

## **Perception of poverty: A study on the non-social work students**

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### **1 Background**

Poverty is the most significant social evil (Gupta & Kumar, 2007) that slows down the process of social development or progress. Prevention of this problem from our society might expedite the developmental process. For a long time, educators, researchers, and practitioners have been addressing poverty. However, understanding and examining the perception and attitude of social work students toward poverty has been a new emphasis on social work education. Similar to social work, different non-social work courses (sociology, anthropology, development studies, rural development, and other related disciplines) address the issue of poverty as a global concern. The rural development programme in development education as a non-social work discipline emphasises educating and training the students about the emerging social problem and development issues, including poverty.

The perceived conceptions are influenced by culture and socio-economic backgrounds. The culture influences human perception (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014) and the perceptual process (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2015); therefore, the perception of poverty may vary from one culture to another. The dichotomy between rural and urban has not only been instead of geographical differences (Woods & Helley, 2015) but also in culture, economy, and many others. In this perspective, this study strived to explore the perception of poverty in the view of cultural dualism, i.e., rural and urban. We examined the rural development discipline students as a non-social work discipline to recognise the perception of poverty, perception of causes of poverty, and the level of future commitment to work in poverty eradication action in a cross-cultural context, i.e., rural and urban culture. It was found that social scientists and social workers often neglected culture that significantly influences human perception; therefore, this study included the following research questions:

1. How the non-social work (rural development) students perceive poverty and how the perception varies in the context of cultural differences (rural and urban)?
2. How the non-social work students perceive the causes of poverty based on cultural variation (rural and urban)?
3. What is the level of future commitment among the non-social work students to work with poverty affected people?

### **2 Review of literature**

#### **2.1 An overview of poverty in India**

Poverty in India is indeed a complex phenomenon that is not only driven mainly by income deprivation but also involves lacking in knowledge, opportunity, asset, and empowerment.

Poverty, which has commonly been measured by income level explained in terms of absolute and relative forms (Jayakumar, 2005). Poverty in India has remained in serious jeopardy. However, India has gained an impressive economic growth throughout a few decades (Castillo et al., 2014). According to Tendulkar methodology used by the Planning Commission of India of poverty estimation, there were 269.8 million (216.7 million in rural and 53.1 million in urban) people affected by poverty, where the urban (13.7 percent) were at the better situation than the rural population (25.7 percent) in 2010-11 in terms of poverty ratio (Rangarajan et al., 2014). However, researchers (e.g., Patnaik, [2007]; Himanshu & Sen [2010]) contended over the methodological framework adopted by the Planning Commission that mentioned poverty in India. Mohan (2011) argued that poverty is merely an economic phenomenon; instead, it is a political phenomenon. It is “a sense of powerlessness and deprivation of entitlements” (Grimble, 2003). In 2018, UNDP (United Nation Development Programme) and OPHI (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative) released the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which includes health, education, and living standards. Interestingly, recent data reported that India achieved noteworthy progress in MPI. In contrast, the absolute number of poor people decreased by 271 million between 2005 and 06 (635 million) to 2015-16 (364 million), which is indeed a considerable improvement. But India remains as the globally largest share of poor people (364 million) living in multidimensional poverty index followed by Nigeria (97 million), Ethiopia (86 million), Pakistan (85 million), and Bangladesh (67 million). Shockingly, 83 percent (more than 1 billion) share of people living in multidimensional poverty belongs to Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (OPHI, 2018).

## **2.2 Culture and perception**

Culture is the shared elements (such as historical place, geographical location) of the people. Culture confers the “standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting” (Shavitt et al., 2008). Culture is a set of material and symbolic standard that shapes and directs the behaviour (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) and structures the perception of their self and others (Triandis, 1989). Kastanakis and Voyer (2014; p. 6) mentioned that “culture serves as a source of lay theories about the world and shapes how people attend, think, and react, crafting their life views and philosophies.” Moreover, culture influences the psychological aspects and determines the perception of an individual by delivering the expectations, needs, and values (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Researchers support that culture affects the perception of the individual and society (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014) and therefore, varied perceptions in culture through which people become cognizant of their environment (Weiner et al., 2003) also influence the relationship between the individual and others (Triandis, 1989).

## **2.3 Perceptions of causes of poverty: Theoretical perspective**

The term poverty mainly emerged from social psychology (Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Morcol, 1997; Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli et al., 2011; Niemelä, 2008). Researchers from diverse fields (economics, social work, sociology, psychology) have been emphasising to investigate the perception of poverty (Castillo et al., 2014). The contributing factors that determine the interpersonal and social construction of the perceptions of poverty are personal, family, community, social, and culture (Kelly, 1991; Raskin, 2002; Castillo et al., 2014). Moreover, Collins (1989) stated that gender, class, caste, religion, language, educational qualification, and language of individual and group of people might provide “distinctive life experiences about the advantages or hardship of populations” (Cited in Castillo et al., 2012). Lewis (1966) mentioned that culture and subculture (feelings of helplessness, powerlessness,

marginality, and dependency) are the most remarkable facts of poverty. The cultural traits are evolved due to long term association with poverty and transmitted cross-generationally within a family.

There have been four theoretical explanations on the perception of causes of poverty in the existing literature such as individualistic, structural, fatalistic (Law & Shek, 2014), and psychological (Weiss & Gal, 2007). The individualistic theoretical explanation assumes that the individual is the responsible person of being a poverty victim. In contrast, the external factors (society and economic forces) are blamed in structural explanation. The fatalistic assumption includes illness, bad luck, and poor health condition as the responsible factors of the cause of poverty. (Smith & Stone, 1989; Sun, 2001; Shek, 2004; Davids, 2010). Emotional problems and lack of interpersonal skills are considered in psychological cause (Weiss, 2005; Weiss & Gal, 2007).

Various studies investigated the perception of causes of poverty concerning social class, age, gender, and educational status. Higher and middle-class people more often incline on individualistic accounts. While the lower-class people support the individual cause of poverty (Hunt, 1996; Bullock, 1999). Few studies (e.g., Feagin, 1972; Hunt, 1996; Morcol, 1997; Larsen, 2006). reported that young people support the structural explanation. While older people likely to support the fatalistic and individualistic interpretation. This perceptual explanation in gender perspective explored an interesting result, as several studies (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Hunt, 1996; Sun, 2001) found that the male respondents support the structural approach; while few studies (e.g., Morçol, 1997) stated the contrary result. High and low educated people are more likely to support the structural explanation, while the intermediate people explain the individualistic approach (Feagin, 1972; Furnham, 1982). However, Davis (2010) noted that education does not significantly influence the structural perceptions of the causes of poverty.

#### **2.4 Perceptions of poverty among social work and non-social work students**

An extensive number of studies examined attitude (Negrón-Velázquez, 2016) and perception of poverty. Furthermore, studies also addressed the attitude and perceptions regarding the adopted method of poverty eradication process among the social work students (Cryns, 1977; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Rosenthal, 1993; Rehner et al., 1997; Clark, 2007; Weaver & Yun, 2011; Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Blomberg et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2014). In the earliest attempt of the perception of causes of poverty among the social work students Cryns (1977) investigated 136 social work students (67 students of MSW and 69 students of BSW) and reported a significant relationship between perception of causes of poverty and academic status of the students. Graduate students were more likely to endorse the individualistic explanation rather than other explanations. Schwartz and Robinson (1991) found the structural cause as to the most salient among the undergraduate social work students. Negrón-Velázquez (2016) noted that undergraduate social work students of Latin America supported the individualistic explanation. A few studies (Sun, 2001; Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2007; Weiss & Gal, 2007) conducted comparative studies between social work and non-social work student's perception of the causes of poverty. For example, Weiss and Gal (2007) found that there were no significant differences between social work and non-social work students (other professionals). Both of them supported the structural explanation regarding the causes of poverty.

### 3 Material and methods

#### 3.1 Theoretical approach and research design

Earlier studies focused on the perception of the causes of poverty based on Feather's (1974) assumption. Social work students were the target population of the earlier studies. This study aimed to explore the perception of poverty and its causes in the context of cultural differences (rural and urban) among non-social work students. Very few studies so far considered the qualitative research method approach to study the causes of perception of poverty. Hence, based on the epistemological assumptions, the qualitative approach of research was adopted. In constructive viewpoints, the qualitative method of research aims at looking towards the social situation and explores the real world to recognise the particular phenomenon (Patton, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In the milieu of inadequate knowledge in this field, this study is exploratory. This study enables the researcher to explore the student's perception of poverty in a subjective dimension, merely discovering the researcher's understandings (Baikady et al., 2019).

This study considered rural development undergraduate and post-graduate students as non-social work students. The two universities from Jharkhand, India, were purposively selected. This study adopted non-probability (purposive) sampling due to the heterogeneous socio-economic background of the students. A total of 42 students belonged to different cultural backgrounds, (i.e., rural [ $n = 21$ ] and urban [ $n = 21$ ]) who were conveniently available to participate in this study were purposively selected from two universities. The undergraduate students were selected only from one university. However, the representation of post-graduate students were from both universities.

#### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

The selected students were informed to participate in the data collection process conveniently. In-depth interviews were taken through the open-ended questionnaires to explore the perception of poverty of the students. The students were informed about the purpose of the study. Verbal consent was taken to record the conversation of the interview. The in-depth interviews were carried out in two local languages (Bengali and Hindi). It was ensured to the students that their identity will be anonymous. The interviews were taken for 30 minutes on an average. The data collection process was carried out through open-ended questions. There were three parts in the questionnaire. The first part consisted of questions regarding the demographic profile of the student (name, age, gender, caste, residence, family income, etc.). In the second part, some key questions were put on the general perception of poverty. The last part included the questions on the theoretical explanation of causes of poverty (individual, structural, fatalistic, and psychological), and their future commitment to work with the poor people, especially in the poverty eradication process. Data were analysed through thematic analysis. Firstly, each respondent's raw transcripts were translated into the English language; then, transcripts were coded by highlighting the text to recognising the theme of the data. The theme of data was determined by the distribution of phrases and segments of the responses. The mentioned quotes in the result section were selected from the transcripts.

### 4 Results

#### 4.1 Demographic profile of the non-social work students

A total of 42 students (21 students from each university) participated in this study (see table 1). Furthermore, the emphasis was made to consider the equal representation of students

based on the cultural differences (purposively involved 21 students from rural and 21 students from urban cultural background).

Table 1: Demographic variables of participants

Variables		Number (N = 42)	Percent (%)
Institute/University <sup>a</sup>	A	21	50
	B	21	50
Residence	Rural	21	50
	Urban	21	50
Gender	Male	29	69
	Female	13	31
Age	18-25	38	90.4
	26-30	4	9.5
Caste	General	12	28.6
	OBC <sup>c</sup>	13	31
	SC <sup>d</sup>	8	19
	ST <sup>e</sup>	9	21.4
Education	Undergraduate	23	54.7
	Postgraduate	19	45.2
Annual income of the family (in rupees)	Below 30,000	9	21.4
	31,000 – 80,000	10	23.8
	80,000 – 2,00,000	2	4.7
	2,00,000 – 5,00,000	15	35.7
	Above 5,00,000	6	14.2
Marital status	Married	0	0

	Un-married	42	100
Work experience	0-2 years	39	92.8
	1-2 years	1	2.3
	3-5 years	1	2.3
	Above 5 years	1	2.3

a= The identity of the university has been mentioned as anonymous; c= Other backward class; d= Schedule caste; e= Schedule tribe

A significant number of students (90.4 percent) were from the age group of 18-25 years. Male participants were higher than females. Most of the student participants were from the OBC category (31 percent) of caste, followed by 28.6 percent from the general caste. Students also belonged to schedule tribe (21.4 percent) and scheduled caste (19 percent). The majority of student participants studied in undergraduate (54.7 percent) course of rural development. It was found that most of the students (35.7 percent) had the family income between annual income Rs. 2 to 5 lakhs, but the students who were from rural backgrounds had a comparatively low level of family income. All the student participants were reported unmarried during the data collection. The majority of the students (92.8 percent) had no professional work experience.

#### 4.2 Student's perceptions of poverty

The perception of poverty denoted the perception and interpretation of poverty based on cultural traits such as observation and life experiences of the students. The students were asked to share their perceptions about poverty affected victims and poor households who lived under the poverty line. It emerged from the data that students perceived poverty as a suppressed condition as well as an underprivileged condition. The perception and interpretation of poverty of participants (both rural and urban) were based on six distinguished elements such as (i) low-income level, (ii) lack of basic facilities, (iii) poor access to resources, (iv) poor lifestyle, (v) poor mental health condition and (vi) poor physical health condition.

The first element (low-income level) denoted that below the standard level income that obstructs poverty affected victims to buy nutritious food. The second element included the three basic needs of human life, such as food, cloth, and house. The participants mentioned the third element, which remarkably affects the poverty victims due to the high prevalence of caste system practice in Indian society. Being oppressed, individuals were unable to access different social resources (access to quality education, health, water, etc.). The poor lifestyle involved addiction toward drugs, consumption of alcohol, poor hygienic condition. The poor mental health condition (rude and abusive behaviour, frustration) and poor physical health (affected by chronic diseases, thin and malnourished body structure) conditions appeared as the fifth element and sixth element respectively. These elements which emerged from the direct or indirect observations, life experiences of the participants can be considered as cultural traits of perception.

### **Rural participant's perception**

The rural participants perceived poverty more than an economic phenomenon in which people are suppressed, discriminated, and live in a deprived condition. Being associated with rural culture, the students perceived poverty through their cultural association. The perception of poverty or poverty affected victims was based on the following four elements - (i) low level of income, (ii) lack of basic facilities, (iii) poor access to resources, and (iv) poor physical health condition. The participants shared their views, observation, and life experience of poverty, especially rural poverty. It emerged from the interview that 'landlessness' as one of the crucial facts regarding the low level of income. One participant stated:

Poor people or poverty affected people usually do not have land. I belong to the rural area, and I have seen much poverty affected households in my village. Most of the families do not have land. They depend on daily wage labour occupation. They earn hardly two hundred rupees per day, and it is difficult to feed all the family members. (#P31)

Few students argued that apart from the landlessness, poor investment (lack of capital to invest in cultivation), poor economic returns, unexpected loss in crop productions, and improper utilisation of land arose as essential factors.

Living with poor housing infrastructure, wearing the ripped and old dress, and incapable of affording nutritious food are the characteristic features of the poverty affected household members. Mostly, poverty affected people who belong to the lower caste (scheduled caste or scheduled tribe). Living under the poverty line, the lower caste people encounter several difficulties such as powerlessness to access resources (water, land, etc.), quality education, religious institutions. One participant said:

During my last fieldwork, I explored that most of the lower caste people were very poor. . . they were caste deprived and socio-economically backward. (#P41)

Few participants had a view that poverty affected victims cannot afford nutritious food, which is the prime cause of malnourished physical condition and possession of various chronic diseases.

### **Urban participant's perception**

The perception of poverty of the urban participants was similar to rural participants. The participants perceived poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, where people live in underprivileged conditions. The participants shared their views, which they gained through observing the poverty victims, residing in slums, footpaths, and other homeless persons or beggars. The participant's responses regarding the perception of poverty can be accredited to the following five elements such as (i) low-level income, (ii) poor housing, (iii) lack of basic needs, (iv) poor mental health condition, (v) poor lifestyle.

The participants denoted that poor economic condition is the most common element to recognise the poverty victims, who live in the slum areas. The poverty affected people do not get proper income opportunities and rational pay for their work. One participant expressed:

There are limited employment opportunities for people who live in footpath and slum areas. They work in local shops or in households as a servant. Sometimes, they beg on the roadside. Even the rickshaw-puller, wage labourers live in the slum areas usually

earn not more than 250-300 rupees per day. It is hard to survive as a healthy family in a city. (#P17)

The participants also reported that the habitat of poverty affected victims is mostly distributed in slum areas and the footpath of a city. They lived with poor housing conditions accompanied by poor accessibility of basic needs (safe drinking water, dress, nutritious food, primary education etc.). The victims predominantly youth and children are obsessive toward various substance use (drug, cigarette, weed, and alcohol, etc.) that is conducive to provoke rude behaviour, frustration, and crimes. One participant mentioned:

There is a slum near my house. . . they live in a dirty place. I often see the children and young people begging, as no one is interested in offering work to them. They even do not go to school. They beg all over the day and spend most of their incomes on different addicted items like drugs, alcohol, or cigarette. They often indulge in minor crimes like theft, fight etc. (#P5)

Furthermore, the participants mentioned that the poor physical condition (malnourished, weak, and thin body structure) of the poverty victims is the most common element to recognise the affected individual by poverty.

### **4.3 Participant's perception of the causes of poverty**

#### **Rural participant's perception**

Most of the participants mentioned the structural explanation as to the cause of poverty. They argued that corruption, policy implementation gaps, lack of state's role in poverty eradication measures were the emerging issues of structural explanation. One participant said:

The massive level of corruption is the central fact of poverty in India. Central and State governments in India are granting billion rupees to eradicate poverty. However, the grant does not reach to the actual poor. I belonged to BPL (below poverty line) family, and I have such experience as the victim of the corruption process. The process of eradication of poverty might be faster if corruption can be removed. (#P11)

Another participant explained:

There is an extensive gap between the policymaking and implementation process of poverty-related schemes. The key policy-gap can be recognised in selecting the beneficiaries, i.e., who will come under the BPL category. The actual BPL families are not selected. Furthermore, inequality can be found in determining the wage rate across the country. The predetermined or paid rate of wage is not enough to meet the minimum maintenance cost or a decent standard of living to BPL families; therefore, it has become a challenging issue to addressing poverty by the Government of India. (#P22)

Another student stated the fact of the structural explanation of perception of poverty:

None wants to be associated with poverty. The poverty victims are trying to uplift themselves from this critical situation. However, the state and central policies cannot reach to them and fail to address. Even society are also pushing them into poverty by promoting caste practice. The casteism generates discrimination, and the lower caste families fall into poverty. (#P39)



On the contrary, few participants supported the individualistic explanation of the perception of causes of poverty and argued some critical points such as lifestyle or culture, personality, etc. The participants contended that it is none other than the individual who him/herself is the reason for falling into poverty, as the poverty affected individuals or family members are lazy or do not wish to work hard to come out from poverty, and most of them addicted to various substance use. One participant said:

One of the leading causes of poverty is the culture of the poverty-affected victims. They spend their entire income to the addicted materials instead of buying food. Addiction has become a culture of those people that affected individuals and families. Even they do not have the intention to work hard. (#P30)

It emerged that the participants who belong to rural culture were likely to support the structural approach and individualistic approach as the cause of the perception of poverty.

#### **Urban participant's perception**

Urban participants supported the individualistic explanation of the perception of the cause of poverty. Participants argued that the 'lifestyle' is the prime factor of poverty affected victims. According to the participants, poverty affected individuals have low educational qualifications, rude behaviour, and criminal mentality that lead toward unemployment and consequently push them into poverty. Furthermore, they mentioned that expecting charitable help or begging had become the culture of the poverty victims. One participant said:

The people like to live into the poor socio-economic condition. They do not want to be out of that because they do not like to work. Why not? If the individual can earn 100 or even 200 rupees by begging only. (#P4)

Other participant shared the view regarding the individualistic explanation:

The government has been spending as much as budget for eradicating poverty. However, it would not be possible if the culture of the poverty victim will not change. They just want help without doing anything. Therefore, the individual victim is responsible for being into the situation of poverty. (#P25)

Few participants noted numerous social factors such as the attitude of the common people toward the poverty victims, lack of willingness to help poor people, lack of employment opportunities, and dominant discrimination on the ground of wage rates, resource access. These factors appeared as part of the structural explanation. However, few participants supported the psychological cause as to the main element of poverty. They argued that poverty affected people are hopeless, frustrated due to extensive substance use and make themselves isolated from society. The people are likely to be associated with their peer groups.

#### **4.4 Commitment of participants to work with poverty affected people**

It was found that both the participants belonged to rural and urban culture have a strong commitment to work in the poverty sector (see Table 2). Around 57 percent of students responded that they have a very strong level of commitment to work with poverty affected people in the near future. However, it is essential to note that the rural participants had a stronger commitment than the urban participants to work in the poverty sector or poverty affected people.

Table 2: Attitude toward future commitment to work with poverty affected people

Geographical residency	Level of attitude toward future commitment* (N=42)				
	Very strong	Strong	Average	Low	Very low
RP <sup>a</sup>	17 (80.9)	3 (14.2)	0 (0)	1 (4.76)	0 (0)
UP <sup>b</sup>	7 (33.3)	3 (14.2)	11 (52.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	24 (57.1)	6 (14.2)	11 (26.1)	1 (2.3)	0 (0)

\*Parenthesis in figure are the percentage share, a= Rural participants; b= Urban participants

One participant of the rural participants expressed:

Earlier, I encountered poverty. Sometimes, we had only a one-time meal during those days. We did not get support from government-funded schemes as my family was not listed in the BPL category. I know how difficult it is to survive to be under poverty. Those memories make me in tears. I want to work with poverty affected people after completing my rural development course.

Another rural participant mentioned that:

Maybe I am not much financially strong to help the poor people, but I try to help the people through other means.

On the other hand, few urban participants explained that working with poor and poverty affected people is social responsibility. One participant said:

It is our social and moral responsibility to help poverty affected people. The government cannot alone eradicate poverty until or unless the common people come to help them.

## 5 Discussion

The study attempted to explore the perception of poverty, perception of causes of poverty, and attitude toward future commitment to work with poverty victims among non-social work students in cross-cultural context (belong to rural and urban areas). Based on the qualitative approach of research, the explorative results of this study found that the perception of poverty among non-social work students markedly varies in the cross-cultural perspective.

Our result suggested that non-social work students perceived poverty not solely based on income level; instead, it was articulated as a comprehensive socio-economic deprivation (Grimble, 2003). The perceived total socio-economic deprivation includes six key elements such as low-income level, lack of necessary facilities, poor access to resources, poor lifestyle, poor mental health condition, and poor physical health condition. The participants from rural culture perceived poverty through four elements (low level of income, lack of necessary facilities, poor access to resources, and poor physical health condition). Being associated with rural culture, rural participants encountered the rural poor people, who live under poverty often characterised by landlessness and various socio-economic deprivation (inadequate access to resources, powerlessness, caste politics). On the other hand, the urban participants perceived poverty through five elements (low-level income, poor housing, lack of basic needs, poor mental health condition, poor lifestyle). The participants from urban culture

experience the poor people living in urban slum areas. The people living in urban slums exhibit socio-economic deprivation accompanied by low-income level, poor mental health, and lifestyles (drug abuse, indulge in crime, etc.). These perceived elements were distinguished subjective parameters through which the non-social work students perceived poverty or poor people. However, there were several common elements in perceiving the poverty. But the varied perception was attributed to diverse cultural traits (personal observations, life experiences, etc.). For example, rural participants mentioned landlessness, caste deprived, while the urban participants noted clogged-living with poor infrastructure, a criminal attitude. Participants experienced these elements as the characteristics poverty of poverty affected victims through their cultural association. It strongly supported the fact that perceptions are inherently embedded in cultural experiences (Davids & Gouws, 2013; Niemelä, 2008; Kelly, 1991; Raskin, 2002). Moreover, the results argue that culture strongly shapes the perception (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014) and the attitude of the non-social work students toward poverty and poor people.

Results revealed that participants (both rural and urban culture) did not support the fatalistic explanation of perception of the causes of poverty; rather, they agreed with individualistic, structural, and psychological explanation as to the cause of poverty. Rural participants supported the structural and individualistic reason. The rural participants incriminated the social structure (caste system), capital accumulation (possession of land), inaccessibility of local resources (the consequence of caste politics), and government welfare services (due to the predominant level of corruption and gaps in government policy implementation process) that emanated as the prime cause of poverty in the rural areas. Apart from it, the participants reported the cultural factors (i.e. addiction, laziness) as the individualistic explanation of causes of poverty. In contrast to the rural participants, the subjective standpoints of the urban participants regarding the perception of causes of poverty were incongruent enough. The urban participants endorsed the individualistic, structural, and psychological explanation. They averred the hypothesis of the culture of poverty (smoking, drinking, abusing behaviour personality) into individualistic as the prime cause of poverty. Moreover, they indicated the societal structure (discrimination on account of wage rate, lack of employment opportunities) as the structural cause of poverty. Few urban participants endorsed the psychological explanation as they perceived that psychological distress is the result of continuous exploitation of social structures and culture of poverty (addiction toward substance use, criminal mentality). The results evidently pointed out that the differences in the perception of the causes of poverty. The rural participants chiefly supported the structural explanation, while the urban participants broadly endorsed the individualistic reason. It was very interesting to note that both the rural and urban the participants argued the culture of the poverty of victims as one of the important responsible factors (in structural explanation) of poverty. The rural participants closely experienced the social exploitation of poor people that led to developing their perceptions toward the structural approach. On the contrary, the urban participants mainly came across the culture of the people (begging, addiction, criminal activities) living in slum areas, which was the possible factor in developing the perception of individualistic approach of perception of the cause of poverty. It further supported the earlier discussion i.e. cultural association influences on human perception.

The level of future commitment to work with poverty affected people among the non-social work students revealed an interesting result. In social psychology, it is a well-recognised fact that past experiences and actions shape the perception, decision, and emotion (Tykocinski & Ortmann, 2011) that structure the human's future commitment. The result showed that the

rural participants had a stronger level of future commitment to working with poverty affected people than urban participants. The in-depth interview with the participants revealed the fact that the rural participants predominantly perceived poverty as the structural cause; therefore, it is the state's responsibility to help the poor people to come out from poverty. Urban participants instead endorsed the individual cause and they mainly experienced the substandard culture of the urban poor; therefore, they had a much lower future commitment to working with poverty affected people. Our results suggested that culture, including experience, intrinsic value strongly influences future commitment.

Recapitulating, it can be argued from the above discussion that the cultural backgrounds strongly influenced and shaped the perception (overall perception of poverty or poor people and causes of poverty) of poverty and future commitment to work with poverty-affected individuals to the non-social work students.

## **6 Conclusions**

This study was aimed at exploring the perception of poverty, its causes, and future commitment to work with poverty affected victims among the non-social work students. The rural participants perceived poverty through encountering the rural poor and endorsed the structural and individualistic cause of poverty. While the urban participants predominantly supported the structural, individualistic, and psychological approach of the cause of poverty that they experienced through observing the poor people living in urban slums. However, it is important to note that the future commitment to work with poverty affected individuals was comparatively higher among the rural participants. This study conclusively suggests that perceptions that are strongly influenced by culture also shape the future commitment toward the attitude of working with poverty victims among the non-social work students.

There were some apparent methodological limitations of this present study such as small sample size ( $n = 42$ ), gender differences in perceptions, focused only one programme (rural development programme), coverage of the study was up-to two selected universities, and utilised only qualitative approach of research; therefore, we would like to suggest to conduct further studies focusing on other non-social work courses (sociology, anthropology, political sciences, development studies, etc.) and comparing the results with the social work students may reveal new insights in the field of social work education. Furthermore, this study recommends some institutional interventions as policy implications to improve the non-social work course i.e., rural development education curriculum to establishing a clear and structured perception of poverty among rural development students. The addition of fieldwork is needed in poverty affected rural and urban areas to understand the issue of poverty in different situations (rural poverty and urban poverty, especially in slum areas). The students should be allowed have open discussion through exchanging their perception of poverty. Incorporation of the concept of social justice (has already been added in social work programme) into the curricula of rural development education might help to create secured connection and insightful perception among the students, entertaining the rural development students to take part in poverty eradication related social services (interactions with poverty affected people, policy implementations process etc.) in non-government, government or other charity organisations.

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