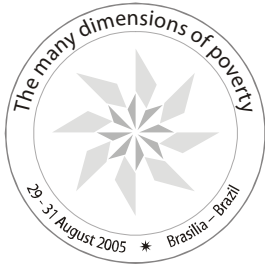


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# The many dimensions of poverty

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## The Subjective Dimension of Poverty: a Psychological Perspective

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**E M B A R G O**

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# THE SUBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF POVERTY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Conceptualizing poverty is extremely complex, since as widely recognized today, it is a multidimensional phenomenon. When poverty is spoken of, reference is commonly made to the lack of or insufficiency of different attributes that are necessary for individuals to reach an acceptable standard of living. In 2001 the World Bank defined poverty along this line, specifically as material deficiency, weak social relations, insecurity and precariousness, minimal self-confidence, and helplessness.

The first report by the technical committee for measuring poverty in Mexico — which emphasizes the limitations characterizing monetary measurements of poverty for representing non-monetary dimensions as components of well-being— states the following: “multidimensional measurements would represent an ideal objective, particularly the *mixed* measurements that include both monetary and non-monetary indicators,” (López-Calva and Rodríguez, 2005). Nevertheless, some questions arise: What type of information is needed to be able to arrive at multidimensional measurements? What types of dimensions are relevant? And what kind of interaction takes place among the various dimensions? (Bourguignon and Chakravarty, 2003). The multidimensional conceptualization of poverty has important implications not only for the study and measurement of poverty, but also for the way in which social policy instruments are conceived of, and for the implementation of social policy (López-Calva and Rodríguez, 2004).

One aspect frequently ignored in studies and social policies on poverty is its psychological dimension which, as I will attempt to demonstrate below, is a relevant factor for both explaining the phenomenon of poverty as well as the successful implementation of public policies aimed at reducing this phenomenon. The objective of this paper is to offer an overall vision of what psychology and psychologists have contributed to the study of poverty. This contribution is focused basically on five areas:

1. The study of how poverty is perceived, from different geographic locations and by different social actors (poor, not poor, men, women, liberals, conservatives, blacks, Latinos, etcetera). This includes: a) the perception of what it means to be poor; b) the perception of the causes of poverty; c) the relationship between beliefs regarding the causes of poverty and how the possibilities for overcoming this condition are perceived; and d) how individuals classify themselves in terms of class (if they consider themselves to be poor or not poor) and the relationship between this identification and certain health variables as well as social mobility.
2. The psychological aspects of the culture of poverty. This encompasses the study of the influence of cultural aspects on whether extreme poverty is reproduced or overcome, through the socialization process of children, primarily in their homes, since this is the most important environment for the transmission of culture.
3. The study of the relationship between certain psychological variables and poverty; or in other words, the degree to which poverty and economic hardship are associated with mental health; as well as the effects that poverty may have on the process of socialization during childhood, youth and even adulthood.
4. The study of the relationship between certain psychological variables and the likelihood of experiencing upward social mobility.
5. The study of the relationship between the well-being of individuals living in poverty considering their subjective perceptions.

In the following pages, I will further develop each of the areas just mentioned, to address the contribution from psychology in a more in-depth way for each of these aspects.

## 1. Perception of poverty

### a) Psychological meaning

One of the modalities used in research on the perception of poverty is the study of *psychological meaning*. The notion of psychological meaning refers to the conceptual meaning or content that a given word or phrase has for a given person. According to Collins and Loftus (1975), the amount of information a person can generate with regard to any concept appears to be unlimited. Therefore, a concept can be represented as a node in a network and the properties of the concept can be represented as relational connections labeled with other concepts (nodes) in the network. Information stored in the semantic memory is located within a huge network, and each element is related to other elements through different connectors. Through the network, it is possible to discover the way in which a concept is represented in the memory and in this way, take note of its psychological meaning, the latter being the total network generated for a particular concept (Valdez, 1998).

One of the ways used to address *psychological meaning* is through the technique of semantic networks. This is a technique that emerged from the cognitivist theory in psychology, which attempts to explain the causes of behavior by using as a starting point the information that individuals have stored in the form of representations and symbols with a particular meaning. In order to achieve this objective, individuals are asked to define each *stimulus* word presented to them, with a minimum of five individual words, which may be names, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs, but without using prepositions, conjunctions or articles. After the words used to define the stimulus word have been written down, individuals are asked to place them into hierarchical order, based on the importance that each one has with respect to the stimulus word defined, or in other words, in accordance with the degree to which they have the closest meaning to the stimulus word. Thus, individuals are asked to assign number one to the most important, number two to the next in importance and so on. What is obtained is a semantic network, understood as a set of concepts selected through processes of memory reconstruction, although this selection is not viewed as a simple association, since it is determined by the classes and properties of the elements of which it consists. The results can be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively through

four values (J value, M value, the SAM set, and FMG value), which can be generated from an analysis of the semantic network, and which reflect the most important descriptors in terms of the frequency of appearance and the hierarchy assigned.

In Mexico, Silva (2000) reports a study conducted with people living in poverty, and in which the subjects were offered 159 descriptors of “poverty.” Those with the greatest semantic weight were: “deficiency,” “scarcity,” “limitations,” “money,” “needs,” “sadness,” “malnutrition,” “dissatisfaction,” and “happiness.” Through this study, according to the author, it is possible to begin to see two major dimensions in the perception of poverty, one tangible, observable and material-oriented, and the other, abstract. The first refers to aspects such as: “money,” “house,” “clothes,” and “car,” and the second refers to terms such as: “limitation,” “deficiency,” “shame,” and “sadness.”

Also, Palomar and Pérez (2003) found in their study that a group of extremely poor subjects reported a greater number of descriptors in the category of “personality characteristics,” in comparison to a group of not poor subjects. These descriptors refer to aspects of the personality that are associated with poverty, as if possessing these characteristics makes individuals responsible for the situation in which they are living. There are other examples of studies that have used similar methodologies and have also led to similar results.

#### b) Perception of the causes of poverty

The number of studies conducted on the perception of factors causing poverty is considerable. Feagin (1972; 1975) was the first to systematically study the multiple meanings of poverty for different social groups, developing a list of eleven types of beliefs regarding the causes of poverty, and grouping them into three categories: 1) individual or internal causes, which explain poverty in terms of the characteristics or life styles of poor people, such as a lack of skills, effort or savings; 2) social or external causes, which attribute poverty to unfavorable social and economic forces such as the inequitable distribution of wealth, exploitation of the poor, lack of education, low wages and absence of social opportunities; and 3) fatalism, including causes of poverty related to bad luck or a determination by inscrutable superior forces (God, fate, etcetera).

The first type of belief is based on the perspective that poor people are responsible for their condition, while in the case of the two other beliefs, poor people are believed to suffer due to circumstances outside their control.

Other studies conducted in other countries have found factorial structures that are different from this construct. For example, Shek (2002) found four factors that indicate beliefs regarding the causes of poverty, which are referred to as: personal factors, lack of opportunities, exploitation and fate.

The results of research carried out in this field have made it possible to determine that, generally speaking, there is a tendency in developed countries to overestimate the power of individual factors as opposed to structural, situational or external factors, since it is believed that in a democratic society with equal opportunities for all, individuals are responsible for their own economic situation. In developing countries, on the other hand, there is a greater tendency to attribute the causes of poverty to structural or fatalistic factors.

Beliefs regarding the causes of poverty have been linked to certain variables such as race, education, income, age, gender and social status, among others. In terms of racial aspects, it has been observed that individuals tend to identify with the generalized experience of the group to which they belong, and to respond in accordance with this identification. Consequently, members of minorities tend to identify with the struggle and efforts of their reference group (Gurin, Millar and Gurin, 1980, cited in Hunt, 1996).

With respect to the education variable, it has been found that higher levels of education are associated with individualist explanations of poverty, which means that in social strata characterized by higher levels of education, there is a tendency to view poverty as a failure that can be attributed to individuals (Cryn, 1977, cited in An-Pyng Sun, 2001).

With respect to socioeconomic level, it has been found that individuals who are in a favorable economic position tend to blame poor people for their situation, while they attribute their own favorable condition to their own merits. This is likely a result of

a psychological need to distance themselves from poor people in order to enhance their own social identity and self-esteem. Poor people, for their part, tend to blame others — the *system*, government, etcetera— for their own situation (Steele, 1994). In relation to gender, results have not been very consistent, however in general terms, we can say that groups in less favorable economic conditions, as well as women and younger people, are more likely to attribute poverty to structural factors (Robinson and Bell, 1978).

c) Perception of causes of poverty and perception of social mobility

There are diverse studies that link the type of beliefs held by individuals in relation to the causes of poverty with the way in which they perceive their own possibilities for overcoming this precarious condition. The main results from these studies have demonstrated that individuals with a low socioeconomic level —in comparison to individuals from other socioeconomic levels— are more likely to have beliefs that connote victimization (for example, blaming society, God or the government) and that are associated with perceptions of a lack of control over their own lives, plus low self-esteem, low psychosocial adjustment, and a lack of optimism in regard to overcoming their poverty (Smith, 1985). As well, other studies have found that individuals who are inclined to explain the causes of poverty in terms of the characteristics or life styles of poor people, tend to more often think they have strong possibilities for overcoming poverty, in comparison to those who tend toward fatalistic or structural explanations. This latter tendency is stronger when these individuals are young and have high levels of schooling (Palomar, 2005).

d) Class identification and psychological health variables

Class identification involves the way in which individuals define their position within the social structure and the way in which they indicate their social preferences, or in other words, the type of individuals with whom they enjoy socializing, the lifestyle they would like to have, and some other significant aspects of their lives. The way in which individuals define their background and identify with a social class has serious implications for their life opportunities, since this determines their behavior and the way in which they face economic deprivation (Marsh, 2003). In this sense, authors such as Adler, Epel, Castellazzo and Ickovics (2000) have found that physical and psychological health variables, such as certain styles for coping with stress, levels of

stress, physical health and pessimism, are more related to the perceived socioeconomic level than to the objective socioeconomic level.

## 2. Psychological aspects of the culture of poverty

The degree to which the cultural element is responsible for poverty has been under discussion for a long time. Some theories attempt to explain poverty from a cultural perspective, defining culture as the factor that is ultimately responsible for this phenomenon. The solutions proposed in these theories are educational processes that integrate cultural models, granting them greater possibilities for success. These theories have been criticized for blaming poverty for its own misfortune. The reaction to an oversimplification of the problem has been a refusal to consider cultural aspects as aspects that are important in overcoming extreme poverty.

There are various authors in Mexico as well as in other countries who, from different psychosocial approaches, have analyzed the most relevant aspects of popular culture and socialization in the culture of poverty, emphasizing the role played by family and social support networks in the survival of the poorest.

In Mexico, literary figures such as Octavio Paz, and psychoanalysts such as Santiago Ramírez, have focused on this issue, also analyzing the role of history in popular idiosyncrasy.

In the Dominican Republic, Jorge Cela (1997) has meticulously analyzed some of the cultural and social characteristics of those living in extreme poverty in Santo Domingo, specifically: their sense of time; their lack of skills in advocating for themselves, preventing them from obtaining the means to reach their objectives; the intrafamily violence in which they live (derived from authoritative use of power); low self-esteem confronted through humor and aggressiveness; and various relevant aspects in their everyday life that are marked by economic and emotional instability, as a product of their experiences since very early ages.



“One characteristic note of the culture of poverty is its institutional and emotional instability. At the institutional level, individuals lack a strong experience of stability. And often families have been unstable. The number of cases in which couples have separated and found new partners is very high. Geographic mobility is very high. For many children, school is an unknown experience, or a very brief one. And for many, work has not represented an experience of institutional stability. Therefore, their reference to institutional stability is very weak, and has generally not led to an impact on behavioral habits, such as perseverance, discipline, punctuality, coordination and planning. What is much stronger is the experience of insecurity in which people are subjected to the ups and downs of everyday life. Emotional experience is also marked by instability. Family instability, and the weak nature of other connections due to geographic, labor or school mobility, creates affectivity that is unanchored.” (Cela, 1997, p. 68).

### 3. Poverty and psychological variables

Psychological research has also demonstrated that economic deprivation in childhood—in addition to having adverse effects on the physical and mental development of individuals—increases risks of emotional and behavior problems. This may be due to the fact that poverty places parents in a situation with excessive everyday demands, which can produce high levels of stress, depression and anxiety. This leads to less sensitivity on their part to the needs of their children, as well as to the use of more severe discipline, and to low emotional parental support. And all of this increases the likelihood that their children will develop emotional problems (McLeod and Nonemaker, 2000).

Stress derived from economic hardship also affects marital relations, making it less likely that couples will express love, warmth, support and respect to each other. This lack of affect, alliance, and respect diminishes the abilities of couples to resolve problems in a joint manner, and increases hostility and stress between them. Consequently, they tend to show limited socialization behaviors with their children and to demonstrate hostility toward their children’s needs, leading to a deterioration in

parent-child relationships (Ge, Conger Loren, Elder, Montague and Simona, 1992, cited in Ho, Lempers and Clark-Lempers, 1995).

In this sense, it has been established that for children in poorer families, the risk of an emotional disorder is higher (33.4% vs. 15.9%), and that they are in a situation of emotional and behavioral comorbidity that is three times higher than for other children (6.5% vs. 2%) (Costello, Farmer, Angold, Bums and Erkanli, 1997).

Poverty has been associated with numerous psychological variables such as depression, anxiety, self-esteem, strategies for coping with stress, achievement motivation, perception of social support, and locus of control, among others. Due to the limitations of this paper, I will present only a very general, compacted panorama of the research carried out in this regard.

In terms of the relationship between poverty and depression, a review of 47 studies addressing this issue in the literature reveals that in 28 of them, statistically significant differences were not found among those of a low socioeconomic level, while they were found in 19 of them (Eaton, Muntaner, Bovasso and Smith, 2001). Currently, most of the studies conducted on the relationship between socioeconomic status and depression are based on the stress paradigm, which supposes that depression suffered by individuals originates from their high exposure to multiple stressors that foment this condition (Miech, Shanahan and Elder, 1999).

Three theoretical models have been developed for addressing the relationship between poverty and self-esteem. The first sustains that since socioeconomic level is an indicator of social status, a high socioeconomic level may promote high self-esteem, and a low socioeconomic level, low self-esteem (Rosenberg and Pearlin, 1978). The second affirms that individuals internalize the perceptions that others have of them, and therefore if socioeconomic level influences the way in which others treat us, this will be reflected in our self-esteem. The third model maintains that individuals have a broad repertoire of self-protecting strategies that serve as shields in relation to external feedback linked to socioeconomic level. Therefore, individuals from low social classes may blame external factors for their economic situation, and maintain their self-esteem by comparing themselves with others less fortunate (Twenge and Campbell, 2002). In

any case, the results between these two variables have been rather inconsistent (Rosenberg and Pearlin, 1978; Twenge and Campbell, 2002; Mullis, Mullis and Normandin, 1992, among others).

In addition, the relationship between poverty and strategies for coping with stress has been studied from various angles, and it has generally been found that poverty may promote ways of coping with stress that are passive (persons expect that circumstances on their own or other persons will resolve their problems), emotional (persons focus on the emotions produced by a situation, more than on evaluating and confronting the situation in a rational manner), and evasive (persons avoid confronting the problem or situation that causes them stress, denying it or indefinitely postponing it) (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987).

In other research it has also been found that children who have grown up in an environment of extreme poverty have been subjected to high levels of stress and when they become adults, they are not able to manage stress adequately. These adults are less likely to maintain a job, or to obtain the positions to which they aspire, which can hinder or diminish their possibilities for experiencing positive social mobility (Corcovan, 1995).

Another variable that has had an important place in the study of poverty from a psychological perspective is achievement motivation. This variable has been conceived of as a personality trait related to the search for independence and ongoing improvement in the activity in which one engages, as well as the desire of individuals to establish and meet personal goals. According to the principal studies in this area, there is a strong relationship between socioeconomic level and achievement motivation, since children who grow up in families with limited psychological resources assimilate feelings of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority —all of which are related to achievement motivation. Thus, individuals who present strong achievement motivation have greater possibilities for escaping from poverty, than those who do not (Cassidy, 2000 and Cassidy and Lynn, 1991).

It is very important to continue research along this line, including psychological and social variables that will allow for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon as

complex as poverty, since it is plausible to suppose that social policies will be more effective to the degree than these factors are taken into account.

#### 4. Social mobility and psychological variables

Social mobility can be defined as the transition or movement of an individual from one social position to another of a different level (Blejer, 1977), or the movement of persons within a social system that offers a certain degree of fluidity in the stratification of classes (Biswas and Pandey, 1996).

From a psychological perspective, the study of social mobility has been focused basically on learning about the effect that patterns of raising children, family structure and some psychological variables (such as values, attitudes and beliefs) have on social mobility (Aston and McLanahan, 1991; Biblarz and Raftery, 1993). According to this perspective, each social class instills in its members the values that will encourage them to remain in that social class. To the contrary, individuals who are able to maintain a critical point of view with regard to the values of their reference group and adopt more independent behaviors and attitudes have greater possibilities for moving up or down from the social level in which they are (Balán, Blowing and Jelin, 1973).

Identifying which characteristics, attitudes and skills of subjects are associated with social mobility is highly useful, since this information can lead to the increased effectiveness of public policies, by focusing on individuals with these characteristics.

#### 5. Poverty and subjective well-being

When we speak of poverty, we generally refer to a state of neediness, difficulty and a lack of what is indispensable for sustaining life, derived from individuals' economic situations. Nonetheless, poverty has characteristics that extend beyond an economic focus and have repercussions on individuals' levels of subjective well-being.

During the last 30 years, interest has increased —especially on the part of psychologists— in studying the type of circumstances that permit persons to perceive their own lives as positive. This indicator of perception has been named “subjective well-being”.

While income has been one of the measurements most used in explaining the well-being of individuals, it has been established that even when there is a positive relationship between these two variables, it is a rather weak one. In other words, a high level of income does not necessarily promote a feeling of satisfaction or well-being, and a low level of income does not necessarily promote a feeling of dissatisfaction or a lack of well-being (López-Calva and Rodríguez, 2005). For example, a study conducted by Fuentes and Rojas (2001) found that income explained less than 5% of the variance in subjective well-being, and in contrast, the perception of satisfied material needs had a greater impact.

Of course, different perspectives have emerged to explain this type of result, however what is relevant here is to be able to explain the factors and circumstances that can explain the subjective well-being of individuals. In this sense, a very important contribution from psychology consists of the study of other variables —most of which are psychological— that make it possible to explain the subjective well-being of individuals living in poverty. These variables include self-esteem, depression, achievement motivation, neuroticism, extroversion, psychosomatic symptoms, the perception of self control, and the perception of social support, among many others.

These studies are important since they clearly establish that an increase in the well-being of individuals is not only a matter of satisfying basic needs by improving income or in-kind assistance. And this is especially relevant for designing public policies for addressing poverty, if the intention is to promote significant changes in the attitudes, values and behavior of the target population (Weiss, Goebel, Page, Wilson and Warda, 1999; Petrosky and Birkimer, 1991; Elliot and Sheldon, 1997; Lenz and Demal, 2000, Palomar, Lanzagorta and Hernández, at press).

## Conclusions

Poverty is a phenomenon that must be addressed from a multidisciplinary perspective, due to its multidimensional nature. While the psychological dimension has often been ignored in these studies and in social policies, research in this field — although only in the early stages— points to its importance.

The results from psychological research have demonstrated that poverty is understood and explained in different ways, according to the sector of the population and individuals' geographic regions of origin. In particular, through this research it has been possible to discover that the majority of poor people in developing countries, and among them, the most disadvantaged groups (women and youth), attribute poverty to factors beyond their control and their lifestyles, and also that this type of belief is negatively associated with the likelihood of experiencing upward social mobility. Also, it has made it possible to establish that the well-being of a poor population is not mechanically associated with improved income.

Therefore, it is imperative that psychosocial elements be considered in the designing of public policies oriented toward providing support to the most vulnerable groups in the population, in order to make the following possible: a) the target population's full understanding of the nature, orientation, functioning and scope of intervention programs, and b) the promotion of assertive, proactive behavior by the target population that is oriented toward improving their situation.

Working with perspectives of this type will encourage significant changes in the behavior of participating social groups, as well as the better use of the few resources allocated in this area, while avoiding the establishment of patronage-oriented, paternalistic programs and practices.

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