

## **Perceptions of Causes of Poverty among Rural and Urban Households in Zomba Malawi**

**Steven Henry Dunga**

*North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, 1174 Hendrick Van Eck Boulevard, Vanderbijlpark, 1900, South Africa*

### **ABSTRACT**

An important macro-economic objective of a country is poverty reduction. This objective is shared by its development partners. Many policies have been introduced at the international and national levels to tackle poverty, especially hard core and abject poverty. Each policy is theory- driven. These theories that shape and inform the policies are developed by practitioners whom in most cases have not directly experienced poverty themselves. Thus, it is no surprise these policies fail to solve or minimise the problems via the resultant intervention. There is therefore a mismatch as it were, that requires a reset, or at the very least, adapting as opposed to adopting the theories and their prognosis therein. Based on the Feagin scale, there are three main categories related to perceptions of poverty: Individual, Structural, and Fatalistic. The objectives of the paper are to examine the perceptions of causes of poverty among households in Malawi, and the factors influencing those perceptions. A special focus is on rural and urban households to see if there exists a significant difference in their perceptions. The results show a variation in perceptions, with household income, location of the household and gender of the head of household proving to be significant predictors. Additionally, by location, people in the rural areas allude to the individualistic causes of poverty. Thus, approaches to tackle poverty can be effective if these perceptions are taken into account.

*Keywords:* Fate, households, individualistic, perceptions, poverty, rural, structural, urban

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*E-mail address:*

[steve.dunga@nwu.ac.za](mailto:steve.dunga@nwu.ac.za) (Steven Henry Dunga)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

Poverty reduction remains an important macro-economic objective of almost all developing countries. There have been policies both at international and national

levels to deal with poverty, especially its abject form. Theories that inform contemporary policies to combat poverty although meant for poor communities are developed to a greater extent by practitioners far detached from the experiences of poverty. Thus, the resultant intervention becomes less effective. Dealing with this mismatch as it were, requires a reset, or at the very least, adapting as opposed to adopting the theories and their prognosis therein.

Most theories related to poverty originate from developed countries (Lewis, 1966; Rowntree, 1889). Conservative theories blame the victim which make it difficult to engage the poor. There exist no theories that have been developed based on experience of poverty in the African context, let alone in Malawi. There have been attempts (Grobler & Dunga, 2016; Niemela, 2008) to use poor households or just households in general to understand poverty and the perceptions of its causes of poverty by the poor. However, the studies have not developed any succinct approach to dealing with poverty. It is therefore important to engage the households in these contexts and to get an understanding as to what they perceive to be the causes of their poverty. This study therefore contributes to the literature on poverty by developing relevant and applicable approaches to dealing with poverty.

The international effort to deal with the worst forms of poverty has for years taken one step forward and two steps backwards. The World Bank (2016) states that fewer people live in extreme poverty than ever

before adding that even as the world's population has grown, the number of poor has gradually fallen. In 1990, almost 4 in 10 people were living below extreme poverty line of \$1.90 a day. In 2013, that figure had fallen to just over 1 in 10. But it still represents more than 767 million people (World Bank, 2016). These statistics indicate that poverty remains unacceptably high and that relative poverty may have not changed at all. In fact, statistics from most of Sub Saharan Africa such as Malawi, have shown worsening situations (National Statistics of Malawi [NSO], 2015). The poverty improvement as shown by global figures are due to the gains made in East Asia and Pacific and in South Asia (World Bank 2016).

The fact that there is no dramatic reduction in the number of poor people is a worrying fact. Studies (World Bank, 2016; Dunga, 2014), in developed and developing countries indicate that the effort to deal with poverty whether by national governments, philanthropic outfits and international organisations or agencies have been met with overwhelming challenges and there is very little to show for even after the 2015 MDG target year. There is need to understand the origins of the approaches that are taken in dealing with poverty issues. Bradshaw (2006) rightly pointed out that most programmes are designed and formulated based on some theories of poverty that explain what poverty is and how it can be dealt with. He stated that "anti-poverty programs are designed, selected, and implemented in response to

different theories about the cause of poverty that “justify” the community development interventions” (Bradshaw, 2006). The theory that informs the organisation or a philanthropist usually influences the approach or the kind of intervention they take to battle poverty. Those that hold the view that the poor are lazy and do not seek to change their situation usually implement programmes that may only help the poor to survive in their situation, i.e. maintaining their status quo. They may not be keen to implement programmes to alleviate poverty, such as education and employment.

In this paper, pre-theoretical position which is informed by the authors stance is a marked departure from the conservative theories. It will be argued the poor do not enjoy being poor or remain trapped in it. The paper will also take a bold stance of critiquing traditional theories as regards to how they intend to be used in other contexts which do not fit in the original idiosyncrasies that helped the formulation of these theories. It will also assess the assumptions that were held as true in the process of developing the theories in the first place. Hence, the assumptions underlying these conservative theories are considered by the author as twisted and hence misguided.

Feagin (1972) argued that there are three main perceptions of poverty; the individualistic perception where the poor person is blamed for his/her circumstances, The structural perception which puts the blame on the structure of society and the injustices that help others to succeed at the expense of other segments of society, and

the third which is the fatal perception that considers poverty to be a result of fate. This paper examines perception of household heads in Malawi on causes of poverty. The findings of the paper would be useful in understanding the gap that exists between theories and policies that shape poverty alleviation measures in order to effectively combat the menace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of poverty are not as clear cut or cannot be simplified like mathematics or physics. The idiosyncrasies of countries and societies make a blanket theorisation of poverty erroneous. It is therefore important to take cognisance of the differences of background and context in mitigating poverty. The theories of poverty are based on conservative and liberal principles as their blueprint. For example, Elesh (1970) identified two distinct categories in the theories of poverty which he called cultural theory and structural theory. In relating the usefulness of theories of poverty to poverty reduction programmes, Bradshaw (2006) reviewed five theories, which if looked at carefully can all fall within the two broader categories of liberal and conservative. The five theories were: 1) individual deficiencies, 2) cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty, 3) political-economic distortions, 4) geographical disparities, and 5) cumulative and circumstantial origins (Bradshaw, 2006). The first two of the theories were part of the conservative school of thought while the other three formed the liberal school of thought. Bradshaw,

however, contended that poverty reduction policies were to a greater extent a reflection of the view or position taken by those in charge of the formulation of the policies and programmes (Bradshaw, 2006; Sameti, Esfahani & Haghighi, 2012).

According to Feagin (1972), there is an individualistic perception which points to the fact that the poor themselves are to blame for their poverty. This is the same argument advanced by Lewis (1963, 1965) in his infamous 'culture of poverty' or the sub-cultures of poverty. This position in itself is a judgemental condemnation of the poor who would disagree with such characterisation. The second perception places the blame squarely on society and its structures, arguing the systems exclude the poor from participating in development and hence, remain poor. The third category is the fatal perception which looks at poverty as an act of some fate which is beyond a person's control. A number of studies have replicated the Feagin categorisation. Some of them include Bagguley and Mann (1992); Bowles and Gintis (1998); Bullock (1999); Carr and MacLauchlan (1998); Furnham (1985; 1993); Hine and Montiel (1999); Hunt (1996). The results of the studies vary widely with other countries like the US being more inclined to agree with the individualistic perceptions. Nasser and Abouchedid (2002) argued that the results in the US only strengthened the individualistic identity of that country. These individualist perceptions were found in a number of studies in the USA, for instance, Feagin,

(1972); Kluegel and Smith (1981, 1986); Smith and Stone (1989).

The individualistic perception just like the conservative theories of poverty, points the finger at the poor as being responsible for their circumstances (Lewis, 1963, 1966). Social psychology introduced the term culture of poverty where it is believed that certain individuals feel they are responsible for their situation and they can do nothing to change their situation. Liberal theories rigorously disagree with the conservative postulation as they contend it leads to slackness in the efforts to end poverty or at least reduce its extreme forms. Davis and Sanchez-Martinez (2014) distinguishes the theories of poverty as classical and neo-classical, where the former is premised on the fact that individuals are ultimately responsible for their economic well-being and accordingly, propose laissez faire policies to uplift the conditions of the poor. In contrast, Neoclassical (mainstream) economics is more diverse and can provide explanations for poverty, notably market failures, that are beyond individuals' control (Davis & Sanche-Martinez, 2014)

Several studies in the last decade stated that to develop suitable poverty alleviation strategies, policy developers must first realise that poverty may differ from place to place, and society to society (Diamond, 2007; Hulme & Shepard, 2003; Small, 2010). In this context, interpretation of social reality, and the fact that poor people are never a monolith should be considered when coming up with appropriate interventions.

Feagin (1972) is usually cited as the first person to look at different perceptions of poverty. Other studies include (Ryan, 1976; Schiller, 1989), who focused on individualistic perception. Goldsmith & Blakely (2010) and Jennings (1999) looked at the structural component of society and how that may explain the causes of poverty. Campbell (2001) looked at the fatalistic perception of poverty and how poverty may also be a result of some events that are beyond anyone's control like death of parents or disability at birth.

There are studies that have attempted to identify the differences in perceptions based on nationality or race or social economic status. Nasser and Abouchedid (2002) compared perceptions of students from three nations, namely South Africa, Lebanon and Portugal, on causes of poverty and found that there were differences in the perceptions, with the South African students alluding more to individualistic perception.

## METHODS

The paper uses survey data collected in the rural and urban areas of Zomba district in South Eastern part of Malawi. A total of 327 households were involved in the survey with households sampled from rural and from urban areas. The households were randomly selected from the clusters of townships and villages that were pre-selected due to their poverty profile as provided by the NSO (NSO, 2013). This was done using the available maps of the dwelling units in the two areas. A questionnaire was used to obtain data. They were administered

by experienced and trained enumerators. Only heads of households were interviewed upon obtaining their consent. Some of the questions were on household demographics and on the perceptions of causes of poverty. The main objective of the study was to investigate the differences that existed in the perceptions of what rural and urban households considered to be the causes of poverty. This questionnaire has been used in other low-income areas in South Africa (Grobler & Dunga, 2016).

Households that were interviewed were living in poverty or in close proximity with poor households. This was achieved by clustering poor townships in the urban area and rural households who are subsistence farmers. The intention was to have responses informed by lived experiences as opposed to speculations. Three indices were calculated based on the responses on the perceptions of causes of poverty. The perceptions were adopted from the existing scale (Davids & Gouws, 2011; Feagin, 1972). The scale has questions on individualistic perceptions, structural perceptions and fatal perceptions of the causes of poverty. Table 1 shows the different statements in the scale used to assess perceptions of poverty.

The statements were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represented strong disagreement and 5 represented strong agreement with the statement. An index score was then calculated which ranged between 3 and 15 for the individualistic perception, 5 and 25 for the structural perceptions and 4 and 20 for the fatalistic perception.

Table 1  
*Statements in perceptions of causes of poverty scale*

Index	Reasons for poverty
Individualistic perceptions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They lack the ability to manage money</li> <li>2. They waste their money on inappropriate items</li> <li>3. They do not actively seek to improve their lives</li> </ol>
Structural perceptions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They are exploited by rich people</li> <li>2. The society lacks social justice</li> <li>3. Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven</li> <li>4. They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families</li> <li>5. They live in places where there are not many opportunities</li> </ol>
Fatalistic perceptions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They have bad fate</li> <li>2. They lack luck</li> <li>3. They have encountered misfortunes</li> <li>4. They are not motivated because of welfare</li> </ol>

*Source:* Davids and Gouws: 2011 also used in Grobler and Dunga (2016)

Heads of households were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statement. The index, therefore, implied that a higher score indicated strong agreement with the statement in that particular category of perception and a lower score indicated strong disagreement with the statement. The scale (see Table 1) was validated by David and Gouws (2011).

**Model Specification**

Three linear regressions models were estimated with the dependent variable calculated as the index of each of the three perceptions. This is the same approach used by Davids and Gouws (2011); Grobler and Dunga (2016) to compare the results. The linear regression model was formulated as follows

$$Index_i = \beta_0 + \sum_i^n \phi_i X_i + \sum_i^n \theta_i D_i + \varepsilon \tag{1}$$

Thus, the regressions to be estimated are as follows:

$$Index_i = \beta_0 + \phi_1 Income_i + \phi_2 Age_i + \theta_1 D_1 + \theta_2 D_2 + \theta_3 D_3 + \theta_4 D_4 + \varepsilon \tag{2}$$

$$Indiv Index = \beta_0 + \phi_1 Income_i + \phi_2 Age_i + \theta_1 D_1 + \theta_2 D_2 + \theta_3 D_3 + \theta_4 D_4 + \varepsilon \tag{3}$$

$$Struct Index = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Income_i + \beta_2 Age_i + \theta_1 G_i + \theta_2 L + \theta_3 MS_i + \varepsilon \tag{4}$$

$$Fatal Index = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Income_i + \beta_2 Age_i + \theta_1 G_i + \theta_2 L + \theta_3 MS_i + \varepsilon \tag{5}$$

Where equation 3 has the individualistic perception index as the dependent variable, equation 4 has the structural perception index as the dependent variable and equation 5 has the fatalistic perception index as the dependent variable.

The categorical variables have been converted into dummy variables as follows:  $D_1$  is dummy variable for gender defined as 1 for female head of household and 0 for male head of household, meaning that the coefficient represented by  $\theta_1$  represents the coefficient for females, and hence, it is entered in the regression as female.  $D_2$  is dummy for location defined as 1 for urban

household and 0 for rural household.  $D_3$  is dummy for Marital status defined as 1 for married head of household and 0 for those that are not living with a partner, and finally  $D_4$  is dummy for the interaction variable between gender and location and since the  $1*0=0$  and  $1*1=1$  the interaction variable represents urban female heads of households.

**RESULTS**

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics of the indices which will be used in the regression as dependent variables.

Table 2  
*Descriptive statistics of the indices*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Individualistic index	327	4.00	20.00	11.6422	4.00580
Structural index	327	6.00	25.00	16.7584	4.60924
Fatalistic index	327	5.00	20.00	13.9786	3.55105

The results in Table 2 show the ranges of the indices as explained in the methodology section. For the individualistic perception, there are four statements with a minimum score of 4 and a maximum score of 20. The index for structural perceptions has a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 25 with

a mean of 16.75, meaning that majority of the respondents agreed with the perception.

Table 3 shows the frequencies of the location of the households with 63.9% from rural areas. This is a representation of the population in most parts of Malawi, where the majority of households are found in the rural areas (NSO, 2016).

Table 3  
*Location of household*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Rural	209	63.9	63.9	63.9
	Urban	118	36.1	36.1	100.0
Total		327	100.0	100.0	

A cross- tabulation between gender and location is also done since there is an interaction variable used in the model that interacts gender and location. Table 4 presents a cross tabulation between gender and location.

Of the 209 households from the rural areas, 73.7% were male headed households while 26.3% were headed by females. And from the urban areas 82.2% were headed

by males whilst 17.8% were headed by females. The data shows that the majority of households in the sample were male headed households only 23.2% of the total sample was female-headed households. This shows a big contrast with data collected from townships in South Africa where there were more female-headed household than male headed households (Dunga, 2017).

Table 4  
*Cross tabulation between location and gender*

			Gender		
			Male	Female	Total
Location	Rural	Count	154	55	209
		% within location	73.7%	26.3%	100.0%
		% within gender	61.4%	72.4%	63.9%
		% of Total	47.1%	16.8%	63.9%
	Urban	Count	97	21	118
		% within location	82.2%	17.8%	100.0%
		% within gender	38.6%	27.6%	36.1%
		% of Total	29.7%	6.4%	36.1%
Total	Count	251	76	327	
	% within location	76.8%	23.2%	100.0%	
	% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	76.8%	23.2%	100.0%	

This cross-tabulation also gives an indication of the number of households which make up the interaction variable of urban female households, which according to Table 4, is only 6.4% of the total sample. This is why the interaction variable is only included in

the individualistic regression but is left out in the structural and the fatalistic indices. Table 5 shows the results of the three regressions represented by equations 3, 4 and 5.

Table 5  
Regression results

Variables	Individualistic perception index			Structural perception index			Fatalistic perception index		
	Regression			Regression			Regression		
	$\beta$	t	sig	$\beta$	t	sig	$\beta$	t	sig
Constant	12.266	10.3	0.000***	17.7	13.2	.000***	13.87	13.8	.000***
Household income	-1.03	-0.26	0.78	2.06	4.72	.000***	1.4	4.3	.000***
Age of head of household	0.017	.774	.439	.015	.618	.537	.036	1.92	.055*
Gender of head of household (1 = female)	-.345	-.375	.708	-1.8	-1.74	.08*	-1.57	-2.03	.043**
Location (1 = Urban)	-4.661	-2.85	.005***	-1.05	-1.7	.086*	-1.16	-2.53	.012**
Marital status (1 = Married)	-1.295	-1.37	.169	-1.91	-1.79	0.073*	-1.12	-1.39	.16
Interaction of location and gender	2.458	2.82	0.005***						

The regression significance test from the ANOVA tests were significant for all three regressions, For the Individualistic, the F-statistic was 1.99 and significant at 10% with a p-value of 0.06. This could be due to the inclusion of the interaction between gender and location. The interaction was not included in the other two regressions. The F statistic for the structural regression was 5.52 with a p-value of 0.000 which was significant at 1% significance level. The F statistic for the fatalistic regression was 5.79 with a p-value of 0.000 which was also significant at 1% significance level. The bootstrapping was also used on all the regression to see if the robustness would improve the standard error; the changes in the standard error were very

small meaning that the regression was robust enough. The VIF for all the coefficients in all the three regressions was also around 1, small enough to indicate that there was no multicollinearity in the models.

## DISCUSSION

The perceptions of people on the causes of poverty may vary depending on how they perceive their own situation and that of others. It is likely that those that are trapped in poverty would disagree with the individualistic perception of poverty and point the finger at the others. Gender dynamics in terms of how women experience poverty as compared to men may also influence what people think about causes of poverty.

### **Household Income**

The regression results in Table 5 show that income was not a significant predictor of the individualistic perception. However, the coefficient was negative, indicating the more income people get, the more they do not agree with the individualistic perception. The regression result for structural and fate showed, income of the household proved to be a significant predictor. For the structural, the higher the income the more they agreed with the fact that the structures of the society should be blamed for poverty. The fatalistic regression also registered a significant p-value of 0.000 on income as a predictor indicating that the higher the income, the higher the score on the fatalistic index. This could be explained mainly by the high numbers of orphans. Children that have lost their parents either due to HIV/Aids or natural death are likely to fall into poverty, fail to attend school and end up in poverty. The fact is government support structures are not well developed to help these children.

### **Age of Head of Household**

The age of the head of household was only significant in explaining the fatalistic perception of causes of poverty with a coefficient of 0.036 and a p-value of 0.055 which was significant at 10% significance level. The fact that age was not significant for the other two perceptions of causes of poverty may indicate the fact that the perceptions are not really dependent on age.

### **Gender of Head of Household**

Gender was defined as 1 for females and 0 for males, thus the coefficient in the regression indicates the difference in the score between male heads and female heads of household. The coefficient for gender was not significant for the individualistic regression, although it is interesting to note that the coefficient was negative, meaning that the average score of female heads of households was 0.345 less than that of males. Gender coefficient was significant in the structural regression with a p-value of 0.08, which was significant at the 10% significance since 0.08 is less than 0.1. The gender coefficient was also significant for the fatalistic regression with a p-value of 0.043 which was significant at 5% significance level. The fact that the coefficients were negative indicate that on average, male heads of households would agree more with both the structural and the fatalistic perceptions, more than the female heads of households. This may indicate the level of involvement between males and females in society.

### **Location of the Household**

The variable of interest was the location of the household, either rural or urban. The fact that opportunities differ between rural areas and urban areas was considered an important factor to be investigated to see if the location would be a significant predictor of the perception of the causes of poverty. The location was defined as

1 for urban areas and 0 for rural areas, implying that the coefficient indicates the difference between rural and urban heads of households in the score of the three indices. The coefficient was significant in all the three regressions, with a p-value of 0.005 for the individualistic perception significant at 1% significance level. The coefficients were all negative meaning that rural heads of households would score higher than the urban heads of households. The result makes sense given the fact that there are higher levels of poverty in the rural areas of Malawi than in the urban areas (NSO 2015). Rural areas hence, are likely to agree with almost all the perceptions; they however, scored more on the individualistic perception, which indicate rural heads of households viewed poor people in the rural areas must share part of the blame for their condition.

### **Marital Status**

Marital status has been used in previous studies to explain poverty and food security (Dunga, 2016; Grobler & Dunga, 2016). In this paper, marital status was only significant at 10% significance level for the structural index of causes of poverty with a p-value of 0.073. The fact that it was not significant in the other models may be due to the fact that majority of respondents were married and account for almost 80% of the sample.

However, the married were less likely to blame society whereas the unmarried scored higher on the structural perception index. This may mean that the unmarried felt society had failed them. Single women are more vulnerable to poverty than the married who have dual income and social support from both sides.

The final variable that was considered was the interaction between gender and location. Based on the calculation of the interaction variable, the coefficient represented female heads of households in the urban areas. This variable was only used for the individualistic perception. The coefficient for this group was significant at 1% with a p-value of 0.005. The coefficient was positive, meaning that heads of households based in urban areas were more likely to agree with this conservative postulation that the poor are supposed to take responsibility for their poverty.

In order to see which statements had high levels of agreement, the responses were added up to find a total score for each statement. The responses were on the comparable scale of 1 to 5, and the total were to be on the range of a minimum total score of  $(1*327) = 327$  to a maximum aggregate score of  $(5*327) = 1635$ . The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6  
*Comparing total scores of perception statements*

Perception Category	Perception Statement	Total Score	Rank of score
Individualistic perceptions	They lack the ability to manage money	396	11
	They waste their money on inappropriate items	389	12
	They do not actively seek to improve their lives	431	8
Structural perceptions	They are exploited by rich people	512	5
	The society lacks social justice	434	7
	Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven	405	10
	They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families	488	6
	They live in places where there are not many opportunities	430	9
Fatalistic	They have bad fate	573	1
	They lack luck	557	3
	They have encountered misfortunes	549	4
	They are not motivated because of welfare	570	2

Calculations from the Survey results

Table 6 show the fatalistic perceptions had the highest level of agreement among the heads of households. The 4 statements in that category were ranked top 4 in the total score. The second category that had high total scores was the structural perception. Households on average did not agree with the individualistic perception of causes of poverty.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined three perceptions of the causes of poverty from the individual, structural and fatalistic standpoint. The location of the household was found to be significant determinant of the perceptions of poverty with people from the rural areas scoring higher on all the perceptions. The findings of the study showed a variation in

the perceptions of poverty, with income and gender of the household head also proving to be significant predictors. The respondents agreed the most with the fatalistic perceptions followed by structural perception, while the individualistic perception was not favoured. The implications of the study is that perceptions of causes of poverty differ and hence poverty interventions needs to take into account the people's perception, otherwise policy interventions will not achieve their intended outcomes in these different contexts.

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