Perceptions, Attributions and Policy in the Economic Domain

A Theoretical and Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes and tests a causal path model for the influence of perceived economic justice upon support for government intervention aimed at reducing inequality. These constructs were linked by a pair of indirect pathways, mediated by social and individual attributions for poverty and wealth, and supplemented by a direct path. According to the model, the respective influences of economic justice upon individual and social attributions were expected to be positive and negative. In their turn, these constructs were expected to have negative and positive influences upon intervention. Using data from 13 countries involved in the International Social Justice Project, the expected pattern of influences was observed. However, only in certain post-communist countries was there evidence for a direct influence of economic justice upon intervention.

Introduction

RECENTLY, THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL JUSTICE PROJECT (ISJP) completed an extensive comparative survey of popular beliefs about social justice. The project was the first of its kind, being based on a common survey instrument conducted at about the same time in 13 countries. The participating countries ranged from those espousing a capitalist free-market ideology through to a variety of former communist countries which were currently trying to reform their economic systems in the direction of free market principles (Kluegel, Mason, & We-
gener, 1995). Our aim in the present paper is to propose and test a model involving four latent constructs, viz., perceived "economic justice", "individual" and "social" attributions for poverty and wealth, and support for "government intervention" to reduce inequalities.

Kluegel and his colleagues have carried out a number of relevant studies using data from the ISJP: These include the factor structure of individual and social attributions for poverty and wealth (Kluegel, Csepeli, Kolosi, Örkény and Neményi, 1995); the role of attributions in explaining support for the welfare state in the five capitalist countries (Kluegel and Miyano, 1995); and support for egalitarian and inegalitarian norms as a function of the perceived legitimacy of the economic system (Kluegel and Matejú, 1995). Thus, some of the components of our model have been investigated in previous work. As Kluegel, Csepeli et al. (1995: 179) have noted: "...perceptions of the rich and poor provide a vehicle for studying how the public evaluates existential macrojustice." Later they claim that: "Popular beliefs about who is responsible for poverty and wealth...are consequential for support of government intervention to reduce inequalities...". However, thus far, no one has attempted to integrate the treatment of economic justice (perceived legitimacy of the economic system), attributions, and support for government intervention. In other words, we do not understand the extent to which judgements about the justice of the economic system may influence both the kinds of explanations that people give for perceived inequalities in wealth, and their expressed support for policies involving government intervention in the market.

This topic has important implications, for, as Kluegel and Miyano (1995: 82) point out, it is difficult to sustain existing economic and welfare policies unless there is a sufficient consensus about their legitimacy. Moreover, this issue may assume even greater significance in a period of rapid economic change, as was the case in Central and Eastern Europe at the time of the ISJP surveys. For example, widespread cynicism towards the authorities in a given society may inhibit the development of any new economic policies which rely for their success upon a high degree of popular support (Angresano, 1994).

Modelling Economic Justice, Attributions and Government Intervention

We turn now to consider the rationale underlying the choice of the latent constructs in our model, which is discussed below. Following Kluegel and his colleagues (cf. Kluegel and Smith, 1986), we espouse a social constructivist viewpoint, according to which people's perceived social reality forms a basis for the explanations they offer and for the policies they endorse. Thus, we would argue, when people are asked if they support government measures to reduce inequalities, they may draw upon their beliefs about the justice of the current economic