Why Poor and Why Rich: International Surveys Validate Attribution Theory

Political communication research recently has taken a promising and interesting turn, examining whether political conservatives and political liberals process messages very differently. This turn has been led by George Lakoff who lately has been prompting U.S. liberals about how they must frame their messages; he also has chastised them for surrendering political discourse to political conservatives, specifically letting the conservatives frame the terms of debate (Lakoff, 2010).

The Lakoff claims fit well within Attribution Theory and largely have been advanced regarding the United States. This research seeks to test whether these phenomena are culture-specific to the U. S. or if such processing of political messages is a more universal phenomenon. Specifically the researcher conducts a secondary analysis of four large international polls and one national poll, the Polish General Social Survey. The polls all featured questions about why others are poor or wealthy. All these polls also asked questions about political philosophy, liberal to conservative. If the Lakoff points "travel well," then political conservatives, true to Attribution Theory, will see both poverty and wealth as a consequence of individual traits. Political liberals would point to social conditions for both wealth and poverty.

Literature Review

Attribution Theory observes that people have a compelling need to explain things. These explanations break down into things internal to the self or to an outside force. Advancing Attribution Theory, Zucker and Weiner (2006) studied attribution of the causes of poverty by student and non-student U. S. samples. In both samples conservatism correlated positively with individual causes and negatively with societal causes. The Zucker and Weiner work largely validates Lakoff's observations (2002, 2004, 2008) that in the U. S. conservatives and Republicans take a "stern father" approach to issues, finding individual fault for almost any problem, while Democrats and liberals look to external forces.

Harmon (2010a) built on these works by testing their conclusions against six U.S. public opinion polls. Secondary analysis found consistent and strong relationships. Conservatives and Republicans overwhelmingly attributed poverty to the personal failings of the poor themselves (lazy, drunk, etc.) while Democrats and liberals consistently offered social explanations like poor schools and lousy jobs for poverty. Later he looked at the inverse question, the reasons respondents give for others obtaining wealth (2010b). Generally he found that Democrats and liberals attributed wealth to connections or being born into a wealthy family, while Republicans and conservatives declared wealth comes from hard work.

Several studies suggest these phenomena are cross-cultural, and not just an American pattern. Wagstaff (1983) studied attitudes toward the poor among respondents in Liverpool and Glasgow, using MacDonald's Poverty Scale and the Protestant Ethic Scale. He found supporters of the British Conservative

Party more likely to blame the poor for their plight. Labour Party supporters were much less likely to do so. Supporters of the Liberal/SDF Alliance fell somewhere in between. Similarly Pandey et al (1982) found those in India with a right-wing orientation take more negative attitudes toward the poor than those with a left-wing orientation. Ideas about wealth also are very resilient. Prabhakar (2008) conducted seven focus groups with 58 members of the English public about wealth taxes. He hoped to counteract the "death taxes" frame on estate taxes with other ways of framing the issue. Participants, however, generally clung to opposition to wealth and inheritance taxes even when presented with substantial contrary information.

International, multi-nation surveys clearly are of self-evident value in extending research linking political orientation and "why poor" and "why rich" responses. Surveys within individual nation states, however, also can be valuable in such research. Poland, for example, represents a good opportunity to test further whether political liberalism consistently correlates with the attribution of both wealth and poverty to social conditions, while political conservatives rely on individual strengths and weaknesses to explain both wealth and poverty. The Polish General Social Survey (Cichomski, Jerzynski, and Zielinski, 2004) offers an elaborate series of several questions in which respondents are queried about the reasons for wealth and poverty.

Recent political crosscurrents in Poland also make the inquiry intriguing. Poland, Nawojczyk and Walton (2004) argued, has a unique mythology of wealth that can be

found in both its peasant and literary subcultures. Public opinion, they noted, was fairly negative toward the 1990s burst of wealth accumulation, and attitudes lingered that the Polish business elite used shady practices to obtain and maintain wealth. Paczynksa (2002) adds that Poland has bifurcated into two classes: a small, well-educated urban and upscale group active in civic life; and a poor, rural, dissatisfied class less likely to participate in civic life or to see democracy and universally beneficent.

Methods

The researcher obtained from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (www.icpsr.org) the following surveys: the Polish General Social Survey, 1992-2002 (Cichomski, Jerzynski, and Zielinski, 2004); the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) surveys on Social Inequality, 1992; International Social Justice Project 1991 and 1996 (Wegener and Mason, 1996); World Values Survey aggregate data 1981-2000 (Inglehart, 2006); and Eurobarometer 67.1 (Papacostas, 2007). The data were downloaded and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) files for data analysis.

The 1992 ISSP surveys were first made available to the ICPSR in May 1996. They contains multistage probability samples and data from: Australia, Germany, Great Britain, the United States, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia, New Zealand, Canada, and the Philippines. Respondents (total N of 23,093) aged 18 and older were asked about equality of income, wealth, and opportunity; the

extent of present inequality; explanations for inequality; and support for government programs to reduce inequality. In the ISSP surveys, political philosophy was identified on a five-point scale from 1 (very liberal/left) to 5 (very conservative/right). Possible reasons for success were scaled from 1 (essential) to 5 (not important).

The International Social Justice Project was a collaboration among 13 countries to determine popular perceptions of economic and social justice. Countries participating in the 1991 and 1996 surveys were: Bulgaria, East Germany, Estonia, Great Britain, Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, the United States, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the final two known as Czechoslovakia in the 1991 survey. Political partisanship and political ideology were scaled from l very liberal party to 5 very conservative party. Reasons for poverty and wealth shared the same five-point scale from very often to never.

World Values Survey respondents self-identified on a political scale from 1 (very left) to 10 (very right). A question on the causes of poverty had the following stated answering options: because they have been unlucky, because of laziness and lack of willpower, because there is much injustice in our society, and it's an inevitable part of progress. The World Values Surveys cover multiple waves of data collection covering the time period of 1982 through 2000. The four-wave aggregate covers more than 250,000 respondents in 80 countries. It is available from the World Values Survey website (http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSData.jsp?Idioma=I) as well as that of the ICPSR and the Association for Religion Data Archives

(http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/WVSAGG.asp).

Eurobarometer data came from surveys of citizens of the European Union aged 15 and over residing in the 27 EU member countries. Total sample size was 27,746. Eurobarometer used the same political scale and four-option explanations for poverty as in the World Values Survey. It also asked a question about which three out of a long list of reasons "might best explain why people are poor or excluded from our society."

The 1997, 1999, and 2002 Polish surveys had extensive modules on wealth and poverty. All were field surveys of adults at least 18 years old. The 1997 survey yielded 2402 completed questionnaires. In 1999 the figure was 2282 completed surveys, and in 2002 it was 2473 completed surveys. The total sample size of those participating in both the political philosophy question and the wealth and poverty module typically ranged from roughly 1900 to 2200. Respondents identified their political philosophy on a scale from very left (1) to very right (10). Reasons for poverty or wealth were scaled from (1) very often to (5) very rarely or never.

For both the ISSP and Polish GSS surveys, these scales allowed for simple regressions to see how well self-reported political philosophy correlated with reasons given for wealth and poverty. The questions in both were scaled so a negative Beta and t-value indicated the reason is more strongly favored by the political right than by the political left. Positive Beta and t-values indicate reasons more strongly preferred by political left (liberal) as opposed to the political right (conservative). The researcher recoded the data in both only to one small degree. The numerical codes for no data or no

answer were set to “system missing” so as not to affect the calculations.

The researcher anticipated that, based on past work in the U.S., U.K., and India, political liberalism in all sets of surveys will correlate strongly with social explanations for both wealth and poverty, while political conservatism in all surveys will correlate strongly with individual characteristics of the poor and rich explaining both wealth and poverty.

Findings

Secondary analysis of the Polish General Social Survey, 1992-2002, generally followed the expected cross-cultural pattern of political ideology strongly predicting how respondents explain poverty and wealth. Right-wing Poles explained poverty in terms of the individual failings of the poor—laziness, drunkenness, and inability to save. Conversely, left-wing Poles saw poverty as a failure of the economic system, a lack of state protection, a consequence of the introduction of a market economy, and bad luck. The only characteristic of the poor stressed by self-described left-wing Poles was their lack of connections (Table 1).

Right-wing Poles tilted toward admirable personal characteristics to explain wealth, namely hard work, saving, and exercising moderation and restraint. Left-wing Poles had a decidedly different view of how wealth had been accumulated and maintained. They mention a system that allows unfair advantage and exercises little systemic control over high incomes.

Furthermore, in an echo of the Nawojczyk and Walton observations, dishonest behavior was cited as a factor in wealth (Table 2).

A few stated reasons for both wealth and poverty did not yield a significant difference by political philosophy. Education/qualifications, or the lack thereof, were not significantly different as cited by Polish liberals and conservatives, neither did coming from a wealthy/poor family. Ability/talent or the lack of it was not significantly different between liberal and conservative Poles as a cited reason for wealth, but fell just short of significance ($p = .051$) as a stated reason for poverty—with conservatives tilting more toward citing a lack of ability as a cause.

Sometimes a stated reason and its inverse did not yield the same result. For example, dishonest behavior yielded a significant difference with liberals more than conservatives citing it as a source of wealth. However, honest behavior did not yield a statistically significant difference between Polish left and right as a reason for poverty. Perhaps, at least in the eyes of many Poles, dishonesty can play a role in becoming rich, but honesty doesn't necessarily doom one to a life of poverty. Liberals but not conservatives cited bad luck, lack of connections, and the introduction of a market economy as a reason for poverty, but the difference between right and left was not significant for luck, connections, and a market economy as reasons for wealth.

Poles not only broke down by political philosophy on reasons for wealth /poverty but also had different ideas about the percentage of their countrymen who were rich and poor. The right-wing more than the left-wing estimated a higher percentage of rich people (Sum of Squares 23.883, $F = 4.745$, Beta .048, $t = 2.178$, $p = .029$). The political left more than the right estimated a higher percentage of poor people (Sum of Squares

56.416, F = 11.314, Beta = -.034, t = -3.364, p =.001).

The multinational ISSP surveys offered even stronger connections between political philosophy and stated reasons for "getting ahead in life." Conservatives once again attributed success to the personal characteristics ambition, natural ability, and hard work. They also credited a person's religion as important, perhaps more of a bow to the moral framework of religion than to any suggestion of religious discrimination. Liberals offered more social/political/economic external factors such as being born to a wealthy family, having well-educated parents, knowing the right people, and having political connections. Liberals also were more likely than conservatives to suggest race, gender, and political beliefs could be reasons for either advancement or mobility-crushing discrimination. Liberals more than conservatives also cited education as a success factor (Table 3).

In fact, of the 13 success factors tested by ISSP twelve yielded statistically significant relationships associated with political philosophy. Only the suggested "success reason" of coming from a particular region fell shy of significance (Sum of Squares 2.976, F = 3.408, Beta -.019, t = -1.846, p =.065).

The International Social Justice Project asked about reasons for poverty, as well as reasons for wealth. The political right overwhelmingly tilted toward loose morals and lack of effort as explaining the plight of the poor. The political left was much more likely to cite discrimination, unequal opportunity, and the failures of the economic system. The political left also opted for a multitude of reasons for wealth: connections, dishonesty, economic injustice, and more opportunities made available to the already wealth. The political right saw wealth as deriving from hard work (Table 4).

The 20,106 World Values Survey respondents who as their first choice to explain poverty blamed laziness or lack of willpower among the poor themselves averaged 5.80 on the ten-point left to right political scale, compared to 5.54 for unlucky (N=9975), 5.53 for part of modern progress (N=14,258), and 5.07 for injustice in society (N=27,183). These differences were statistically significant (ANOVA Sum of Squares 6,538.271, df=3, Mean Square = 2,179.424, F = 502.194, p <.000).

Eurobarometer yielded very similar results. The 4,392 citing laziness averaged 5.76 on the political scale, compared to 5.54 for inevitable part of progress (N=2951), 5.39 for unlucky (N=4033), and 5.05 for injustice (N=7863). Furthermore, when one compares mentions to lack of mentions, the "check three reasons for poverty" question yielded further support to the observation that personal failings of the poor are cited by right-wingers while the political left opts for social and economic explanations for poverty. If one sets the bar for significant difference at a very high level, p < .0005, the differences are startlingly evident. The right-wing overwhelmingly are more likely to say "they don't do enough to get by" or say the poor are drunk or addicted, while left-wingers select more often social and economic issues like low pay, insufficient affordable housing, insufficient number of jobs (long-term unemployment), discrimination, and lack of concern from the people around the impoverished (Table 5).

Discussion

This paper largely confirmed that in Poland and in the multiple nations surveyed in the ISSP, World Values Surveys, and Eurobarometer self-identified political right

wingers followed the pattern previously noted in the U. S., U. K., and India, namely that conservatives explain poverty and wealth largely as a consequence of personal failings or strengths. Self-identified liberals or left-wing persons explain poverty and wealth in terms of systemic failures of unregulated markets, family connections, discrimination, and government policies or practices that serve elites and "stack the deck" against advancement of the poor.

Furthermore, Poles, or at least liberal Poles, add a twist that dishonesty has played a strong role in the modern political economy of the country, playing a key role in establishing and maintaining post-communist "have's" and "have nots." This finding fits Polish historical mythologies described by Nawojczyk and Walton, as well as modern hierarchical realities noted by Paczynksa.

These secondary analyses add to a building body of research that answers to the questions "Why Are People Poor?" and "Why Are People Rich?" represent clear and consistent cleavages in the public and the electorate. Across several cultures, those who identify as conservative blame the poor for their condition, and laud the rich for theirs—relying almost exclusively on personal strengths and weaknesses for attribution of these phenomena. Those who identify as liberal see a mix of social, political, and economic external forces shaping the fates of those who are poor and those who are wealthy. These findings fit well with Attribution Theory.

The author did not venture into how well answers to "why poor" and "why rich" correlate with political party in Poland or other countries. That question represents a promising area for scholars who have plumbed the shifting tides of parties and allegiances in those countries. Other promising areas for future inquiry include

secondary analyses of other existing data sets to see if the pattern holds true, or, better still, original data collections specifically aimed at the “why poor” and “why rich” questions. Perhaps future editions of research like the Pew Global Attitudes Project could borrow some of these questions and put them to good use.

Table 1. Reasons for Poverty and Political Left-Right from Polish GSS

Reason	Sum of Squares	F	Beta	t	p
Loose Morals, Drunkenness	104.909	21.466	-.098	-4.633	.000
Laziness	47.477	9.687	-.066	-3.112	.002
Inability to Save	57.090	11.587	-.073	-3.404	.001
Failure of Economic System	41.193	8.201	.063	2.864	.004
Lack of Connections	28.314	5.781	.051	2.404	.016
Introduction of Market Economy	54.242	10.918	.074	3.304	.001
Bad Luck	22.784	4.615	.046	2.149	.032
Lack of State Protection	33.203	6.732	.055	2.595	.010

Not Significant: Lack of Education and Qualifications, Coming from a Poor Family, Lack of Ability and Talent, Honest Behavior.

Table 2. Reasons for Wealth and Political Left-Right from Polish GSS

Reason	Sum of Squares	F	Beta	t	p
Hard Work	64.485	13.163	-.077	-3.628	.000
Ability to Save	34.169	6.939	-.056	-2.634	.008
Exercising Moderation and Restraint	38.182	7.748	-.061	-2.783	.005
Lack of Control over High Incomes	88.216	17.897	.091	4.230	.000
Economic System Allows for Unfair Advantage	35.711	7.243	.058	2.691	.007
Dishonest Behavior	93.287	19.019	.093	4.361	.000

Not Significant: Education and Qualifications, Coming from a Wealthy Family, Connections, Luck, Introduction of Market Economy, Abilities and Talent.

Table 3. ISSP Multi-Nation Survey, Left-Right and Reasons for Getting Ahead

Reason	Sum of Squares	F	Beta	t	p
Ambition	24.875	33.820	-.059	-5.816	.000
Natural Ability	15.100	20.471	-.046	-4.524	.000
Hard Work	66.887	87.813	-.094	-9.371	.000
Person's Religion	11.152	12.569	-.036	-3.545	.000
Wealthy Family	27.821	23.168	.049	4.813	.000
Well-Educated Parents	4.360	4.209	.021	2.052	.040
Good Education	32.366	40.763	.064	6.385	.000
Knowing the Right People	22.194	23.172	.049	4.814	.000
Political Connections	64.712	54.100	.075	7.355	.000
Person's Race	20.520	16.110	.041	4.014	.000
Born a Man or Woman	21.038	17.515	.043	4.185	.000
Political Beliefs	37.020	37.113	.062	6.092	.000

Not Significant: Region Comes From.

Table 4. ISJP Multi-Nation Survey, Left-Right Political Parties and Respondent Reasons for Poverty/Wealth

Reason	Sum of Squares	F	Beta	t	p
Poverty: Loose Morals	33.977	27.121	-.059	-5.208	.000
Poverty: No Effort	139.649	118.707	-.122	-10.895	.000
Poverty: Discrimination	138.244	105.199	.116	10.257	.000
Poverty: No Equal Opp.	143.432	117.050	.121	10.819	.000
Poverty: Economic System	197.409	140.288	.133	11.844	.000
Wealth: Dishonesty	41.199	18.386	.047	4.288	.000
Wealth: Hard Work	7.615	3.930	-.022	-1.982	.047
Wealth: Connections	42.427	28.475	.058	5.336	.000
Wealth: More Opportunity	107.878	58.583	.083	7.654	.000
Wealth: Economic Injustice	143.657	46.842	.074	6.844	.000

Not Significant: Ability/Talent, Luck

Table 5. Eurobarometer, Left-Right Mean on Ten-Point Scale and Reasons Given for Poverty, Mentioned (M) versus Not Mentioned (NM), choose three list.

Reason	Mean	N	Std Dev	t / p
Social benefits not high enough (M)	5.29	7225	2.302	t = 4.0754
in our country (NM)	5.42	13833	2.141	p <.0001
There is a lack of concern from (M)	5.17	2560	2.195	t = 4.9650
people around them (NM)	5.40	18498	2.197	p <.0001
They suffer from a long-term (M)	5.43	5699	2.178	t = 2.3469
illness or disability (NM)	5.35	15359	2.205	p = .0189
They have been through a family (M)	5.43	4511	2.136	t = 2.1674
break-up or lost a family member (NM)	5.35	16547	2.214	p = .0302
Their current work (M)	5.29	6481	2.243	t = 3.6576
doesn't pay enough (NM)	5.41	14577	2.177	p = .0003
They suffer from alcoholism, (M)	5.52	7979	2.153	t = 7.6977
drug abuse or other addictions (NM)	5.28	13079	2.220	p < .0001
They have been unemployed (M)	5.28	7797	2.156	t = 4.7838
for a long time (NM)	5.43	1326	2.221	p < .0001
They lack education (M)	5.44	4970	2.121	t = 2.5233
(NM)	5.35	16088	2.221	p = .0116
They don't do enough to get by (M)	5.71	3371	2.213	t = 9.7062
(NM)	5.31	17867	2.189	p < .0001
Their parents were poor (M)	5.23	1105	2.262	t = 2.2086
	5.38	19953	2.194	p = .0272

(NM)				
Discrimination based on ethnic origin (M)	4.91	1651	2.109	t = 8.8898
age, disability, or sexual orientation (NM)	5.41	19407	2.201	p < .0001
They cannot locate affordable (M)	5.16	1283	2.117	t = 3.6324
housing (NM)	5.39	19775	2.203	p = .0003

Not significant: They live in a poor area; they have too many children.

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