	1.245
	Household poverty status	.023	.571	.003	.040	.968	.517	1.934
a. Dependent variable: individualistic								

These are people that are not poor themselves, hence they agreed with the perceptions that blamed the victim. Qualification was also significant at 1 percent significance level with a p-value of 0.05. The coefficient was positive, thereby implying that people with higher qualifications also perceived that parents are to blame for their children's circumstances. The remaining three variables were not significant. The ANOVA test had an f-statistic of 8.067 and a p-value of 0.000 indicating that the model as a whole was a good fit. The tolerance and the variation inflation factor (VIF) values also indicated that there was no serious multicollinearity in the model. A serious concern arises when the tolerance value is less than 0.1 and a VIF, which is calculated as one divided by tolerance, should not be too high, mostly not above 10 and for weaker models should not be above 2.5.

The results in Table 4 for Equation 2 are an indication of the variables that explain the structural perception of the causes of poverty. The structural perception puts the blame on the society and its structures for the existence of poverty, mainly pointing to the inequality and unequal opportunities in society.

Table 4: Regression results for Equation 2

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	5.116	2.117		2.416	.016		
Log income	.603	.298	.189	2.028	.044	.484	2.065
qualification	.137	.062	.151	2.226	.027	.904	1.106
Number of people household	.057	.129	.031	.446	.656	.873	1.145
Household poverty status	.607	.621	.087	.976	.330	.526	1.900

a. Dependent variable: structural

The liberal theories of poverty largely are informed by the postulations of this worldview. Based on the results of the regression, all the coefficients have a positive sign, indicating that almost all categories of people believe that the society is structured in an unfair way. Qualification emerged significant, implying that people that are more educated also viewed structural forces at play. The p-value of 0.027 was significant at 5 percent significance level. The log of income was also significant at 5 percent significance level with a p-value of 0.044. All the remaining independent variables had high p-values. The f-statistic from the ANOVA test was 3.463 and the p-value was 0.009, which was, therefore, significant at 1 percent significance level, indicating that the model as a whole was a good fit.

Table 5 presents results of Equation 3, with the fatalistic perception as the dependent variable. The results of the fatalistic perception for Equation 3 has a somewhat different result in the sense that log of income has a negative coefficient, meaning that there is a negative relationship between income and the perception that child poverty is due to fate.

The higher the income in the household, the lower the chance that the head of that household would put the blame on uncontrollable fate. However, qualification of household heads had a positive coefficient, which was somewhat unexpected as it was supposed to be negative, in sync with direction of income. However, this was not attributed to multicollinearity since the VIF and the tolerance were all the

range of no multicollinearity. Most of the other variables were not significant in the model as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Regression results for Equation 3

	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	9.235	2.692		3.431	.001		
Log income	-.146	.379	-.037	-.386	.700	.473	2.116
qualification	.207	.079	.183	2.639	.009	.916	1.092
Number of people in household	.012	.170	.005	.072	.943	.863	1.159
Household poverty status	-.754	.804	-.087	-.938	.350	.507	1.973
a. Dependent variable: fatalistic							

A logical reason for the negative coefficient is that there are indeed children that are poor due to fate, like death of parents, a view that even highly qualified people would agree with.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results from the three regressions, it can be concluded that most heads of households did not perceive fate as a cause of child poverty. The most interesting result was in the income, which can also be linked to poverty status. Individuals with higher incomes perceived that parents are to blame for the child poverty in the household. This ascribes to the conservative theories of poverty that blame the victim since the poverty status of the child is a derivative of the parent's socio-economic status. People with higher incomes also disagreed with the fatalistic perception that emphasised their blaming the victim stance. There was almost consensus in the structural perception where income, education level and all the other variables had positive coefficients. This indicates the fact that all categories of people, inclusive of the educated and uneducated, rich and poor, perceive that the society has a major role to play in the livelihood of people. It further denotes that child poverty is also a result of the society's failure to fulfill its responsibility to provide equal opportunities for everyone to excel and succeed. In the South African context, this notion can be evidenced by the service delivery

protests that were ubiquitous in the years 2015 and 2016 as people felt that the social structures and government were to blame for their suffering. There is more that can be deduced from this result, one being that people are not naïve in their responses and that dealing with poverty and child poverty in particular requires the involvement of all stakeholders that include the government, the parents or heads of households and society as a whole.

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