

# Attitude toward Poverty among Academicians, Social Care Institution Workers and General Population in Kuala-Lumpur, Malaysia

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*Abstract. The aim of the present study is to investigate the differences in attitude among three groups of people as academicians, social institution workers and general population that explain about poverty. A total of 105 respondents were recruited in Kuala-Lumpur. Attitude toward Poverty Short Form Scale was used to determine the attitude toward poverty. There are 3 constructs in this scale as personal deficiency, stigma and structural perspectives. The participants were requested to complete the Attitude toward Poverty Short Form Scale. Statistical result of One-way ANOVA test revealed that academicians and general population ascribed personal deficiency more than stigma and structural perspectives to explain poverty. Social care institution workers perceived personal deficiency as least important determinant to poverty. Demographic profiles such as gender, higher education status and high income individuals emphasized more on individualistic perspective too. The results provide evidence that poverty is ascribed to individual insufficient effort. This indicates that appropriate approach can be implemented to modify behavior of these individuals*

*Keywords: Attitude toward poverty, differences in attitude, Kuala-Lumpur*

## Introduction

Poverty is a social phenomenon that receives global attention. Poverty happens both in rural and urban area. Investigating on the attribution on poverty may lead to the awareness of the determinant factors to poverty. In order to eradicate poverty, the possible contributing factors to it should be identified. The definition of poverty by The World Bank (2000) is “the economic condition in which people lack sufficient income to obtain certain minimal levels of health services, food, housing, clothing and education generally recognized as necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living”.

In Malaysia, the poverty incidence in urban was 1% while in rural it was 3.4% for the year 2012. There was a decrease compared to year 2009 because of an increment in household income together with low inflation rate. In year 2009, it was 1.7% in urban and 8.4% in rural area (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2012).

Causal factors to poverty have been influenced by attribution theories (Wollie, 2009). These contributing factors may be due to internal factors (individual) and or external factors (structural). Feagin, (1972) suggested three fundamental theories that explain on causal factor to poverty such as structural (external), individualistic (internal) and fatalistic. Structural theory explains poverty as the factors -beyond control of individuals such

as environment, social, economy and prejudices. This theory suggests that there are limited opportunities and resources for an individual to earn income. Individualistic theory refers to the personal characteristics of individuals and they are responsible for their poverty situation. Fatalistic theory meanwhile ascribes poverty as due to one’s illnesses, inability, fate or bad luck.

Social status such as education, occupation and income of an individual may have an influence on the belief system toward poverty. Several studies found that individualistic explanation was more favoured to explain poverty (Lepianka, 2007; Samuel & Ernest, 2012). Studies in United States suggested that individual explanation was favoured for poverty (Bullock, Williams & Limbert, 2003). On the other hand, studies in countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, India, Iran, South Africa, Chinese and Singapore, it was found that poverty was explained through structural perspective (Nasser, 2001). Individuals who earn high income support the individual explanation as the cause for poverty as compared to structural explanation (Bullock 1999; Reutter, Veenstra, Stewart, Raphael, Love, Makwarimba & McMurray, 2006). Individuals in high social status favour individualistic perspective (Hunt, 1986). On the other hand, Nasser and Abouchedid (2001) found high-income

groups were structural in their attributions for poverty than low-income groups.

A study in Malaysia was conducted among students aged 12-16 years in rural and urban Malaysia also found that internal factor such as individual explanation was attributed to poverty (Halik & Webley, 2011). On the other hand, Malaysian students in UK found that structural factor is the most important attribution to poverty and followed by the fatalistic factor (Halik, Malek, Bahari, Matshah & Webley, 2012). Female respondents accorded individualistic factor more than male respondents.

The present study focuses on another dimension of the attitude towards poverty such as 'stigma'. Very few studies had focused on stigma which is a negative attitude toward poverty. People living in poverty are usually stigmatized. Being irresponsible, lazy and unkempt are some of the stereotypes toward poor people. Stigmatization may perpetuate poverty, thus it is important to understand about this attitude and find strategies to minimize it (MacKeigan & Loomis, 2013).

Educational level revealed the main significant effect on individualistic perspective. High school respondents reported more individualistic attributions of poverty than university respondents (Naseer, *et al.*, 2005). Education, income levels and gender favoured more to the individualistic explanation (Reutter *et al.*, 2006).

Academics do play a role in the eradication of poverty worldwide through the association Academics Stand against Poverty (ASAP). To the knowledge of the researchers there were no studies conducted to investigate academics' attribution to poverty. The present study investigates the differences in attitude toward poverty among academics, general population and individuals working with the social care institution. The findings of the present study may shed light to the knowledge about academics' explanation about poverty.

Individuals working in the field of social work services are committed in helping the financially disadvantaged people. Most past studies suggested that individuals related to the field of social care, such as social workers or students were less likely to favour individualistic explanation for poverty. Past studies suggested that negative attitudes toward poverty were correlated with individualistic theory while positive attitudes were correlated with structural theory (Cuzzarelli *et al.*, 2001; Bullock *et al.*, 2001). Individuals involved in the social care discipline are more inclined to positive attitude towards poverty. In Ohio, social workers favour to structural attribution for poverty more than the individual or cultural attribution. Ohio (Bennett, 2010). While in Mississippi, older social workers accorded positive attitudes toward the poor (Rehner, Ishee, Salloum and Velasques (1997). Social work students had more positive attitudes towards the poor compared to the students from other degree program Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2007) and Yun and Weiver (2009) found that social work students favoured more structural attitude toward poverty.

The objectives of the present study are to investigate the attitude towards poverty among academicians, general population and individuals working with the social care institution. The study is also to determine whether the attitudes of the respondents favour personal deficiency, stigma or structural perspectives.

## Method

This is a cross sectional study and the samples were recruited using convenient purposive sampling method involving three groups; academicians, general population and individuals working with the social care institution that provide social support to poor individuals and family members.

### Participants

A total of 105 respondents from the area of Kuala Lumpur were recruited. There were 35 respondents in each group.

### Instrument

The respondents were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire of Attitudes toward Poverty Scale (ATP) Short form that consisted of 21 items developed by Yun and Weaver [34]. The original Attitude Toward Poverty Scale (ATP) that consists of 37 items was developed by Atherton *et al.*, (1993). Cronbach's coefficient of reliability showed a high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .93$ ). While the short form ATP scale yielded Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .87. The reliability of the scale in the present study yielded Cronbach's coefficient of  $\alpha .77$ . This is not very high degree of internal consistency, however, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value that yields above 0.7 is an acceptable value (George & Mallery, 2003). ATP Short Form consists of three factors such as personal deficiency (7 items); stigma (8 items); and structural perspective (6 items). It uses five point Likert-type scale (SA = strongly agree (1), A = agree (2), N = neutral (3), D = disagree (4), SD = strongly disagree (5). Scoring of the Attitudes Toward Poverty Scale (ATP) indicates that the higher the score means the higher the respondents' favour to the attitude toward the poverty (Atherton & Gemmel, 1993).

## Results

Total sample was 105, 65.7% of the participants were female aged 20 to 69 years old. The mean for age was 33.65 ( $SD = 7.45$ ). The independent variables in the present study are the demographic variables such as gender, age, income level, education and occupation. Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of participants and the mean and standard deviation of the three constructs. The mean for personal deficiency ( $M=23.5$ ,  $SD = 4.68$ ) higher compared to stigma and structural constructs.

Independent sample *t*-Test revealed that there was statistically significant differences in individualistic attitude between gender on attitude toward poverty (*t*

(103) = -1.41,  $p=.05$ ). Female respondents reported higher level of personal deficiency attitude toward poverty ( $M=23.9$ ,  $SD=4.25$ ) than the male respondents ( $M=22.4$ ,  $SD=5.34$ ). One-way ANOVA analysis was conducted between (age group, education, income level and occupation) and attitude toward poverty. There were no any significant mean differences between age groups and attitude toward poverty.

Table 1. Demographic Profiles

Demographic profile	N/M(SD)	%
Gender		
Male	36	34.3
Female	69	65.7
Marital Status		
Single	22	21.0
Married	83	79.0
Age group		
20-29	29	27.6
30-39	64	61.0
40-49	8	7.6
50-60	3	2.9
60-69	1	1.0
Education		
Postgraduate	35	33.3
Undergraduate	39	37.1
High school	31	29.5
Occupation		
Academicians	35	33.3
Social Workers	35	33.3
General Population	35	33.3
Level of Income (RM)		
<1000.00	3	2.9
1000-2000.00	21	20.0
2001-3000.00	20	19.0
3001-4000.00	12	11.4
4001-5000.00	8	7.6
5000 and above	41	39.0
Constrats		
Personal deficiency	23.5 (4.68)	
Stigma	21.6 (4.38)	
Structural	20.8 (3.25)	

For income level, there was significant mean differences between personal deficiency attitude and income level ( $F 5,99=4.07$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Post-hoc comparison of Bonferroni test revealed that the mean for highest income, earning RM5000.00 and above monthly ( $M=25.7$ ,  $SD=3.73$ ) was significantly different than income RM1000.00-2000.00 monthly ( $M=21.5$ ,  $SD=4.83$ ) and income RM2001.00-RM3000.00 ( $M=21.0$ ,  $SD= 5.28$ ). This result indicates that highest earning individuals ascribed more on personal deficiency. There were no any significant mean differences between constructs such as stigma and structural with any of the income levels.

For education level, there was significant mean differences between personal deficiency and education ( $F 2,102=8.46$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Post-hoc of Bonferroni test showed that the mean for post graduate education ( $M= 25.9$ ,  $SD=4.14$ ) was significantly different than undergraduate ( $M= 22.2$ ,  $SD=4.51$ ) and high school ( $M=22.6$ ,  $SD= 4.48$ ). This indicates that individuals with the highest education qualification accorded more on personal deficiency. There were no any significant mean differences between factors such as stigma and structural with education.

In occupation differences, there was significant mean differences between personal deficiency attitude and occupation ( $F 2,102=12.65$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Post-hoc comparison of Bonferroni test showed that the mean for personal deficiency explanation by academician ( $M= 25.9$ ,  $SD=4.13$ ) was significantly different than general population ( $M= 23.5$ ,  $SD=5.10$ ) and social institution workers ( $M=20.8$ ,  $SD=3.25$ ). This shows that academicians favoured more on personal deficiency compared to other occupation. There was significant mean differences between stigma and occupation ( $F 2,102=7.49$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Post-hoc of Bonferroni test revealed the mean for stigma explanation by general population ( $M= 22.8$ ,  $SD=3.44$ ) and academician ( $M= 22.7$ ,  $SD=4.45$ ) was significantly different than social institution workers ( $M=19.45$ ,  $SD= 4.43$ ).

## Discussion

The present study reveals how public in Malaysia understand the possible explanation for poverty. To the knowledge of the researchers this is the first study that compares differences of attitude towards poverty among academicians, general population and social care institution workers. An important factor to highlight is that the results may provide an insight to the explanation of poverty among academicians.

Considering the gender differences towards poverty where more female accorded personal deficiency attitude toward poverty, this is in consistent with what was suggested by Halika et al. (2012). However, another study by Bullock (2009) contradicted this finding, where male respondents favoured more individualistic explanation.

Other demographic profiles such as education, occupation and income level are important variables to explain poverty. In the present study, high income respondents supported the individual perspective and this is in consistent with the findings by (Bullock, 1999; Nasser, 2001). Academicians and highly educated individuals favoured more on individualistic explanation too. Overall, the respondents favoured more on individualistic attitude toward poverty and least likely to support the structural perspective. Individuals who hold higher social status attribute poverty to individual rather than structural factors (Hunt 1996). They may perceive it as individual insufficient effort to achieve success in life. According to McClelland theory of achievement, an

individual would do his maximum effort to achieve success (Raeisi, Hadadi, Faraji, Salehian, 2012).

Favouring more on individual perspective is in consistent with studies by (Lepianka, 2007; Samuel & Ernest, 2012). In contrary to this finding, some past studies (Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2012; Reutter et al 2006; Wollie, 2009) and in Asian countries such as in Singapore (Shek, 2003 as cited in Nasser & Abouché, 2001) and India (Nasser, Singhal & Abouché, 2007) suggested that structural perspective was supported more. This finding calls for more research to explore further on the attitude toward poverty among Malaysians.

The possible explanation for the respondents in Kuala-Lumpur in present study not to incline to structural perspective could be because of the economy growth in Kuala Lumpur continued to register the highest growth rate of 14.9% compared to other states in Malaysia and generally there was an increment in household income in Malaysia by the minimum of 6.9% (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2012). This suggests that the respondents may perceive positively about the economy situation of Malaysia.

In consistent with numerous other findings, the present study found that individuals working with the social care institution had the belief that individualistic factor does not play the most important role to cause poverty (Bennett, 2010; Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2007; Rehner et al 197). They were also least likely to favour stigma (negative) explanation for poverty. Individualistic and stigma perspective are internal factors and indicate negative attitude toward poverty, thus the finding indicates social workers are less likely to incline to negative or internal attitude toward poverty. Emphasizing the external factors among social workers, it reflects their professional socialization, and indicates the congruence with the desired social work values (Weiss, 2005).

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Understanding the perceived causes of poverty is important in addressing the issue of poverty (Wollie, 2009). Community development program can be implemented in response to various theories that explain the possible contributing factors to poverty (Bradshaw, 2005). Identifying the relevant explanation about poverty may help to determine the appropriate approaches that focus on reducing the causal factor to the poverty. It is worth to note that Malaysian government, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and private sectors are providing financial aid and have initiated and implementing numerous program to eradicate poverty and to help the poor in education, social development and training program (Saad et al. 2011).

The individualistic theory suggests that behaviour and personality of the poor play an important role in poverty (Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya, & Peled, 2009). Thus, the individual deficiency factor can be addressed by planning on interventions to modify the behaviour of the poor people (Wollie, 2009).

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

In the present study, individualistic perspective was favoured more to explain poverty. Structural factor was accorded least to explain poverty. In addition to structural aspects, individualistic factors can play a role in developing countries as contributing factor to poverty. The results provide evidence that poverty is ascribed to individual insufficient effort. This indicates that appropriate approach can be implemented to modify behavior of these individuals. Understanding the perceived causes of poverty is important in addressing the issue of poverty (Wollie, 2009). Appropriate community development program can be implemented in response to various theories to combat poverty.

Limitations of the present study were the fact that it was confined to Kuala-Lumpur only, extending the research venue to other cities may provide a more comprehensive results. Additionally, the present study only used quantitative analyses of the data, a combination of qualitative method may shed light in obtaining a more comprehensive results.

Very few studies have been conducted in Malaysia to investigate on factors contributing to poverty and its influence on community development. As a suggestion, more studies should be conducted among multiracial respondents to obtain the differences on various attributions to poverty. Additionally, future research should investigate the attitude toward poverty among the poor individuals too. This can provide a better understanding about the causal factor to poverty so that further improvement to the current poverty eradication program can be done.

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