

Antecedents of Attitudes Toward the Poor

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(Downloaded from <http://www.iusb.edu/~journal/2002/coryn/coryn.html>. Page and line numbers added for each of use in class.)

ABSTRACT

This study assessed attitudes toward the poor using just-world beliefs, external/structural attributions for poverty, and internal/individualistic attributions for wealth as predictors. Just-world beliefs are the extent to which people believe the world is a just or unjust place, and that people get what they deserve. High levels of just-world beliefs frequently contribute to schemas that are associated with victim blaming (e.g., the rape victim must have done something to provoke it). Attributions are indicators of the characteristics (or traits, motives, etc.) that people ascribe to themselves or others. This study assessed internal/individualistic attributions for wealth (e.g., ambition, perseverance, etc.), and external/structural attributions for poverty (e.g., no benefits, low paying jobs, etc.). The significance of holding just-world beliefs and of making internal attributions for wealth and external attributions for poverty in relationship to attitudes toward the poor was analyzed using multiple regression analysis to predict attitudes toward poor persons. In the sample ($N = 112$), just-world beliefs were found to be a significant predictor of attitudes toward the poor. Participants having high just-world beliefs had negative attitudes toward the poor, and participants who believed the world is unjust had more positive attitudes toward the poor. Attributions for poverty and wealth were not found to be significant predictors of attitudes toward the poor.

Approximately 32.3 million persons (11.8%) in the United States live at or below the official poverty level (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000a), and the average income deficit needed to raise poor families above the poverty threshold is \$6,687 per family. Economic trends predict that the gap between the rich and poor will continue to widen. This economic disadvantage is especially great for certain ethnic and racial groups, and more so for households headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). On virtually all indices of social and economic status among citizens of the United States, African Americans and other racial minorities fall below whites, and women fall below men. Income for the poor has remained relatively steady while upper level income continues to increase steadily (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). Unfortunately it is also these populations that tend to be seriously underrepresented in US Census Bureau surveys (viz., homelessness, transience, etc.), and therefore these estimates are not likely to provide an accurate representation of the poor population.

Research indicates that stereotypes and attributions for poor people and poverty are overwhelmingly negative in the United States (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Bullock, 1999). The act of attribution is one in which one ascribes or imputes a characteristic (or trait, emotion or motive, etc.) to oneself or another person. Several studies have identified three fundamental attributions for poverty: individualistic/internal, structural/external, and fatalistic (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Bullock, 1999; Furnham, 1982). Individualistic/internal attributions are those that ascribe personal characteristics of individuals as causes for poverty (e.g., laziness, immorality, and alcoholism). Structural/external attributions

1 are defined as those causes of poverty outside the sphere of the individual control (e.g., social
2 environment, economic conditions, prejudice, and innate economic inequality). Fatalistic
3 attributions are those described as bad luck, illness, fate, etc. Recent research has found that
4 persons in the United States tend to favor individualistic/internal explanations for poverty
5 (Bullock et al., 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Bullock, 1999), although attributions for poverty
6 are also correlated with sociodemographic variations (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity).

7 There has been surprisingly little research on attitudes toward poverty and the poor as a
8 stigmatized or stereotyped group, despite the available data regarding attitudes and stereotypes
9 toward other disadvantaged groups (e.g., ethnic/racial groups, gays and lesbians). Often these
10 groups suffer stereotyping and/or social stigmas (e.g., ethnic/racial groups, single mothers), and
11 also tend to comprise the majority of the population living at or below federal poverty guidelines
12 or lower levels of living standard (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). For
13 example, poverty rates for 1999 as reported by the U.S. Census (2000b) for Blacks were 23.6%,
14 for Hispanics were 22.8%, for Asians (and Pacific Islanders) were 10.7%, and for single mothers
15 an astounding 53% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000).

16 Prior research has shown that attitudes toward the poor in the United States tend to be negative
17 (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Atherton, Gemmel, Hagenstad, Holt, Jensen, O'Hara, & Rehner, 1993).
18 Studies have shown that reporting negative attitudes toward the poor are highly correlated with
19 individualistic/internal attributions for poverty, and positive attitudes toward the poor have been
20 reported as positively correlating with structural/external attributions for poverty (Bullock et al.,
21 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Iyengar, 1990; Smith & Stone, 1989). Americans typically believe
22 that individuals are responsible for their status in systems of social and economic inequality.
23 There have been suggestions that poverty serves a societal purpose and is a necessary part of our
24 social structure. Persons in low positions are kept there for the benefit of those in high positions
25 (Gans, 1989). To eliminate the poor would be to eliminate the low-wage labor pool, physically
26 dangerous work, temporary work, and undignified and menial jobs. Furthermore, attitudes
27 toward and attributions for poverty have been linked to the belief that the world is a just place
28 where people deserve what they get (Furnham, 1982).

29 Lerner's Belief in a Just World theory presumes that persons either believe that the world is a just
30 place and that people get what they deserve, or that the world is not a just place and that events
31 occur by chance (Lerner, 1980). Those with high just-world beliefs attribute poverty and other
32 negative circumstances to one's behavior and personal characteristics, concluding that the poor
33 person somehow deserves to be poor. The person's economic status is due to something the
34 person did or failed to do, therefore they deserved it or had it coming. Many studies have
35 correlated just-world beliefs with attributions and/or attitudes with some success (Bullock et al.,
36 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982). Although some have questioned the reliability of
37 the psychometric scales measuring just-world beliefs (Lea & Fekken, 1993; O'Conner, Morrison,
38 & Morrison, 1993), most studies have shown significant results with the measurement. And,
39 Furnham (1993) reported that people having high just-world beliefs had more negative
40 perceptions and attitudes toward the poor.

41 Research pertaining to poverty and attitudes toward the poor could serve as a catalyst for
42 political policy, education, healthcare, and various other issues concerning this population.

1 Poverty continues to be a significant problem in the United States and globally, yet the poor are
2 apt to be devalued and marginalized. Minority group members (e.g., the poor) are objectively
3 worse off than they would be if stereotypes and prejudice did not exist. They suffer
4 psychologically, economically, and physically. Attitudes form quickly and easily, yet resist
5 change. More importantly, the poor are often the victims of categorization, viewed as the social
6 outgroup, and perceived as homogenous; they are all the same (e.g., lazy, immoral, promiscuous,
7 etc.).

8 Rubin and Peplau (1975) found that just-world beliefs frequently tend to be polar in nature,
9 extending between total acceptance and total rejection of the perception that the world is a just
10 place. Given the previous research, it would seem appropriate to hypothesize that those having
11 higher just-world beliefs will report lower levels of agreement with structural/external
12 attributions for poverty, will report higher levels of agreement with individualistic/internal
13 attributions for wealth, and additionally have more negative attitudes toward the poor.
14 Conversely, those having lower just-world beliefs will report higher levels of agreement with
15 structural/external attributions for poverty, lower levels of agreement with individualistic/internal
16 attributions for wealth, as well as having more positive attitudes toward the poor.

17 **Method**

18 *Participants*

19 One-hundred and twelve undergraduate students (76 women, 44 men) enrolled in introductory
20 psychology courses at Indiana University South Bend volunteered to participate in this study in
21 order to partially fulfill a psychology course requirement. Seventy-one percent of respondents
22 were White/Caucasian, 22% were Black/African American, 3% were Asian, 1% were Hispanic,
23 and 3% self-identified as "other". Fifty-seven percent of participants reported no personal
24 history of public assistance (e.g., food stamps, welfare, or housing subsidies), 42% reported
25 some history of public assistance, and 1% did not know whether they or their immediate family
26 had any history of receiving public assistance.

27 *Materials*

28 Participants were asked to complete a packet of questionnaires. The first part of the questionnaire
29 asked sociodemographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity, and public assistance history). The
30 second questionnaire was Rubin and Peplau's 20-item Belief in a Just World scale (Rubin, &
31 Peplau, 1973). The third questionnaire was a modified 17-item Attributions for Poverty
32 Questionnaire. The fourth questionnaire was a modified 8-item Attributions for Wealth
33 Questionnaire. The Structural Attributions for Poverty and Attributions for Wealth
34 Questionnaires contained selected items from previously tested scales (Bullock et al., 2001). The
35 fifth questionnaire was a 37-item Attitudes Toward the Poor Questionnaire (Atherton et al.,
36 1993). With the exception of the demographic questionnaire, all questionnaires employed five-
37 point Likert scales. Participants rated their level of agreement from 1 (strongly agree) to 5
38 (strongly disagree).

1 *Belief in a just world.* Rubin and Peplau's Belief in a Just World Scale is intended to measure to
2 what extent one believes that the world is a just and fair place where one gets what one deserves.
3 High scorers on this scale have been found to denigrate and blame innocent victims for their
4 plight (Rubin & Peplau, 1973). Twenty statements (e.g., good deeds often go unnoticed and
5 unrewarded, people who meet with misfortune often have brought on themselves) were used to
6 measure the degree to which individuals endorse the Belief in a Just World. Cozzarelli et al.,
7 (2001) reported a coefficient alpha of 0.57; although low, it is typical of previously reported
8 values (Lea & Fekken, 1993; O'Conner, Morrison, & Morrison, 1996). Cozzarelli et al., (2001)
9 reported moderate agreement with just-world beliefs ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.41$), on a seven-point
10 Likert scale.

11 *Attributions for poverty.* The 17-item Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire was adapted from a
12 scale previously developed and tested by Bullock et al., (2001). Scale items were selected to
13 assess structural attributions for poverty (e.g., low paying jobs with no benefits, prejudice and
14 discrimination in hiring and promotion). Structural attributions are those outside the sphere of
15 individual control (e.g., social environment, economic conditions). Bullock et al., (2001)
16 reported a coefficient alpha of .91, with ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.90$), on a seven-point Likert scale, for
17 structural attributions for poverty.

18 *Attributions for wealth.* The 8-item Attributions for Wealth Questionnaire was adapted from
19 Bullock et al., (2001) 21-item Attributions for Wealth Questionnaire. The 8 items were selected
20 from the original 21-item questionnaire to assess individualistic attributions for wealth (e.g.,
21 ambition and personal drive, hard work and perseverance). Bullock et al., (2001) reported a
22 coefficient alpha of 0.82, with ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.84$), on a seven-point Likert scale, for
23 individualistic attributions for wealth.

24 *Attitudes toward the poor.* Attitudes Toward the Poor were assessed using the 37-item scale
25 developed by Atherton et al., (1993). The Attitudes Toward the Poor Questionnaire contained
26 statements that reflected both positive (e.g., poor people are discriminated against) and negative
27 (e.g., poor people create their own difficulties) attitudes toward the poor. Positive items were
28 reverse scored. Atherton et al., (1993) reported Cronbach's alpha as 0.93, and the split half
29 reliability as 0.87. Factor analysis concluded that the instrument was a single-factor scale
30 (Atherton et. al., 1993).

31 ***Procedure***

32 Participants were recruited using posted research announcements, announcements on Indiana
33 University South Bend introductory psychology web sites, and announcements at introductory
34 psychology classes. Participants reported to Indiana University South Bend classrooms and
35 psychology research rooms in groups of 20-25. Data collection took place over a two-week
36 period from October 4, 2001 to October 17, 2001. Participants were told that attitudes toward a
37 variety of social groups were being investigated. Participants took 15-30 minutes to complete the
38 questionnaire packets. After completing the questionnaire packet, participants were debriefed
39 and informed that attitudes toward the poor were being investigated.

40 **Results**

1 **Scale Validation**

2 Internal reliabilities were analyzed using Cronbach's index of internal consistency for the sample
3 (N = 112) to validate the Belief in a Just World Scale (a = 0.95), the Attributions for Poverty
4 scale (a = 0.95), the Attributions for Wealth scale (a = 0.93) and the Attitudes Toward the Poor
5 scale (a. = 0.98). All measures were above the adequate range.

6 **Descriptive Findings**

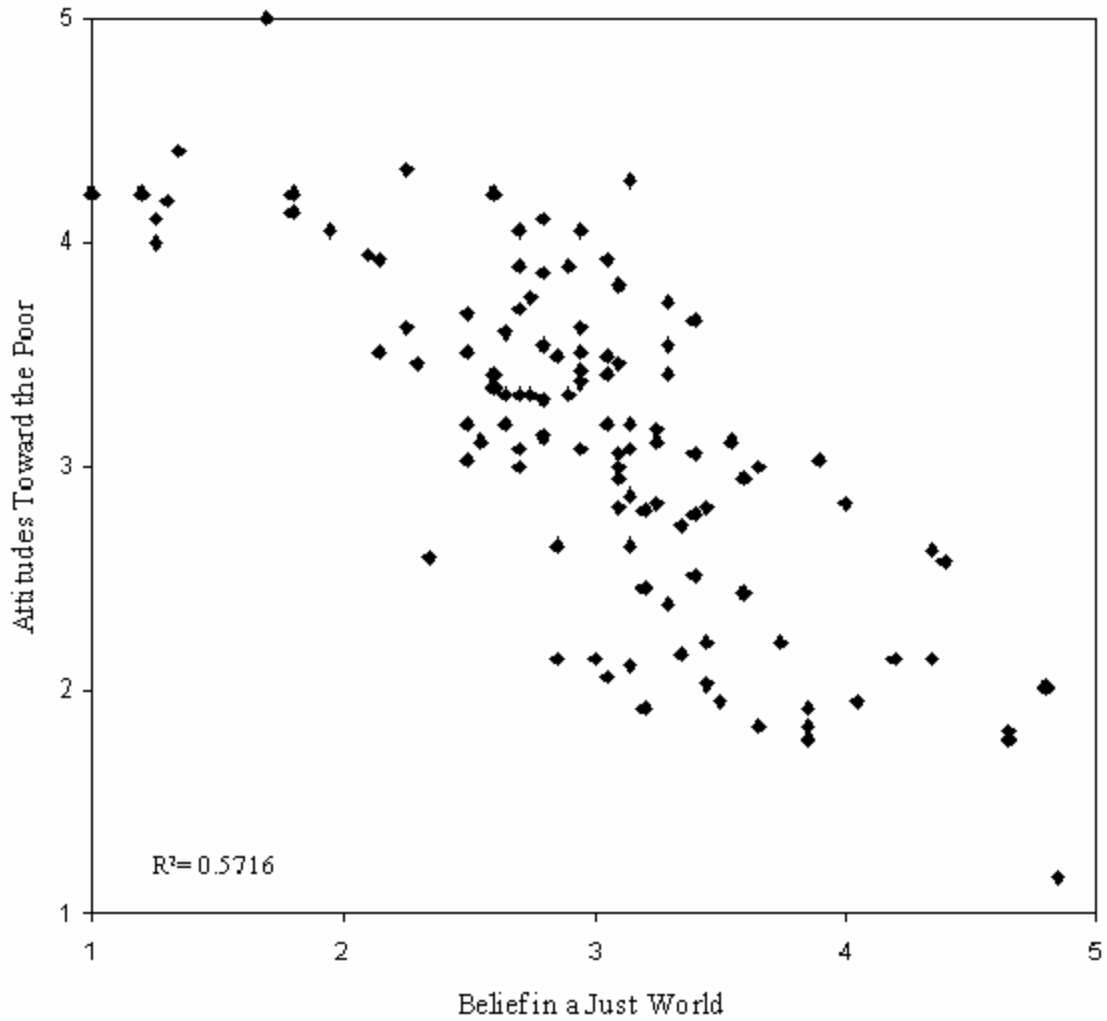
7 In this sample, attitudes toward the poor were, on average, moderately positive (M = 3.13, SD =
8 0.75) (see Table 1). Just-world beliefs were on average, relatively neutral (M = 2.99, SD = 0.74),
9 although scores were widely dispersed, with higher scores indicating stronger beliefs in a just
10 world. External attributions for poverty (M = 3.22, SD = 0.80) were moderately positive, with
11 higher scores indicating agreement with structural (e.g., discrimination, and lack of child care)
12 attributions for poverty. And, attributions for wealth (M = 3.78, SD = 0.73) were moderately
13 high, indicating agreement with individualistic (e.g., ambition, and intelligence) attributions for
14 wealth.

15 *Table 1: Summary of Belief in a Just World, Attributions for Poverty, Attributions for Wealth,*
16 *and Attitudes Toward the Poor*

	Min	Max	M	SD	Potential Range
Belief in a just world	1.0	4.85	2.99	0.744	1-5
Attributions for Poverty	1.05	4.88	3.21	0.80	1-5
Attributions for Wealth	1.5	5.0	3.78	0.73	1-5
Attitudes towards the poor	1.16	5.0	3.12	0.74	1-5

17 **Correlations among Constructs**

18 Correlational analysis revealed a number of relationships between the constructs (see Table 2).
19 Higher just-world beliefs correlated negatively with attitudes toward the poor (see Figure 1),
20 were negatively associated with structural attributions for poverty, and were positively associated
21 with agreement for individualistic attributions for wealth. Structural attributions for poverty were
22 negatively correlated with individualistic attributions for wealth, and positively correlated with
23 attitudes toward the poor. Individual attributions for wealth were negatively associated with
24 attitudes toward the poor. All correlations were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.



1
2 *Figure 1: Correlation Between Belief in a Just World and Attitudes Toward the Poor*

3
4
5 *Table 2: Correlations Between Belief in a Just World, Attributions for Poverty, Attributions for*
6 *Wealth, and Attitudes Toward the Poor*

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Belief in a Just World	-	-0.612**	0.522**	-0.756**
2. Attributions for Poverty		-	-0.502**	0.484**
3. Attributions for Wealth			-	-0.433**
4. Attitudes Toward the Poor				-

7
8 *Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1 - tailed).*

9 ***Regression Analysis***

1 Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess how well just-world beliefs, attributions for
 2 poverty, and attributions for wealth predicted the criterion variable, attitudes toward the poor
 3 (see Table 3). With all three predictor variables entered simultaneously, the model was
 4 significant, $F(3, 108) = 48.465$, $p < .001$. And over half ($R^2 = 0.574$) the variance was accounted
 5 for by the three predictor variables. Individual coefficients assessed how well each alone
 6 predicted the criterion variable. Belief in a Just World was the strongest predictor of attitudes
 7 toward the poor ($\beta = -0.719$, $p < 0.0005$). Attributions for poverty and attributions for wealth
 8 did not produce any significant effects. As expected, stronger just-world beliefs predicted more
 9 negative attitudes toward the poor.

10 *Table 3: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Attitudes Toward*
 11 *the Poor*

Variable	B	SE B	β
Belief in a just world	-0.722	0.084	-0.719*
Attributions for Poverty	1.851e-02	0.077	0.020
Attributions for Wealth	-4.853e-02	0.078	-0.047

12
 13

Note: $R^2 = .574$. * $p < .0005$

14 ***Discussion***

15 The results of this study supported the proposed hypothesis; those who scored high on the Belief
 16 in a Just World Scale made internal/individualistic attributions for wealth and poverty, and
 17 reported more negative attitudes toward the poor. Just-world beliefs and attitudes toward the
 18 poor had a highly negative correlation, indicating that participants who reported believing the
 19 world is a just place, and that people get what they deserve reported negative attitudes toward the
 20 poor. Ultimately, those reporting high just-world beliefs held the poor responsible for their
 21 plight. Conversely, participants who reported lower just-world beliefs reported moderately
 22 positive attitudes toward the poor.

23 The results of this study indicated that attitudes toward the poor are strongly related to just-world
 24 beliefs and, to a lesser extent, to structural/external attributions for poverty and
 25 individualistic/internal attributions for wealth. Overall, participants' attitudes toward the poor
 26 were moderately positive. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Cozzarelli et al.,
 27 2001; Bullock et al., 2001; Bullock, 1999). Multiple regression indicated that Belief in a Just
 28 World was the only significant variable and that the unique variance associated with Belief in a
 29 Just World explained a large proportion of the variance for attitudes toward the poor. One
 30 explanation for these results may be that persons having high just-world beliefs and negative
 31 attitudes toward the poor are endorsing victim blaming as explanations for why people are poor
 32 (Furnham, 1982). People viewing the world as a just place were reported to hold more negative
 33 perceptions and stereotypes toward the poor (Furnham, 1993). This would support Lerner's just-
 34 world theory, in that the poor are themselves to blame for their poverty.

1 According to Lerner (1980), there are two diametrically opposed worlds, the just-world, in which
2 the good and virtuous are rewarded, and the bad and wicked are punished; and the unjust-world,
3 in which the reciprocal occurs. People want to believe that the world is a just place. And, if
4 people believe that the world is a just place and we get what we deserve, then logically, we also
5 deserve what we get. Therefore, if persons are poor they somehow are to blame for their poverty.
6 That is, they are getting what they deserve. The actions, or inaction, of poor persons has caused
7 their plight. They do not work hard enough, they are lazy, or they act immorally. According to
8 Lerner (1980), people with high just-world beliefs tend to denigrate the poor and other
9 outgroups. Clearly, those with wealth and power have earned their position according to the just-
10 world theory.

11 Belief in a Just World scores have been significantly and positively correlated with
12 authoritarianism, work ethic, conservatism, internal locus of control, and religious beliefs
13 (Furnham, 1993). More importantly in regards to this study, just-world beliefs have also been
14 associated with perceptions of poverty, personal income, and reaction to personal deprivation.
15 Furnham (1993) argued that Belief in a Just World may exist in any society, particularly one in
16 which there exist obvious inequalities. Those persons living in poverty tend to believe that the
17 world is an unjust place. Lerner (1993) also reported that in more stratified societies (i.e., caste
18 systems, class systems), unjust-world beliefs are higher than those in the United States.

19 The inequality between wealth and poverty is seen as the outcome of ones own behavior,
20 wealthy people have earned their fortune and the poor have not. Previous studies (Cozzarelli et
21 al., 2001; Furnham, 1982) have suggested several other variables (e.g., political affiliation,
22 Protestant Ethic, authoritarianism) associated with high and low just-world beliefs. Those with
23 high Belief in a Just World would not support assistance programs (e.g., welfare, food stamps,
24 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; TANF) that would provide relief for the poor.
25 According to Lerner's theory (1982), people with high just-world beliefs believed that the
26 opportunity to get ahead is available to all, and that one's own actions cause poverty. Therefore,
27 social programs only serve to justify poor people's behavior.

28 Furnham (1993) reported that some people believe in a just world because of their personal
29 pathology and experiences (individual functionalism), but there is strong evidence that just-world
30 beliefs are a function not only of personal experience, but also of societal functionalism (i.e., a
31 country's structural and societal factors). Just-world beliefs held by the rich and powerful
32 condemn or devalue the poor. A sociological view suggests the poor serve several functions for
33 the rest of society, and the more affluent have no true desire to address the issues of poverty.
34 Gans (1999) suggested that the poor are exploited in a number of ways (e.g., a low-wage labor
35 pool, guarantee the status of those who are not poor, absorb the costs of change and growth in
36 American society, etc.). Elimination of poverty would prove costly and be met with resistance. It
37 is believed that economic inequality is inevitable in a capitalist society, and the wealthy
38 contribute to the economy in ways that are beneficial for all.

39 It was also found that participants tended to endorse the individualistic/internal attributions for
40 wealth, and concurrently moderately endorsed the structural/external attributions for poverty.
41 Specifically, participants making structural/external attributions for poverty were less likely to
42 strongly believe in a just world. Due to the relatively low age of participants ($M = 19.7$),

1 participants may have simply underestimated the extent to which variables such as low paying
2 jobs with no benefits are significant barriers for many poor persons. Therefore, the moderate
3 level of participants' structural/external attributions for poverty may be confounded (i.e., due to
4 inadequate knowledge of social and economic factors related to poverty, fundamental attribution
5 error, etc.). Cozzarelli et al. (2001) reported that younger persons, who may not have not yet
6 worked to support themselves, are more likely to make individualistic/internal attributions for
7 wealth and poverty. Prior studies have reported that attitudinal and attributional variables were
8 related to one another at widely varying degrees, and in some cases were not related at all
9 (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). This pattern supports previous studies by Furnham (1982), in which
10 unemployed persons were found to favor structural/external attributions for poverty over
11 individualistic/internal attributions for poverty.

12 Clearly this study suffered from certain limitations. Firstly, the majority of participants were
13 White, young, college students who reported that neither they nor their immediate family had a
14 history of receiving public assistance (e.g., welfare, TANF, food stamps, or a housing subsidy).
15 Cozzarelli et al. (2001) reported that age is significantly related to the attributions one makes for
16 poverty and wealth. Furthermore, a greater variety of ethnicities, social classes, ages, and
17 geographic locales would be beneficial to this study. Further research is necessary to explore
18 other factors associated with poverty and poor persons. In particular more research is needed to
19 assess the content (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of attitudes toward the poor rather
20 than simply evaluating degrees of favor or disfavor.

21 Current systems tend to disadvantage the poor, and the economic disparity continues to widen.
22 Historically, programs that have been designed to serve the poor (e.g., welfare, TANF, the
23 Workforce Investment Act) have been ineffective, and serve to reinforce the negative stereotypes
24 and attitudes toward the poor. Debate continues regarding welfare reform and legislation that
25 would establish time limits for those receiving public assistance. A portion of the population of
26 the United States consider social service and public assistance programs created to assist the poor
27 as a waste of taxpayer money, and regard the poor as a burden to society. Negative attitudes and
28 stereotypes lead to negative behaviors against members of disliked groups. And while legislation
29 may create laws that require equal opportunity for employment, housing, and other factors,
30 legislation will never eliminate prejudice. Legislation and law cannot make people think or feel
31 what we want them to.

32

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29

30 **Chris Coryn** graduated in May 2002 with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. He was also the
 31 recipient of the James R. Haines Research Award in Psychology for the 2001-2002 academic
 32 year. He will be attending the Master of Arts in Applied Psychology program at IUSB in the fall
 33 of 2002. This research was conducted for P421, *Advanced Laboratory in Social Psychology*.
 34 ``My interest in this project was generated quite some time prior to its actual origination. The
 35 catalyst for this study began in P320, *Social Psychology*. This course identified and defined
 36 various theories, themes, and topics that I found intriguing and enlightening. The phenomenon
 37 that is the human condition and the relationship to social identity, social learning, and other
 38 social influences that contribute to our sense of self and how we define and perceive others
 39 continues to fascinate as well as perplex me. Not all stigmatized persons are members of racial,
 40 ethnic, or minority groups. Certainly many poor persons are also members of these groups, but
 41 the discrimination and prejudice remains indistinguishable. Although the poor comprise a large
 42 proportion of the United States and global populations, these groups tend to be marginalized or
 43 overlooked. Dr. Catherine Borshuk assisted me in exploring this topic and directed me to a small
 44 body of literature and prior research in this area. I intend to further explore these and various

1 related issues while attending the Masters of Applied Psychology program." The author would
2 like to extend his thanks for the continued effort, assistance, and support of Catherine Borshuk
3 PhD, Jonathan McIntosh PhD, and Laura Talcott MA.

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