The causes of poverty: Is a biblical understanding reflected in the experiences of today's poor?

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Abstract

In September 2000, the United Nations adopted their Millennium Declaration: a commitment to improving the lives of the world's poorest people. Of the eight Millennium Goals declared, the foremost was to "Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger," with a target to halve the proportion of people whose income is less than US $1 per day. Many have attempted to address this problem, yet debate rages as to what causes poverty in many communities. Dr. Christopher Wright, a Church of England minister, contends that the root causes of poverty are indeed identifiable from Old Testament texts: natural disasters, laziness, and oppression. While Wright presented a brief overview of this biblical approach to the causes of poverty, he did not elaborate on whether it would be reflected in the experience of poor people. This study therefore presents a critical synthesis of Wright's model with contemporary field research. We conclude by reinforcing the importance of the Church engaging with the *causes* of poverty—not just the expressions of poverty—in order to fully demonstrate the love of God to the world.

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Introduction

In September 2000, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration—a commitment to improving the lives of the world's poorest people. Of the eight Millennium Goals declared, the foremost was to "Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger," with a target to halve the proportion of people whose income is less than US $1 per day by the year 2015 (United Nations, 2010). In order to achieve such a lofty goal, Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Duke University, Anirudh Krishna, makes an impassioned yet rational plea for going beyond merely identifying and measuring poverty, and seeking to recognize the causes of poverty:

> Poverty is not a static phenomenon; identifiable causes help regenerate poverty. Concentrating not just on who is poor at a given moment in time but on why they are poor can lead to better designed and in fact better "targeted" policies. (Krishna, 2007: 1950)

In *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Wright, 2004), Anglican evangelical scholar Christopher J. H. Wright gives an outline of his understanding of the causes of poverty according to the biblical literature. He proposes that the Christian Old Testament classifies the causes of poverty to be natural causes, laziness, and oppression (2004: 169–72). This article seeks to assess whether this biblical model for understanding the causes of poverty is consistent with the experiences of today's poor. Granted, Wright's model is not unique as a foray into this type of thinking (e.g. Myers, 2011; Kaiser 2014), yet his work has an excellent grounding in both the church (as an ordained minister) and the academy (as a Cambridge graduate and holder of various academic positions) and thus can provide an invaluable contribution to missiological praxis.

Wright's textual support is entirely Old Testament, which may raise a question of focus, considering the Christian faith's preference for biblical writings centered on the life and activities of Christ and the early church. Yet Donald Hay, the retired University of Oxford economist whose research typically covered the interaction between economics and Christian ethics, argues this might be entirely appropriate based upon the spiritual context addressed in the two testaments (Hay, 1989: 69–70). When discussing applying the Bible to contemporary social problems, he reasons that New Testament ethics are aimed at those in the church who, by the process of a new spiritual birth, are being regenerated by the Holy Spirit and thus should be able to maintain a higher attainment of social behavior. Old Testament writings, however, seem to presuppose a low level of human behavior in the community. Murder, theft, rape, divorce, and bestiality are frequently addressed in the first canon, as they are directly appropriate to the actual tribulations of cultures composed of unregenerate people. Without dismissing the relevance of New Testament ethics, Hay's conclusion is that "the Old Testament may well be more useful than the New Testament in providing examples of second-best applications to a people who are less well motivated to obey" (1989: 70).

The biblical model of Christopher J. H. Wright

Wright classifies the causes of poverty to be *natural causes, laziness*, and *oppression* (Wright, 2004: 169–71). He explains *natural causes* to be "the result of living in a fallen world in which things go wrong for no reason" (2004: 169). To support the idea of natural causes being an instigator of poverty, Wright makes reference to natural disasters such as the famines of Genesis 47 and the bereavement and widowhood met by Naomi in the book of Ruth, or the personal disasters encountered by Job (2004: 169). By extension, this would also include any disabling injury, floods, or fires or instance where a person or people group is inadvertently disadvantaged by an unforeseeable tragedy. Wright contends that there is rarely a suitable explanation or rationalization: it simply happens.

In the category of poverty caused by what he simply titles *laziness*, Wright observes "laziness and squandering can indeed lead to impoverishment, and hard work is often conducive to economic prosperity" (2004: 170). Wright acknowledges that this is predominantly the view of the book of Proverbs, where the avoidance of hard work is a named cause of economic lack (Prov 12:11; 14:23; 20:13), but is aware that there are often other causes in play (i.e. 13:23) (2004: 169–70).

The final category of poverty causation—and the principal cause according to Wright's reading of the biblical literature—is *oppression.* Acknowledging oppression as the largest root cause admits that the largest cause of poverty in humanity is actually humanity: the "exploitation of others by those whose own selfish interests are served by keeping others poor" (2004: 170). Wright goes further (2004: 170–71), noting that oppression is recognized in the Old Testament in a remarkably nuanced way:

- *Exploitation of the socially weak.* This is particularly true when there is no stronger party prepared to take up their cause (see 2 Kgs 4:1–7).
- *Exploitation of the economically weak.* This is prevalent when lenders, employers, and leaders take advantage of the poorer in society, by imposing heavy taxation, rents, or usury, or by withholding personal items or wages (see Exod 22:25; Deut 15:7–9; 24:14–18; 1 Sam 8:10–18; Neh 5; Amos 2:6).
- *Exploitation of the ethnically weak.* This occurs when people are at a disadvantage because of their ethnicity, and could occur in employment, social, trading, or judicial circles. As the Israelites had themselves once been enslaved as a minority in Egypt, they are told to pay particular attention to the vulnerability of the ethnic minorities in their midst (see Exod 22:21; Lev 19:33).
- *Royal excess, corruption, and abuse of power*. Using royal standing in order to violently take advantage of the people is a frequent observation throughout the Old Testament. Solomon, Ahab, and Jehoiakim are referenced for their exploits. Ezekiel condemns this behavior as it spreads beyond the royal walls to become a scourge in general society (see 1 Kgs 11–12; 21; Jer 22:13; Ezek 22:6, 25, 29).
- *Judicial corruption and false accusation*. At times, abuse of power was not restricted to the sovereign leaders, but it also became a feature of the judicial

leaders. The poor were frequently victims of corrupt judicial procedures, even to the point of being deliberately disadvantaged.

Testing the biblical model

We wanted to know whether the presented biblical model is reflected in the experiences of today's poor—people who live in a vastly different place and time. We recognize that there are important socioeconomic differences that can be seen between Old Testament Israel and contemporary Brazil. For instance, as a theocracy under God, Israel was expected to adhere to divinely ordained laws concerning the tightness of the family unit (see Deut 21:18–21), the regulation and protection of the land as a family resource (Deut 19:14; Lev 25), the expectation to share resources with those in need (Lev 19:9–10), and restrictions on profiteering from debt (Deut 23:19–20; Lev 25:35–37). Furthermore, as a subsistence economy based largely on agriculture, the influence of the economic market would have been significantly different. Each family was granted its own land resource and would primarily focus on the economic activity (sowing and reaping, breeding and killing) that was necessary to sustain the family. In this environment, formal education and employment that was separate from the activity of family maintenance would have been almost negligible, especially compared to what contemporary market economies require.

Nevertheless, both O'Donovan (1973) and Kaiser (1983) argue that for the Scriptures to still hold authority, there must be a sense of universality: an ability to transcend time, space, and culture and speak to a non-biblical audience. Though we concede that every biblical command or narrative may be directed in the first instance to a particular person in a particular context, this does not refute its ability to be universalized. In fact, we contend for a specific command to have any authority, it must first be referenced to a higher, universal principle: "an ethic without universals would be no ethic, [but] a series of disconnected, arbitrary imperatives" (Kaiser, 1983: 25). Thus, while we accept that this biblical model speaks to a people living under divinely appointed socioeconomic conditions, we maintain that robust biblical interpretations should offer a degree of universality to contemporary populations.

The data set

There is a myriad of data available regarding the reason for poverty and economic underdevelopment and we must carefully select what kind of data would best suit our research needs. We agree with Chambers (1994) that our data concerning poverty causation have come from the poor themselves, drawing upon their insights, understandings, and beliefs. We also agree with Sen (1999) that poverty is primarily a human experience that largely transcends quantitative proxies such as income and consumption. This means that we are looking for specifically qualitative data—records that are rich in communicating the spectrum of the human experience.

Ideally, we would have been able to source the data ourselves. However, given the extraordinary amount of time, resource, and specific skills required in gathering

primary data of this sort, this type of research was beyond the capability of this article. We therefore accepted that our study would be a secondary analysis of pre-published primary data, and we aimed to source data that are as close to our requirements, and of a necessary high standard, to be included in our research. We selected to use data collected for the *World Development Report 2000/1* on poverty and development (World Bank, 2000). The *World Development Report* (*WDR*) is the World Bank's major analytical publication and the Bank's best-known contribution to knowledge about development. The report is written by a panel of Bank staff and external consultants, under the general guidance of the Chief Economist. In his critique on the history of the report, Yusuf writes, "it has become a highly influential publication that is consulted by international organizations, national governments, scholars, and civil society networks to inform their decision-making processes" (Yusuf, 2009: i).

The *World Development Report 2000/01: Attacking Poverty* (World Bank, 2000) was specially commissioned to bring together a whole new body of evidence on poverty, seeking to "expand the understanding of poverty and its causes" (2000: v). In order to provide data for this report, a study was commissioned to "enable a wide range of poor people in diverse countries and conditions to share their views in such a way that they can inform and contribute" to the report, based on their "experiences, priorities, reflections, and recommendations" (2000: 2). The *WDR* 2000/01 used data from two sources: a synthesis of PPA reports titled *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan et al., 2000, hereafter titled "Voices"), and a commissioned study titled *Consultations with the Poor* (Narayan et al., 1999, hereafter titled "Consultations"). The former was a review of recent participatory poverty reports conducted for the World Bank since 1993. Eighty-one reports were selected (from an initial pool of over 300), representing data collected in 50 nations and involving about 40,000 poor people (see Narayan et al., 2000: 3, 17). The latter was a new comparative study, specially commissioned for the *WDR* and comparing data from 23 countries and involving about 20,000 poor people (see Narayan et al., 1999: 1). It is the latter that is of most interest to us, as it comprises the national study that was specifically designed for a study such as ours.

In 2013, we attempted to make contact with the lead researchers of each of the 23 countries studied in *Consultations*, as well as lead supervisor Deepa Narayan. Of all those available, it was only Marcus Melo, the lead researcher of the Brazilian report, who was able to supply the primary data records used for his research. Following a request on 23 May 2013, Marcus Melo graciously supplied the site reports from Brazil via email on 28 May 2013.

Sample

The Brazilian study was conducted in ten sites located in three cities: Recife, Santo André, and Itabuna. It involved discussions with 632 poor individuals who participated in discussion groups and/or individual interviews. As per the guidelines given to the researchers (Shah, 1999), the methodology employed was participatory and qualitative and was based on the view of poverty as multidimensional and not reducible to single-indicator economic measures of well-being.

In 2015, Brazil was classified by the World Bank (2015a) as an Upper Middle Income country with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of US $11,690 (in 2013) and a poverty headcount ratio of 8.9% (in 2013). However, at the turn of the century Brazil was still reeling from the 1980s "lost decade" of Latin American countries, and years of double-digit inflation. Ultimately, according to Melo, this led to both an increase in absolute poverty and the impoverishment of the middle sectors: per capita income grew at an annual rate of 0.4% between 1981 and 1989 (Melo, 1999: 12). In 2001, Brazil's GNI per capita was only US $3,290 and 24.7% of Brazilians still lived under the national poverty line (World Bank, 2015b, World Bank, 2015c).

In the Brazil report, 10 sites were chosen across the cities of Recife, Santo André, and Itabuna. The selection of sites was influenced by both the presence of ongoing World Bank projects and the desire for regional variety population diversity. According to Melo,

> Recife has one of the highest unemployment rates and the highest percentage of families below the poverty line of metropolitan areas in Brazil. The data for the metropolitan area of Recife are significantly worse because it includes the impoverished peripheral municipalities. (Melo, 1999: 8)

In discussing the selection criteria for the metropolitan area of Santo André, Melo commented that it "epitomizes a highly industrialized area, which is undergoing rapid change as a result of job losses in the auto industry" (1999: 8–9). Itabuna, a mid-sized city (population 150,000) in the Brazilian hinterland, was to counterbalance the metropolitan focus of the first two locations (1999: 9). Itabuna's economy was formerly dominated by cocoa plantations but has since slid into impoverishment.

The data we have used comes from two components of each Brazilian site report: the group discussions on cause-impact and the individual interviews. The group discussions typically involved around 50 men and women (group sizes of about 12) and were used to explore the links between perceptions of the different causes of poverty and their impact. Though all sites were expected to conduct group discussions, we have data from eight. The interview case studies were based on one-to-one, open-ended discussions with individuals that were purposed to provide specific illustrations to highlight and support the results obtained from the group discussion (Melo, 1999: 8). It is important to note that the national report stressed that though the interviewees were considered poor, they were not from the poorest groups in urban Brazil, the *pedintes* and *esmolés* (beggars) (1999: 28). Therefore, our data pool consists of eight group discussions (involving a minimum of 434 people) and 48 individual interviews. Statistical data with regards to levels of schooling, literacy, ethnic groups, and access to basic infrastructure (electricity, water, paved roads, post offices) for each location was provided at the beginning of each site report and will not be discussed here.

The research tool

We selected a framework synthesis as our research tool. A framework synthesis is a qualitative research approach that uses an a priori "framework" derived from the

The established process (see Carroll et al., 2013 p. 12) for conducting a Framework Synthesis has been adapted for the purposes of our study and is shown below:

1. Systematically identify relevant primary research studies with qualitative, participatory approach data, using the SPIDER approach.
2. Generate an a priori framework taking into consideration themes observed.
3. Extract data on study characteristics and appraise quality.
4. Gather evidence from studies and code against the framework.
5. Look for signs of new themes that do not fit in the framework.
6. Produce an updated framework by merging the a priori and any new themes that have been observed.
7. Review evidence against new framework. Explore any issues that have arisen, discuss implications and comment on quality of studies.

researcher's previous literature review to synthesize the qualitative research findings. It produces a map of each key dimension identified in the synthesis and the nature of its influence and association with the other dimensions. It is a deductive approach: beginning with a general theory, stating a hypothesis, making observations, and finally confirming, refuting, or refining the theory (see Carroll, Booth, and Cooper, 2011; Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009). This suits our investigation, as we will be opening with a general theory (the model presented by Wright) and looking to observe whether this is identifiable in the data set in order to confirm, refute, or refine Wright's model. The established process (see Carroll et al., 2013: 12) for conducting a framework synthesis that has been adapted for the purposes of our study is shown in the above list.

Methodology

We generated an a priori framework for understanding the causes of poverty, drawing directly upon Wright's model. This is shown in Table 1.

Our data was then reduced to its core theme and subthemes and coded against this framework. Any matching data was coded accordingly, and any discrepancies were individually interpreted and coded according to a new, relevant theme as appropriate. To do this, we first imported both the group discussions and the individual case studies provided by Melo into NVivo. These are our *source items*. We then coded our data, which in its simplest sense, is a way of "classifying and then tagging text with codes . . . in order to facilitate later retrieval" (Bazeley, 2007: 66). We therefore created three "parent nodes" to coincide with column two in Table 1 and labeled them with the themes of "Natural causes," "Laziness," and "Oppression." We then created numerous "child nodes" to coincide with the subthemes presented in column four. For organizational clarity, each specific theme from the text was kept in a third-level node and labeled according to its subtype. Once a reference was cited, it was coded under one of the parent–child nodes.

Table 1. The coding framework.

Question	Theme	Definition	Subthemes
"In the opinions of those experiencing poverty, what are the leading causes of their situation?"	Natural causes	The result of living in a fallen world in which things go wrong for no reason.	None.
	Laziness	Laziness and squandering that leads to impoverishment.	None.
	Oppression	Exploitation by those whose own selfish interests are served by keeping others poor	Social exploitation Economic exploitation Ethnic exploitation Governing corruption Judicial corruption

Coding involved a detailed, slow, reflective exploration of the interviews in order to find any and all references to the causes of poverty. This coding was mostly done at the level of words, but occasionally at the level of sentences, clauses, and larger units of information. When coding at the word level, care was taken to only code once per idea, so as to prevent multiple references to the same idea. The only exception to this is when the same idea resurfaced later in the interview—in this case it was recorded again in recognition that it was a particularly strong idea for the interviewee and should be treated accordingly in our analysis. It is also important to remember that we are analyzing the appearance of references (i.e., how many times it was raised by an interviewee), but we are not assessing the strength of the feeling or ranking them in order of priority.[1]

At times there were subtle and interesting references in the data that seemed to cross the boundaries of the framework. Admittedly, making a decision on which theme a subset theme would come under was at times difficult: at these times it was important to look at the context of the comment and to allocate it to the most pressing subtheme. At the conclusion of the first round of coding and noding, we reviewed the data again to see if there were any themes developing that would alter the way we had coded earlier texts, and we made appropriate adjustments.

As much as possible, while still staying true to the data, we have endeavored to match the biblical description with what is reasonably equivalent in a contemporary Brazilian society. For instance, Wright's reference to "royal power" has been reframed "governing power" to reflect the ruling presidential democracy. Additionally, infrastructure that a community should reasonably expect to be provided by a modern government—access to water, electricity, sewerage, and so on—will come under this theme.

Results

Following our coding, we were able to see number of interesting observations regarding both the quantity of references to poverty and the types of references made.

Figure 1. Top 100 words in coded data.

References to causes of poverty

From the 48 interviews, we found a total of 175 references to the causes of poverty. From the 8 group discussions, we found a total of 27 references. This totals 202 references.

To help us clarify and represent the most common words, trends, and patterns emerging from our coding, we generated a word cloud of the top 100 words (three letters or more) that appeared in our nodes (i.e. only words that have already been selected for referencing, not the entire transcript). This word cloud is presented in Figure 1.

We see in our word cloud that immediately the words "lack" (139 references, but we recognize that "lack" always precedes the item of concern), "problem" (36), "police" (36), "sanitation" (30), "water" (27), "father" (26), and "government" (24) present themselves as very pressing issues to these interviewees.

Observations on Wright's model

According to our data, there were 64 references to Natural causes, 120 references to poverty caused by Oppression and just 4 to Laziness. Observations on the most referenced subthemes for each are discussed below.

Natural causes. Many interviewees spoke about malnourished childhoods, while others spoke of currently leading large families and experiencing difficulty providing a sufficient amount of food for the multiple mouths. In some communities there was access to food banks or "baskets" which were frequented by laborers whose meagre incomes proved insufficient to pay for the daily nutritional necessities.

> She stated that she had a very tough childhood, since she starved many times.
>
> —interviewer reporting a female respondent from Padre Jordano

The second most referenced item under Natural Causes was the death of a father during childhood (abandonment, where the father has completely refused all contact and support, was included in this category). Paternal death was tragically a common experience among the interviewees, and it frequently had the double impact of both removing the primary source of income for many families and frequently triggering a complete family breakdown:

> I was very connected to my father, with his death our family dismantled . . . every one had to get along by themselves.
>
> —man in Recife, aged 35 years

In other cases, paternal death would necessitate a child leaving education in order to work and provide for the remaining family members. Sickness and disability to self was the third most-referenced cause under Natural causes. This was primarily because of the reduction of work opportunities available.

> I quit because I had a health problem and the doctor told me to stop with the cleaning activities. I was unemployed . . .
>
> —female respondent from Sacadura Cabral

Laziness. A very significant observation is the almost-negligible number of references in the dataset to Laziness as a precursor to poverty. Perhaps unsurprisingly, not one comment in Laziness was self-referential—all mentions focused on the laziness of others.

Oppression. The most recurring subtheme was a lack of sewage and sanitation services within the community (20 references). Though this might seem surprising at first, it perhaps represents the modern conviction that adequate sanitation services are an

expected public service. To be denied this service may be an indication of being disregarded by those in political power and may represent a form of social exclusion. Many interviewees also equated the presence of open sewers with the onset of disease and discomfort within the community.

> In her perception, the problem that is currently bothering the community is the garbage, and she explains "the garbage is in front of my house . . . I pray for the people here to become conscious about it . . . I pray for them to find a solution . . . it is too bad . . . my house is small to all the people living there and with the garbage . . . it is rotten food, dead animals . . . it is a shame. . ."
>
> —interviewer reporting a female respondent from Borborema

Second to sanitation services was a feeling of corruption, maltreatment, or disinterest by public officials (17 references, also under the theme Governing exploitation). The interviewees frequently expressed a disappointment that their public officials—from local administration to the national government—ignored their plight. It was often felt that politicians feigned interest in their community needs in the lead-up to elections, but delivered very little support to the poor communities once in office.

> I had the money, but President Collor confiscated it and I could only get 50 000 out of the account.
>
> —male respondent from Vila Junqueira

> What causes everything is the lack of humanity in the mayor.
>
> —respondent from Nova California

> . . . [the] politician that considers the "poor" only during elections.
>
> —respondent from Morro

> Governments have to do policies, but they don't make policies for the "poor."
>
> —respondent from Morro

One young man from Sacadura Cabral, aged 21, expressed a determination to educate himself in the rights of the people because, in his eyes, "the politicians abuse and use their knowledge to take advantage of those that have not this knowledge."

The third most prominent reference came under the theme of Social exploitation and regarded the fear (or experience) of social violence. Though some interviewees regarded their communities to be safe and cohesive, the majority believed that it was "very dangerous" to live in their neighborhood, that they were frequently "exposed to violence" or that "the community offers no safety, particularly at night, when the residents do not leave home fearing the invasion of criminals." The impact of violence—either real or feared—was that members of the community would lock themselves away, fearing abuse or robbery if they left their homes.

> Here we do not have police patrols, I live locked up at home, watching television, sewing or taking care of my grandson.

> —respondent from Bode

> In her opinion, the community doesn't offer security; people cannot leave their houses at night and children cannot play in the road because of mugging, aggressive behavior of underdogs, and shootings.

> —interviewer reporting on female respondent from Bode

New themes

An important part of the process of a framework synthesis is the recognition that additional themes or subthemes may be arising from the text. As the coding process unfolded, we began to recognize additional references to the causes of poverty that seemingly fit outside our framework.

Laziness and the "laziness" of others. Wright's observations on Laziness only took into consideration the action if it occurred on the part of the impoverished person. However, a reoccurring theme in the data was that someone related to the "lazy" person often experienced poverty, particularly if the latter would normally be expected to provide income or wisely spend income on behalf of the former. An example would be the child of an alcoholic or the wife of a drug abuser:

> Daughter of an alcoholic father, Silvana recounts that she had a very poor and difficult life.

> —interviewer reporting on female respondent from Bode

> My husband became alcoholic . . . we lost the kiosk . . .
> —female respondent from Borborema

In these cases, we see the need for another child node under Laziness called "Lack of self-discipline (other)." Under this subtheme, we placed the nodes "Substance abuse by parent," "Substance abuse by spouse" and "Substance abuse by other."

Laziness—or lack of opportunity? Unemployment, and the related underemployment, is unquestionably the largest cause of poverty according to the interviewees. References to willingness to work, but a lack of jobs available, were frequent and widespread across all the communities. At times the respondents placed the blame on factors external to them: the government for not providing enough job opportunities; a downturn in the community of people willing and able to purchase their produce; the loss of their employer's crops by disease or plague; the increasing mechanization of their jobs; or the outsourcing of their work to cheaper labor elsewhere. At other times the respondents identified internal factors: their lack of training or skills meant finding work in a

competitive environment was very difficult. Not surprisingly, there were consistent connections between childhood labor and a lack of educational opportunities.

> After that, my whole life has been work . . . already in my infancy I lived in an environment which did not give me the freedom to study.
>
> —respondent from Bode

> Many in the community live without a regular job, and there are many who get a bit here and a bit there, but, that don't have any secure work.
>
> —male respondent from Itabuna

> The business has fallen a lot, because of this unemployment wave. I used to sell 250 beers in a weekend, today it is barely 50. 150 hot—dogs before, now just around 50. It is the crisis.
>
> —male respondent from Vila Junqueira

> Nevertheless he thinks that the labor market is very restrictive, particularly for him, that did not go to university.
>
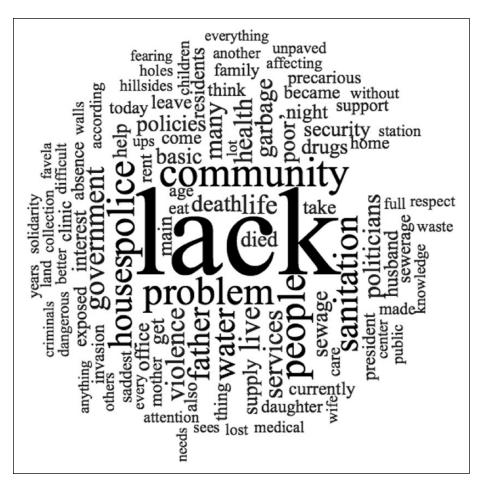> —interviewer reporting on male respondent from Padre Jordano

> I was raised by my grandmother and it was a terrible loss at 13. Then I had to work, had to stop studying.
>
> —an adult man who's father left his family when he was 13 years old.

Updated framework

An important part of the synthesis is to recognize new themes and to adjust the framework accordingly. We therefore assessed the new ideas and generated new child nodes to accommodate them. When we had revised our inclusion parameters to accommodate for the new subthemes (an additional 17), we conducted a new NVivo query. We found a new aggregate of 311 references to the causes of poverty (formerly 198). We found there were now 123 references to poverty caused by Oppression (formerly 120), 74 references to Natural causes (73) and 4 to Laziness (equal). There were an additional 104 references to an issue connected with income–expenditure ratio, skills, education or employment, and 7 references to some form of immorality by another person. To help us review the impact of the inclusion of the new themes, we regenerated the word cloud of the top 100 words (three letters or more) that now appeared in our nodes. This word cloud is presented in Figure 2.

In our new word cloud, we still observe the theme "lack" presenting strongly, but the original matters of police, sanitation, water, father, and government are now intermingled with, and sometimes overshadowed by, concerns of productivity: "work" (40

Figure 2. Top 100 words in coded data (revised).

references), "unemployment" (36), and "jobs" (34) are the new major topics. This reinforces the significance of these new work-related subthemes in the revised query.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to ascertain whether a biblical model on the causes of poverty was consistent with the experiences of today's poor. To answer this, we have used data from the 1999 Brazilian National Report, prepared to inform the 2000/01 *WDR*. The process of placing Wright's model through a framework synthesis involving data from this study on poverty has been fruitful: the results of our synthesis show that many of Wright's assumptions have indeed been supported by the interviews and group discussions, but we have also observed the emergence of three significant

subthemes: educational opportunities, employment, and adequate markets—and the almost complete refutation of the theme of laziness. Accordingly, we see it reasonable to make a number of conclusions.

We see the need to review the idea of Natural causes. We take issue with the assumption that all these causes are indeed "natural" and perhaps would be better seen as "disasters." A designation such as this reinforces the abrupt and disastrous nature of these triggers, but allows for the anything-but-natural references to the deaths of parents and spouses.

We need to reconsider the weight given to the theme of Laziness, considering its almost-complete absence from the data. We suggest that it either be removed from the list or that it come under another suitable top-level theme. However, we also recognize the problematic nature of expecting people to self-reference their own laziness and we will need to look at this further. It is possible that laziness is a more relevant issue when opportunities are bountiful (such as the land-based economy of Old Testament Israel), but has less of a correlation when productive opportunities are scarce.

We see the need to review the idea of Oppression. Wright's model placed a heavy emphasis on direct oppression, where the agent was actively seeking to subdue or exploit their object. However, we see in the data a need for a larger emphasis on the onset of poverty caused when leaders desert sections of a community.

We finally need to deal with the most glaring observation: the absence of any reference to employment or education in Wright's model. Given their rate of occurrence in the data, we feel that they must somehow be included as a subtheme and placed under an appropriate top-level theme. Yet this is not entirely unexpected, given the socioeconomic differences between Old Testament Israel and modern Brazil. In the ancient land-based economy, "employment" would have been unnecessary as a separate feature of life: each family provided for themselves without the need to engage in work for an income which would then be traded for the necessities of life. Nor would we expect to see any reference to formal education in the biblical text. Aside from parental training in matters of daily and spiritual life, education was largely unknown and unnecessary in the ancient Near East (Crenshaw, 1985: 614), and certainly not a prerequisite for a productive "career" or the helpful protection from poverty as it would seem today (Lutz, 2009: 3038). A universal connection between the biblical model and contemporary society might therefore focus on the failure to engage in productive work: in biblical times this is reflected in the poor who have lost access to the land and require opportunities to glean, while in contemporary times this reflects those who through a lack of education, employment opportunities, or access to markets are unable to sufficiently provide for themselves.

In response to our question of whether a biblical model on the causes of poverty is consistent with the experiences of today's poor, we offer a tentative "yes," but we would require some alterations. Further research, including comparing and contrasting the socioeconomic conditions of ancient Israel with current circumstances, might prove fruitful in our continued search for connecting and universal principles and might yet help us to establish a better model which is appropriate for the data yet faithful to the biblical text.

Implications

The final question to ask concerns the implications of this research for our missiological praxis. Along with the Great Commission to make disciples in all the nations (Matt 28:18), addressing the issue of poverty is of primary historical and theological importance to the church. James reminds us that God is pleased when our faith leads us to care for the widows and orphans (Jas 1:27). He also affirms that our faith requires more than a token gesture of well-wishes to those in need: the Christian faith anticipates a practical response to poverty (Jas 2:15–16). The Apostle John informs us that if we have in our possession the world's goods, yet turn our heart against a brother in need, it is an indication that God's love is not likely to be in us (1 Jn 3:17). For the church to adequately accept the mission of demonstrating God's love through our thoughtful endeavors to reduce the experience of poverty, we must give due consideration to those situations, events, and triggers that produce it.

We see that giving due attention to the triggers of poverty, not just the symptoms of it, could significantly improve our ability to loosen its grip on segments of humanity. On a domestic level, this might focus on the education of churches and community organizations who are responding to requests from individuals for financial assistance. Members who present as "poor" and in need of resource frequently approach these groups, and with typically limited finances the group must make a decision on how much and in what way they can support the individual. Frequently, their assessment is aimed at understanding *how much* someone is in poverty, not *why* they are experiencing hardship. Likewise, frequently the response is based on the emotion attached to hearing an appeal for help, not on a systematic and intelligent (yet still compassionate) investigation of the situation. We see that the development of an initial assessment that questions the cause of their poverty, not just the manifestation of it, could be beneficial for those responsible for making these decisions (as per Krishna's observation in our introduction). Such an assessment could help identify the initial triggers—disaster, failure, oppression, or a combination—and direct help at targeting the problem at the source.

We also see implications for resource allocation for large-scale, worldwide missions programs. Much of the focus of anti-poverty mission work is deciding *who* should be targeted and not *what* should be targeted, which we believe to be a mistake. We see that it could be more profitable to avert the onset of poverty in the first instance than to provide assistance only after someone has fallen into poverty. We could therefore be looking for scenarios that create vulnerability and proactively address those circumstances—rather than waiting for people to fall into the category we have preassigned to be "poverty" and then devising plans to come to their assistance. Stemming the generation of new poverty should be an equally important goal of poverty reduction. This can be achieved by directing resource at opportunities that: create resilience in the face of disaster; promote productive and gainful employment for all; and encourage environments where those in power are not just refraining from oppression, but genuinely seeking the welfare of those on the bottom rungs of society's ladder.

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Note

1. This is perhaps an example of the limitation of a secondary analysis—we were not able to ask the participants to give an ordinal, interval, or ratio scale for their response. We have to work with a nominal reference.

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