Poverty and its etiology have been major subjects of concern for the social work profession throughout its history. This study focused on four causal attributions for poverty: social-structural, motivational, psychological, and fatalistic. More specifically, it examined the differences between social workers’ and service users’ perceptions of the causes of poverty. Participants were 401 service users and 410 social workers located in a variety of human services agencies in central Israel. Findings showed that although social workers and service users expressed similar levels of agreement with regard to motivational and psychological attributions, service users attributed more importance to social–structural causes and to fatalistic causes compared with social workers. Attributions of poverty were associated with economic status among the service users but not among the social workers. The implications of these findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: attributions for poverty; poverty; service users; social workers

A major portion of social work practice worldwide consists of the provision of services to people with needs and problems associated with living in poverty (Elliott, 1997; Healy, 2001; Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992; Jones, 2002). These problems include insufficient financial resources to meet basic needs; underaccess to social goods; marginalization, oppression, and social exclusion; and feelings of shame, humiliation, and powerlessness (Beresford, Green, Lister, & Woodward, 1999; Lister, 2004). Among the factors that influence this practice are the perceptions of poverty and its causes that are held by a wide range of actors, including the general public and media, politicians, social and economic policymakers, social services management and supervisors, and social workers and service users themselves (Alcock, 1997; Bullock, 1995).

The coming together of the various perceptions of the multiple actors creates a complex social discourse on poverty (Lister, 2004). This discourse not only shapes public perceptions of those living in poverty and the policies adopted toward them but also determines the contours of the professional encounter between social workers and service users who are living in poverty. It influences how social workers and their clients understand and define problems and the relevant strategies and intervention approaches for dealing with them (Bullock, 1995; Parsloe, 1990). Given the centrality of poverty and of the interaction between social work practitioners and service users to social work and its practice, this article explores social workers’ and service users’ attributions of the causes of poverty, with the aim of determining whether the participants in this interaction have similar views.

ATTRIBUTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

The etiology of poverty has been the subject of a long, ongoing debate in both public and academic spheres (Alcock, 1997; Danziger & Haveman, 2001; Lister, 2004; Miller, 1996). Three main types of causal attributions of poverty can be discerned in the theoretical and empirical literature: individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Alcock, 1997; Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Miller, 1996; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). The individualistic attribution argues that poverty stems mainly from the personality and behaviors of the poor. Based on a pathological model of social causation, it has moral and psychological variants. The moral variant emphasizes such individual deficits as lack of motivation, effort, and initiative; passivity, dependency, and lack of self-reliance; lack of job readiness; poor work habits; and (erroneous) perceptions of external constraints to finding and holding a job (Mead, 1992, 1994; Murray, 1984). The psychological variant emphasizes the intrapersonal origins of poverty: emotional problems (for example, depression) or lack of interpersonal abilities (Alcock, 1997).
The structural attribution regards poverty as stemming from the complex operations of local, national, and global forces, which include the actions of classes, groups, agencies, and institutions that interact within a particular social and economic order (Cornia, 2004; Ferge & Miller, 1987; Lang, 2007; Nisanke & Thorbecke, 2007; Wilson, 1987, 2006). Based on a structural model of social causation, it emphasizes forces such as globalization and international economic forces; the capitalist market economy and specific economic policies; limited employment opportunities stemming from local geographic, physical, or economic conditions; low wages and limited demand for or oversupply of low-skilled labor; insufficient social welfare provision and social protection; and lack of political power and systematic discrimination and deprivation on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, or gender.

The fatalistic attribution explains poverty through factors over which neither the individual nor the society has much control. These factors include fate and bad luck, inborn lack of ability or talent, and disability and illness, among many other unfortunate circumstances (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). This explanation is reported mainly in public opinion surveys on poverty (for example, Feagin, 1975; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982).

Because of the social and policy implications of public attributions of poverty, these explanations have served as the theoretical point of departure for a large number of studies in different countries in the past four decades (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Park, Phillips, & Robinson, 2007; Smith & Stone, 1989). Although these studies have presented the explanations separately, they have also found associations among them. In particular, positive associations have been found between fatalistic attributions and the tendency to attribute poverty to structural causes, and negative associations have been found between individualistic and structural attributions (Bullock, 2004; Zucker & Weiner, 1993).

Given the centrality of poverty within social work and the assumption that social workers’ perceptions of poverty are particularly germane to their dealing with this social problem and its consequences, much effort has been directed toward the study of the causal attributions of poverty held by social workers (Bullock, 2004; Hendrickson & Axelson, 1985; Reeser & Epstein, 1987; Rehner, Ishee, Sal- loum, & Velasques, 1997; Weiss & Gal, 2007) and by social work students (Rosenthal, 1993; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Sun, 2001; Weiss, 2005; Weiss, Gal, Cnaan, & Maglejlic, 2002) in different countries. All of these studies examined attributions to both structural and individualistic causes. Most also examined attributions to fatalistic causes, such as bad luck, chance, or poor health (for example, Sun, 2001). Some distinguished between individualistic explanations, such as moral deficits (for example, lack of motivation or effort), and psychological explanations (for example, emotional difficulties and poor interpersonal abilities; see Weiss, 2005; Weiss & Gal, 2007).

Almost all studies, whether among students or practicing professionals, found that structural explanations for poverty were favored over individualistic, psychological, and fatalistic ones. These findings were generally interpreted as reflecting the respondents’ professional socialization, which placed a great deal of emphasis on environmental and societal sources of poverty and were seen as indicative of congruence with the desired social work values (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Weiss, 2005). The only exception is Macarov’s (1981) study of the attributions of American, Australian, and Israeli social work students, which found that Israeli students placed the blame for poverty mainly on the poor.

A similar trend was found in the only two studies to date that examined the service users’ attributions of the causes of poverty. Bullock (1999) found that welfare recipients in Long Island were more likely to make structural attributions for poverty than were middle-class people. In a later study, Bullock (2004) found that both 41 welfare recipients and 39 social workers in a midwestern city endorsed economic causes of poverty more strongly than prejudice, individualistic, or family factors but that welfare recipients gave prejudice greater weight than did social workers. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study to date that has compared social workers with service users. The small sample size and particular setting, however, call for further research on this topic, using larger and diversified samples.

Although the research cited so far suggests that both social workers and service users are likely to favor structural over individualistic, psychological, or fatalistic explanations of poverty, the available findings, aside from those in the Bullock (2004) study, do not indicate how their views of these various explanations compare.
Two contrasting hypotheses may be derived from the literature. First, it is possible that the two groups perceive the causes of poverty differently. This possibility has two variants. The first variant is that social workers may be less supportive of social attributions of poverty than are service users and more supportive of individualistic attributions because of group differences in socioeconomic status and in personal experiences of living in poverty. Most social workers are middle class (Bullock, 2004; Hendrickson & Axelson, 1985), whereas a large portion of service users come from the lower socioeconomic strata and have lived or are living in poverty. Public opinion research shows that middle-income groups and those who have never experienced poverty firsthand are more likely to favor individualistic explanations or less likely to favor structural causes of poverty than are their lower income peers and people who have lived in poverty (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Park et al., 2007).

The second variant is that social workers will be more inclined to favor psychological explanations for poverty. Under the massive influence of psychotherapeutic approaches to practice, especially in the United States (Elliott, 1997; Specht & Courtney, 1994), but elsewhere as well (for example, Israel; see Weiss & Gal, 2003), social workers have come to view a large range of social problems as reflecting intrapsychic processes, such as poor ego function, low self-esteem, and difficulty in impulse control (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Indeed, studies in several countries have shown that social workers tend to emphasize their clients’ personal or interpersonal problems, whereas their clients are more likely to emphasize environmental problems (Krumenger-Noevo, Slonim-Noevo, & Hirshenzon-Segev, 2006; Mutschler, 1979; Mutschler & Rosen, 1979; Rosen, 1993; Rubenstein & Bloch, 1978).

The second hypothesis is that social workers and service users have similar causal attributions of poverty. This possibility is based on the fact that both groups interact within the same social services environment and both encounter poverty and its deleterious consequences on a daily basis—service users, who come disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic ranks, personally, and social workers professionally. In addition, the social work values (for example, social justice) and core concepts (for example, person in environment; see Craig, 2002; Hare, 2004) may temper the effect of social workers’ middle-class backgrounds on their views.

Given the competing hypotheses and the paucity of empirical research in this domain, this study compared perceptions of social workers with those of service users on four types of attributions for the causes of poverty: structural, individualistic (motivational), psychological, and fatalistic.

METHOD

Sample

The study participants were a convenience sample of 401 service users and 410 social workers gathered via snowballing in a variety of human services agencies in central Israel. For inclusion in the sample, service users had to speak Hebrew, be 18 years of age or older, and have received social work services in the past two years; social workers had to be currently working in the profession and have had at least one year of professional experience. Twelve service users and 13 social workers who were approached by the researchers refused to participate.

The service users received services from a wide range of human services agencies (for example, nongovernmental services, municipal welfare agencies, hospitals, clinics, and so forth). Each had received services from a mean of 2.6 social workers (SD = 2.6) for an average of 5.3 years (SD = 7.0).

The social workers came from over 30 human services agencies in Israel (for example, prisons, probation services, family counseling clinics, municipal welfare agencies, hospitals, rehabilitation services, and so forth). Eighty percent were employed exclusively in a municipal or governmental welfare service; 13.6 percent were employed exclusively in a nongovernmental organization (NGO); and the rest were in private practice, whether exclusively or in conjunction with employment in an NGO or municipal or governmental service. This distribution is similar to that of social workers in Israel (Bar-Zuri, 2004). At the time of the interview, the social workers in the sample had worked in the profession for an average of 12.4 years (SD = 8.6).

The groups differed significantly in all the sociodemographic features queried except for age (see Table 1). A substantially higher percentage of social workers than service users were female, and more social workers than service users were married. Over 90 percent of both groups were Jewish, but fewer social workers than service users were Muslim. Regarding the level of religiosity, more social workers than service users defined themselves as secular, and fewer defined themselves as traditional.
Whereas almost half the service users described their economic situation as worse or much worse than that of others, only 13.3 percent of the social workers described their relative economic situation as worse, and only 1.3 percent as much worse, than that of others. Substantially more social workers than service users described their situation as similar to, better than, or much better than that of others. Finally, the mean age of the social workers and of the service users was similar, around 40 years of age.

Education was queried differently in the two groups, making an exact comparison impossible. Slightly more than half the social workers had a BSW (52.7 percent), the minimal degree required for entry into the profession in Israel, and almost half had an MSW (46.3 percent) or higher degree (0.5 percent). Given that the BSW in Israel is a three-year degree, 15 years would be their minimum years of schooling. The service users reported a range from four years to 22 years of schooling, with a mean of 12.7 ($SD = 2.8$). On the whole, the service users had less formal education than the social workers.

**Measures**

Causal attributions of poverty were measured by a 25-item scale. Each item identified a possible cause of poverty. Nineteen items were drawn from studies by Weiss and colleagues (Weiss, 2005; Weiss, Gal, & Dixon, 2003). The remaining six, which assessed fate or bad luck, were drawn from Bullock et al. (2003). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a five-point Likert-type scale.

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| Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Social Workers and Service Users |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Variable                        | Social Workers                  | Service Users   | $\chi^2$ | df | $p$     |
|                                 | % | n  | % | n  |                  |                |                |
| Gender                          |   |     |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Female                          | 88 | 65  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Male                            | 12 | 35  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Marital status                  |   |     |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Single                          | 15 | 27  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Married or living with partner  | 77 | 51  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Divorced or separated           | 6  | 16  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Widow                           | 2  | 6   |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Religion                        |   |     |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Jewish                          | 95 | 92  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Christian                       | 2  | 1   |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Muslim                          | 2  | 6   |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Druze                           | 1  | .1  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Religiosity                     |   |     |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Secular                         | 81 | 67  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Traditional                     | 9  | 26  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Orthodox                        | 9  | 6   |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Ultra-orthodox                  | 1  | .1  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Economic status (relative to others) | 383 | 388 | 117.46 | 4 | $< .001$ |
| Much worse                      | 1  | 21  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Worse                           | 13 | 26  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Similar                         | 62 | 41  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Better                          | 20 | 11  |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Much better                     | 4  | 1   |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Age (in years)                  |   |     |   |     |                  |                |                |
| Range                           | 24.5–65 | 18–88 |     |     |                  |                |                |
| $M$                             | 38.9 | 40.3 |     |     |                  |                |                |
| $SD$                            | 9.4 | 14.4 |     |     |                  |                |                |
ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation yielded four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, which jointly explained 58.2 percent of the variance. Loadings per item in each factor were greater than .5.

The first factor, psychological causes, consisted of eight items (for example, “People are poor because they have emotional problems”; “Poverty and emotional problems are associated with one another”; “People are poor because they’re mentally ill”). This factor explained 25.7 percent of the variance. The second factor, motivational causes, consisted of five items (for example, “People are poor because they don’t want to make an effort”; “People are poor because they don’t want to work”; “People are poor because they don’t take enough responsibility for their lives”). This factor explained 20.1 percent of the variance. The third factor, social–structural causes, consisted of six items (for example, “People are poor because of social and economic conditions”; “There is poverty because the government doesn’t give people the basic things they need”; “People are poor because they belong to groups that, for a long period of time, have not received what they’re entitled to”). This factor explained 7.4 percent of the variance. The fourth factor, fatalistic causes, consisted of six items (for example, “People are poor because of bad luck”; “People are poor because of factors that they have no control over”; “People are poor because they don’t have the right connections to find work”). This factor explained 5.0 percent of the variance. Internal consistencies were high: \( \alpha = .89 \) for psychological causes, \( \alpha = .87 \) for motivational causes, \( \alpha = .82 \) for social–structural causes, and \( \alpha = .78 \) for the fatalistic causes. The participant’s score on each factor was calculated as the mean of his or her responses to all the items in that factor.

Sociodemographic features of both groups were queried in separate questionnaires. The questionnaires for the social workers also queried professional features.

**Procedure**

The study questionnaire was distributed to the participants by specially trained social work students after ensuring their anonymity and obtaining their informed consent. The social workers and most of the service users completed the questionnaires on their own and returned them to the students in a sealed envelope several days later. Seventeen percent of the service users requested assistance. They were aided by the interviewer, who read them the questions and recorded their answers. To ensure anonymity, the completed questionnaires were placed in blank envelopes that were sealed with the client looking on.

Tests showed that service users who received assistance in completing the questionnaires imputed greater power to three of the four attributions for poverty than those who filled out the questionnaires independently: psychological \( t(342) = 4.00, p < .001 \), social \( t(344) = 4.36, p < .001 \), and fatalistic \( t(344) = 5.20, p < .001 \). Mode of data collection was therefore controlled for in the statistical analyses.

**RESULTS**

First, we examined the associations among the four perceptions of poverty subscales by calculating Pearson correlations separately for the service users and the social workers (see Table 2). Psychological attributions were correlated with motivational ones, and social–structural attributions were correlated with fatalistic ones. The latter correlations were significantly stronger among the service users compared with the social workers. In addition, a significant negative correlation was found between social and motivational attributions. Finally, psychological attributions correlated positively with the fatalistic ones. Psychological and structural attributions were

| Table 2: Pearson Correlations Between Perceptions of Poverty Subscales |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| Subscale         | Psychological | Motivational | Social–Structural | Fatalistic |
| Psychological    | —         | .40*       | —           | .29*      |
| Motivational     | .47*      | —         | —           | .05       |
| Social–structural| .18**     | —         | .64**       | —         |
| Fatalistic       | .40*      | —         | .51**       | —         |

Note: Social workers’ data above the diagonal; services users’ data below the diagonal.
*These correlations significantly differ, Fisher’s Z = 2.77, \( p = .006 \).
**These correlations significantly differ, Fisher’s Z = 2.56, \( p = .01 \).
*\( p < .001 \).
unrelated among social workers but positively related among service users.

Next, to examine our main research question, that is, whether social workers and service users differed in their causal attributions for poverty, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, with group (social workers versus service users) as the independent variable and the four causal sub-scales (psychological, motivational, social–structural, and fatalistic causes) as the dependent variables. We controlled for gender, marital status (single versus other), relative economic status, religiosity, and mode of data collection (independent versus with assistance) and their interactions with the group. The MANOVA yielded significant effects for group \( F(4, 642) = 3.76, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02 \), relative economic status \( F(4, 642) = 3.70, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02 \), and the interaction between group and relative economic status \( F(4, 642) = 4.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03 \). Gender, marital status, religion, religiosity, and mode of data collection as well as their interactions with the group were not associated with the various causal attributions.

A series of univariate analyses of variance further examined the sources of the significant effects. These analyses indicated that group was associated with attribution to social–structural causes \( F(1, 659) = 9.70, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01 \) and fatalistic causes \( F(1, 659) = 13.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02 \). Service users attributed poverty to both social and fatalistic causes more than social workers did (see Table 3).

The univariate analyses of variance also revealed the sources of the significant interaction between group and relative economic situation: These were the attribution of poverty to social and structural causes \( F(1, 659) = 12.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02 \) and to fate or lack of luck \( F(1, 659) = 13.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02 \). Pearson correlations between these variables were conducted for each group separately to further understand this interaction (see Table 3). Attributions of poverty to social and fatalistic causes were inversely associated with relative economic situation among the service users but not among the social workers (see Table 4). The better the service users self-reported their relative economic situation, the less inclined they were to attribute poverty to either social or fatalistic factors.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that although the social workers and service users expressed similar levels of agreement with the motivational and psychological explanations of poverty, they differed significantly, albeit modestly, in the importance they attributed to the social–structural and fatalistic attributions. The service users attributed significantly more importance to the latter two attributions than did the social workers. These differences are consistent with the findings of studies suggesting that clients attribute greater power to environmental–structural attributions of their problems than do social workers (Krumner-Nevo et al., 2006; Mutschler, 1979; Mutschler & Rosen, 1979; Rosen, 1993; Rubenstein & Bloch, 1978). They also lend further support to previous findings linking greater support for social–structural attributions for poverty with lower socioeconomic status and personal experience of living in poverty (Park et al., 2007).

The finding that the service users ascribed greater importance than the social workers to fatalistic causes of poverty is of note, as is the strong correlation we found between the tendency to favor fatalistic attributions and social ones. This correlation was even stronger among service users. A similar association between ascription to structural

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### Table 3: Means and Standard Errors of Perceptions of Causes of Poverty among Service Users and Social Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Poverty</th>
<th>Service Users</th>
<th>Social Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social causes</td>
<td>3.47 (0.09)</td>
<td>3.31 (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatalistic causes</td>
<td>2.96 (0.09)</td>
<td>2.67 (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological causes</td>
<td>2.72 (0.09)</td>
<td>2.70 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational causes</td>
<td>2.63 (0.10)</td>
<td>2.83 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant differences were found between the perceptions of service users and social workers at \( p < .01 \), controlling for gender, relative economic status, marital status, religiosity, and mode of data collection.

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### Table 4: Correlations between Relative Economic Status and Perceptions of Causes of Poverty among Service Users and Social Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Poverty</th>
<th>Service Users</th>
<th>Social Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social–structural causes</td>
<td>-0.32*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatalistic causes</td>
<td>-0.29*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001.
and fatalistic causes was evident in other studies as well (Zucker & Weiner, 1993). The close link may stem from similarities between the two attributions. Both place the causes of poverty beyond the control and responsibility of those living in poverty, who are viewed more as victims (of social forces, luck, circumstances) than as people whose failings (whether of character or of competence) brought them to their situation.

Another finding of this study is that service users’ attributions of the causes of poverty were associated with their relative economic situation. The better their relative economic situation, the less importance they attributed to both social–structural and fatalistic causes. This finding is similar to other findings showing that people who are better off economically tend to be less supportive of social attributions for poverty (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Park et al., 2007). The association, however, was not found among the social workers, even though those in this study were an economically heterogeneous group. This may reflect the impact of social workers’ professional education and values, which emphasized the role of social factors in poverty and deprivation, on their attitudes toward the causes of poverty. Whichever was the influential factor in the social workers’ position, it evidently exerted a stronger effect on their views of poverty than did their individual economic situations.

Attributions of the causes of poverty have been linked with views on how to combat poverty (Bullock, 1999; Bullock et al., 2003; Iyengar, 1989; Weiss, 2003; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). The finding that social workers and service users attributed different degrees of importance to the two nonindividualistic explanations for poverty thus leaves open the possibility that social workers and their clients may also disagree somewhat on the best ways of dealing with poverty. This divergence should be taken into consideration on both the practice and the policy level. Social workers should be aware that their clients may view their own poverty differently from the way they do. Policymakers should consider this divergence in planning poverty intervention.

This study has two main limitations. One is its reliance on convenience samples of both social workers and service users. This raises questions about the ability to generalize the findings to the profession and clientele as a whole. It should be noted, however, that it is extremely difficult to gather a representative sample of social workers and even more so of service users, and very few studies in the field actually do this. In this study, we managed to obtain good-sized, heterogeneous samples from a wide variety of social services.

The other limitation concerns the ability to generalize the findings to other countries. Ultimately, the only way to address this issue is by cross-national comparative studies. It should be noted, however, that the study findings are consistent with those obtained in the United States, which similarly show that service users attribute greater power to structural causes of poverty than do social workers.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study contributes to our limited knowledge of the similarities and differences in social workers’ and service users’ perceptions of social problems in general and of the causes of poverty in particular. Further comparative studies in different countries are recommended, covering the entire range of social problems. With respect to poverty, for a more nuanced and precise picture of how social workers and service users view poverty, we recommend studies that focus on perceptions of the poverty of particular groups (for example, elderly people, women, immigrants, unemployed people, and working-age individuals) as well as studies that compare the perceptions of specific subgroups of service users with social workers who deal with those groups. It would also be of interest to compare the differences between social workers and service users with those between other middle-class professionals and service users. Such a comparison would enable us to better understand the role of social work education and socialization versus that of socioeconomic status.

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Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya, and Peled / Social Workers’ and Service Users’ Causal Attributions for Poverty


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