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How the Poor Deal with Their Own Poverty: A Social Psychological Analysis from the Social Identity Perspective

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Abstract The focus of psychological studies of poverty is usually on the psychological outcomes, causal attributions and the personality characteristics of the poor. Different from previous psychological accounts, the present study considered poverty as a group level phenomenon in the frame of Social Identity Theory, addressing the question of how poor people deal with the negative poor identity. In order to explore which of the three identity management strategies suggested by SIT (so-called individual mobility, social creativity and collective effort) would most likely be adopted by the poor to deal with the negative poor identity, a semi-structured interview study (N = 50) and a survey study (N = 170) were conducted of a sample of Turkish adults living below the poverty line, based on data from a 2011 Report of Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TURK-IS, 2011). The analysis of the interviews showed that when people see group boundaries as permeable and the social structure as unstable, they tend to move into higher status groups, even if they perceive the unequal social structure to be illegitimate. On the other hand, when the social structure is perceived as stable, they tend to use creative strategies. The analysis of the survey data mostly confirmed the proposed model, which suggests that a poor identity leads poor people to endorse one of the three identity management strategies through the perceptions of permeability between the poor and the wealthy, and through the perceptions of stability and illegitimacy of the status relations between the poor and the wealthy group.

Keywords Poverty · Social identity · Legitimacy perception · Group comparison

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1 Introduction

While poverty in general is defined as the state of lacking a certain amount of material possessions or money (Carr 2012), scholars usually make a distinction between its absolute and relative forms (e.g. Corazzini et al. 2011; Foster 1998; Yongmie 2013). Absolute poverty refers to the deprivation of basic human needs, which includes usually food, water, hygiene, clothing, shelter, healthcare and education (Langmore 2000); while relative poverty, on the other hand, is related to the unequal distribution of resources or power in a society, in which some people lack the adequate resources to live in the standard they desire, while others do not (Corazzini et al. 2011). In this regard, relative poverty is based on economic inequality in society, which exists largely and persistently all around the world. In addition to the material disad-vantages and economic insecurity, relative poverty has some severe social-psychological consequences, such as reduced self-esteem, feelings of disrespect and humiliation (Jones and Novak 1999; Lister 2004; Tomlinson et al. 2008). The present paper attempts to explore how poor people in Turkey deal with the negative psychological implications of being member of a poor group within the frame of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978). Different from the previous psychological account of poverty, we consider it to be a group-level rather than individual phenomenon.

Turkey is classified as a lower-middle income economy in the World Bank 2012 Report; while it is acknowledged by government officials that the diminishing number of labor unions and unionized workers, and the narrowing scope of collective bargaining due to increased subcontracting have characterized the Turkish labor field (Turkish Republic Ministry of Labor and Social Security Report 2014). Furthermore, being organized or participating in collective action in order to gain rights may have serious consequences, such as dismissal or long-term unemployment. A study of how the poor manage the negative social identity that stems from being a member of the poor group in the Turkish context would contribute to the understanding of the underlying social psychological processes behind poverty in the other countries with a similar social-political background.

1.1 Previous Psychological Accounts of Poverty

Poverty is not a new topic in psychology. The first psychological study of the issue was Lewis' (1966) famous work in which he explained that the persistence of poverty was a product of the value priorities and particular behavioral patterns of the poor that are transmitted down from generation to generation through socialization processes, and in turn, such values and behaviors become determinants of the lower socio-economic status. Psychological works related to poverty historically take three major routes: exploring the personality characteristics of the poor; seeking the causal attributes of poverty; and focusing on psychological outcomes, and each of these continues to the present day (Carr 2012). For example, recent studies have focused on the effects of poverty on cognitive skills, subjective well-being and mental health (e.g. Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Kaplan et al. 2008; Lever et al. 2005; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Rojas 2008), on the personal attributes or traits in the perpetuation of poverty, such as the lack of an entrepreneurial personality (e.g. Carr and Bandawe 2011; Hart et al. 2008), and on the causal attributions for poverty, such as fatalistic-individualistic or structural attributions (Bullock and Waugh 2005; Cozzarelli et al. 2001; see also Furnham 2003).

These three traditional modes of psychological work related to poverty, however, have been criticized as being static, individualistic and reductionist (Carr 2012; Hollander and

Hovard 2000; Yongmie 2013; for a critical review, see Evans et al. 2005). Accordingly, although poverty constitutes an important subject on which psychologists have focused directly for a considerable amount of time, the majority of studies have taken the form of an individual-level analysis, and have usually failed to take into account interactional, contextual and hierarchical aspects. For instance, focusing on the poor as separate individuals, such as emphasizing their personal attributes as being passive, leads eventually to appointing blame to the poor themselves for the situation from which they suffer. Likewise, exploring the causal attributions for poverty may contribute to poverty reduction efforts; however, such studies are characteristically descriptive, and thus would fall short of explaining the social psychological dynamics and processes that underlie poverty.

1.2 Social Identity Theory and Poverty

Social inequalities, including race, gender and socio-economic inequality, have drawn increasing attention in the discipline of social psychology (e.g. Ellemers 1993; Schmitt et al. 2003) since the emergence of Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Although most studies in the tradition of Social Identity have not focused directly on the subject of poverty, they have provided a broader perspective, with emphasis on the interactional, contextual and hierarchical aspects of social inequalities. As the purpose of the SIT is to explain the psychological mechanisms of social categories and the relationships between social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986), it leads to a shift in the level of analysis from individual to group in its examination of a number of psychological subjects, such as prejudice, discrimination, leadership, organizational productivity and socio-economic inequalities (e.g. Haslam et al. 2011; Haslam 2001; Reynolds et al. 2000).

According to the theory, the group concept is a distinct psychological mechanism that gives a reference point for the self and provides a basis for self-definition. This cognitive definition of self as a member of a group, with the values and emotions attached to it, is referred to as social identity (Tajfel 1978: 273), and is achieved through social comparisons between groups.

In the present study, we consider the poor as a distinct psychological group rather than as separate individuals, based on the psychological group assumption of SIT. There are three reasons for this approach: First, in reality people are born into one group in the hierarchical social structure that categorizes them according to gender, ethnicity, religion or class (Ashmore et al. 2004). Although people cannot decide to which socio-economic category they belong, these real world groups (i.e. "poor" or "wealthy") provide an inevitable reference point for self-definition. To be precise, social categories, which are stable components of the social structure, provide the individual with congenital social identities. Second, poverty, by definition and in a relative sense, involves comparisons between the poor and the wealthy, which is also the basic premise of SIT in psychological group formation—that social identity is achieved through comparisons of one's own group with the relevant out-groups. Third, according to SIT, humans are motivated to have a positive self-concept, including social identity (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Tajfel 1978; Spears 2001). Positive social identity is, in this regard, attained through the establishment of a positive distinctiveness of the in-group from the relevant out-groups through a process of social comparison. That said, becoming a member of a better group is not always possible, and sometimes one out-group's superiority over the in-group is so obvious, as in the case of poor versus wealthy, that individuals who belong to the inferior group fail to reach a positive sense of their social identity. In another words, when poor people compare themselves to relatively wealthy people, they develop a negative social identity.

Supporting this point, the "Voices of the Poor" studies, which explored the perspective of the poor on what poverty actually is, demonstrated that shame stemming from deprivation is felt deeply by those living in poverty (Narayan 2000; Narayan and Petesch 2002), and this situation is more prominent in the relatively wealthy countries (Lister 2004) where comparisons with a superior group are much more likely. Empirical evidence has also shown that, as well as the material disadvantages and economic insecurity, relative poverty has social and psychological costs, such as reduction in self-esteem, feelings of disregard and embarrassment (Jones and Novak 1999; Langmore 2000; Lister 2004; Tomlinson et al. 2008). The findings also revealed that while income and life satisfaction/happiness and other variables related to well-being were positively associated (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Kaplan et al. 2008; Rojas 2008), poor people experienced greater psychological distress than the wealthy (Rojas 2010). The findings of these studies imply that poor people engage in active intergroup comparison processes that result in particular (negative) emotions being attached to their poor identity, consistent with SIT's assumption of psychological group formation. Related to this point, this paper addresses the question of how poor people cope with the negative psychological implications that stem from being member of a disadvantaged social category, or in short, being poor.

SIT suggests that when an individual has a negative social identity due to being member of a disadvantaged social category, that individual will attempt to improve his/her own situation (Tajfel 1978). Tajfel (1978) suggested three strategies to altering one's negative social identity: so-called individual mobility, social creativity and collective competition. Efforts to change one's sense of social identity from negative to positive are conceptualized as "identity management strategies" (Blanz et al. 1998). Whereas an individual strategy involves leaving a disadvantaged group behaviorally, or at least psychologically (Turner and Brown 1978; Tajfel 1978), a collective strategy involves direct competition with the out-group to reverse the relative status of the in-group to the out-group (Turner and Brown 1978; Tajfel 1978). Social creativity, on the other hand, refers to a reevaluation of the comparative context, which does not make any real change in one's social group's status, but does provide a positive sense of that social identity. For example, self-definition may be shifted from one social identity to the other, the relatively superior attributes of the in-group may be emphasized or the comparison group may be changed (Mummendey et al. 1999a; Tajfel 1978; Turner and Brown 1978).

According to SIT, identity management strategies to be adopted by group members depend on perceived social-structural relations between the in-group and out-group, so-called stability, legitimacy and permeability (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986). While stability is defined as the in-group members' beliefs about the changeability of the difference in status between groups, legitimacy is conceptualized as the in-group members' perceptions of fairness and justice of the status difference between the in-group and out-group. Permeability of group boundaries, on the other hand, refers to the in-group members' perception of the probability of their elevating into the high-status groups.

There have been numerous experimental and field studies addressing the question of under what circumstances do disadvantaged-group members accept their situation, take individual action or attempt to adopt collective action (e.g. Ellemers 1993; Mummendey et al. 1999a; Wright et al. 1990). For example, Wright et al. (1990) showed that when members of low-status groups believed the boundaries of high-status group was open; they tended to accept the situation and endorse individual action. (Mummendey et al. 1999b) found that collective competition could be predicted primarily through a perceived illegitimacy of status inferiority, whereas mobility is mainly predicted by a perceived stability of status inferiority. The results of these studies, in general, indicated that if group

boundaries are permeable and the status quo is stable, people tend to move into higher status groups. On the other hand, if group boundaries are impermeable and the status quo is stable, low-status group members accept their inferiority and tend to come up with creative strategies. If group boundaries are impermeable and the status quo is unstable, members of lower status groups seek to change the status quo through collective strategies (see Ellemers 1993 for a review).

1.3 Present Study

In summary, different from the mainstream psychological accounts, we consider poverty to be a group-level phenomenon, and the poor as constituting an economically disadvantaged social group. According to SIT, if the members of a group make a negative evaluation of themselves in a comparison with other groups, they tend to use one of three strategies to cope: Individual mobility, social creativity or collective effort. Based on the assumptions of SIT, the present study aims to examine which one of the three identity management strategies the poor adopt to deal with the negative psychological implications of having a poor identity. It can be assumed that which of the three identity management strategies poor people choose to adopt depends on their self-definitions as member of the poor group, and on their perceptions of the permeability, stability and legitimacy of the *status quo*.

In an examination of poverty from the perspective of SIT, we conducted two separate studies: semi-structured interviews (N = 50) and a survey (N = 170) of a sample of Turkish adults living below the poverty line according to a 2011 report of the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TURK-IS, the largest labor union in Turkey).

2 Interview Study

The interview study had two main objectives: to examine the experiences of the poor in their own words related to their experiences with poverty, with the intention being to explore the logical relationships that exist within their arguments by which they come to prefer particular identity management strategies to deal with their poor identity: and to garner data from the arguments of the interviewees for use in the survey study. Given the limited opportunities of the poor to engage in prolonged education, and their possible identification as a subculture with a distinctive discourse in previous studies (e.g. Lewis 1966), we wanted to compile a questionnaire that was based on their own voices in the survey study.

2.1 Method

A semi-structured interview study was conducted in the spring of 2012 using a questionnaire containing seven semi-structured items that had been designed by the researchers to cover all the relevant variables, including the participants' identity definitions based on group belongingness; their legitimacy, stability and permeability arguments on the relationships that exist between the poor and the wealthy; and their preferred identity management strategies in terms of individual mobility, social creativity and collective effort, besides their demographic details. The question asking the participants to define their identities ("Do you consider yourself to be a member of the poor group in Turkey?") was designed to orient the participants towards thinking of themselves as part of the poor group, rather than as a poor individual.

2.1.1 Sample

A convenience sample of 50 (27 female, 23 male) adult volunteers from the suburbs of Adana, the fifth largest city in Turkey, were interviewed. The interviewees were aged 26–67 and had a family income that was below either the poverty or hunger line according to the TURK-IS 2011 report. While the report stated a poverty threshold for a family of four was 2939 Turkish Liras (TL), the hunger limit was 902 TL. In terms of education levels, 28 of the respondents graduated from primary school, 17 graduated from high school and five graduated from university, and the monthly family income ranged between 680 and 2800 TL.

2.1.2 Procedures

The interviews were conducted by the second author, and took place in the individual homes of the respondents, and lasted about 30 min. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and transferred into digital form.

2.2 Analysis

The transcribed materials were read several times and analyzed with reference to the Structural Analysis of Group Arguments technique (SAGA, see Reicher and Sani 1998), which is used to determine the arguments of different poles of a group and to explore the structural relationships that exist between their arguments. SAGA requires paying attention to the details of how positions and identities, and also the overall interrelations among these elements, are construed. In accordance, we divided the participants into two sub-groups, based on their self-definitions of either being poor (N = 22) or not poor (N = 28). In the following phase, the arguments of each interviewee were examined and allocated to one of the theoretically grounded categories that were pre-determined by the researchers in accordance with the purpose of the study (see Table 1), being similarity, comparison groups, stability, legitimacy and identity management strategies. Although an additional category was identified prior to the analysis, namely permeability, it was considered re-dundant, in that the arguments put forward by the interviewees in this category were intertwined with the individual mobility arguments used in identity management strategies category. Accordingly, the "pre-identified permeability category" was merged with the identity management strategies category, and lastly, the arguments put forward by each interviewee were compared with their preferred identity management strategies in order to explore the logical relationships between them (see Table 2). It should be noted that more than one argument in a category may be used by the same interviewee.

2.2.1 Homogeneity

The study revealed that 20 of those who defined themselves as poor and 21 of those who defined themselves as not poor viewed all poor people as similar, thus constituting a homogenous group. The interviewees argued that poor people tend to share similar ways of life, clothing, feeding and houses in general. Interviewee 10 (40, female) stated that:

Table 1 Arguments used by the interviewees who define themselves as poor and not poor

Argument categories		Participants who defined themselves as poor	Participants who defined themselves as not poor
Homogenity	Similar	12, 6, 1, 4, 10, 13, 16, 17, 23, 25, 26, 28, 32, 33, 35, 42, 46, 48, 18, 29 (98 %)	14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 43, 45, 47, 49, 50 (75 %)
	Not similar	11, 44 (2 %)	2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 39 (25 %)
Illegitimacy	Legitimate	6, 25, 42 (14 %)	5, 24, 27, 34, 45 (18 %)
	Illegitimate	1, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 23, 26, 28, 29, 32, 33, 35, 44, 46, 48 (86 %)	2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 31, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 47, 49, 50, 53 (82 %)
Stability	Unstable	1, 33, 42, 44, 48 (22 %)	7, 8, 14, 15, 20, 21, 30, 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, 50 (46 %)
	Stable	4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 32, 35, 46 (78 %)	2, 3, 5, 9, 19, 22, 23, 24, 27, 31, 34, 36, 40, 45, 47, 49 (54 %)
Comparison groups	Downward comparison	0 %	2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 45, 47, 49, 50. (100 %)
	Upward comparison	1, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 32, 33, 35, 42, 44, 46, 48 (100 %)	0 %
Identity management strategies	Social creativity	1, 4, 6, 12, 32, 26 (27 %)	2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 20, 21, 22, 24 27, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 47, 49, 50, 19, 30 (75 %)
	Individual mobility	1, 4, 13, 16, 17, 8, 23, 25, 28, 29, 33, 35, 42, 44, 46, 48 (72 %)	14, 22, 38, 40, 43, 30, 45 (25 %)
	Collective effort	10, 11 (1 %)	0 %

Extract 1 They are similar indeed, in that none of them is able to fulfill their needs exactly… the places they hang out, the schools their children attend, their foods and clothes are all similar…

On the other hand, the participants who argued that the poor people are not similar to each other placed emphasis on individual differences. For example Interviewee 29 (37, male) argued that while some poor people are lazy or lack initiative, others may be content with their situations. Interviewee 39 (37, male) argued that:

Extract 2 Things differ from one poor person to another. For instance some poor people do not work, and have disdain for work; while others do whatever job they can, even for very low wages. These are the differences.

2.2.2 Comparison Groups

All 22 interviewees who defined themselves as poor used upward comparisons, arguing that some people in society live in better conditions than themselves, possess such assets as houses and cars, and are able to provide their children with a better education. Interviewee 12 (34, male) stated that:

Extract 3 Of course I consider myself poor when compared to those with permanent jobs, those who have double wages and those who have land/property. They live in better conditions than me.

On the other hand, the 28 interviewees who did not define themselves as poor compared themselves with those who live in worse conditions than themselves, and thus made downward comparisons. For example, Interviewee 14 (39, female) emphasized that there are some people who have to scavenge from garbage in order to survive.

Extract 4 For instance, some people have to scavenge from the garbage, some people cannot even bring bread home. Indeed all of us are poor, as living is expensive, but some people are much poorer. When I think about them I do not consider myself poor. It's that simple.

2.2.3 Legitimacy

Of the 22 interviewees who defined themselves as poor, 19 stated that the difference in status between the poor and the wealthy is unfair, arguing that most wealthy people had attained their current status in unfair ways. In other words, they would never have attained their current wealth if they had not stolen the belongings of others (*metaphorically*), and so do not deserve what they have. Interviewee 29 (35, female) argued that:

Extract 5 It's not fair. They become wealthier, because they earn through illicitly means. Nobody becomes rich through honest ways. That's why it's not fair.

Some also emphasized that it was the unjust allocation of resources that made some people poor and others wealthy.

Within this group, three interviewees emphasized that it was impossible to attain equality in an absolute sense in any society, as not everyone can be rich at the same time. Inequality is inevitable, and so there will always be individual differences. For instance, some people are lazier than others, or lack adequate skills or abilities. Interviewee 25 (32, female) stated that poverty may not be fair, however, there were always some people who never made the effort to work harder, and there will always be some people who are more skilled or have greater talents.

Extract 6 Maybe it's not fair, but equality can never be achieved. For people who don't want to work or who never try to work harder, poverty is normal.

Of the interviewees who defined themselves as not poor, 23 used similar arguments to those who defined themselves as poor, mentioning that poverty is unjust/unfair, while five viewed poverty as legitimate, arguing that the global system is based on inequality, and that it was not unusual. Interviewee 24 (43, male) argued that:

Extract 7 There are poor people, and there are rich people. I do not know whether it is fair or not. I believe that even if every individual was equal, there would be problems. There is no equality. The world is as it is, that's why it's fair.

2.2.4 Stability

Of the 22 interviewees who defined themselves as poor, 17 stated that the status difference between the poor and the wealthy was stable, and this situation was unlikely to change. They argued further that equality would be impossible in either the near or even distant

Table 2 Logical relations between the arguments used by individual interviewees and identity management strategies

Participants	Identity definition	Homogenity		Comparison		Legitimacy		Stability arguments		Identity management strategies		
		Similar	Not similar	Upward	Downward	Legitimate	Illegitimate	Stable	Unstable	Individual	Creative	Collective
1 (male, 44)	Poor	+		+			+				+	*
2 (male, 48)	Not poor		+				+	+			+	
3 (female, 37)	Not poor		+		+		+	+			+	
4 (female, 34)	Poor	+		+			+	+			+	
5 (male, 37)	Not poor		+		+	+					+	
6 (female, 34)	Poor	+		+		+		+			+	
7 (female, 38)	Not poor		+		+		+		+		+	
8 (female, 25)	Not poor		+		+		+		+		+	
9 (female, 40)	Not poor		+		+		+	+			+	
10 (female, 40)	Poor	+		+			+	+			*	+
11 (female, 25)	Poor		+	+			+	+			*	+
12 (male, 34)	Poor	+		+			+	+			+	
13 (female, 26)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+	*	
14 (female, 39)	Not poor	+			+		+		+	+		
15 (female, 41)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	
16 (female, 28)	Poor	+		+			+		+	+		*
17 (male, 56)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+	*	
18 (male, 62)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+	+	
19 (male, 51)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
20 (female, 30)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	
21 (female, 36)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	
22 (female, 67)	Not poor	+			+		+	+		+	+	
23 (male, 48)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+	*	
24 (male, 43)	Not poor	+			+	+			+		+	

Table 2 continued

Participants	Identity definiton	Homogenity		Comparison		Legitimacy		Stability arguments		Identity management strategies		
		Similar	Not similar	Upward	Downward	Legitimate	Illegitimate	Stable	Unstable	Individual	Creative	Collective
25 (female, 32)	Poor	+			+	+		+		+		
26 (male, 32)	Poor	+		+			+		+		+	*
27 (male, 34)	Not poor	+			+	+		+			+	
28 (female, 50)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+		
29 (female, 35)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+		
30 (female, 40)	Not poor	+			+		+		+	+	+	
31 (male, 62)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
32 (male, 41)	Poor	+		+			+	+			+	
33 (female, 37)	Poor	+		+			+		+	+		
34 (male, 55)	Not poor	+			+	+		+			+	
35 (male, 45)	Poor	+			+		+	+		+		
36 (female, 35)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
37 (female, 46)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	
38 (male, 50)	Not poor	+			+		+		+	+	+	
39 (male, 37)	Not poor		+		+		+		+		+	
40 (male, 52)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
41 (male, 21)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	
42 (male, 31)	Poor	+		+		+			+	+		
43 (female, 30)	Not poor		+		+		+		+	+		
44 (female, 42)	Poor		+	+			+		+	+		
45 (male, 29)	Not poor	+			+	+		+		+		
46 (female, 50)	Poor	+		+			+	+		+		
47 (female, 61)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
48 (male, 44)	Poor	+		+			+	+			+	

Table 2 continued

Participants	Identity definition	Homogeneity		Comparison		Legitimacy		Stability arguments		Identity management strategies		
		Similar	Not similar	Upward	Downward	Legitimate	Illegitimate	Stable	Unstable	Individual	Creative	Collective
49 (female, 35)	Not poor	+			+		+	+			+	
50 (male, 40)	Not poor	+			+		+		+		+	

Italic areas show that the arguments of the interviewee and the identity management strategies preferred by that interviewee are not consistent. Logically it was not expected that these interviewees would tend to use the identity management strategy marked by *

future. They expressed further that they did not believe there would be any improvement in either their individual situations or in the general reduction of poverty. Interviewee 17 (56, male) stated that:

Extract 8   I don't know whether I will get to live in better conditions in the future. I don't believe my conditions will change. Things reoccur. For me, it is impossible to go further. It does not change.

On the other hand, those who thought poverty would be reduce said that it would be through individual effort and steps by the state that poverty reduction would be achieved in the future. Interviewee 42 (31, male) posited that:

Extract 9   Poverty can be prevented through preventive policies of the state, of course. Still, I can hope. I can also improve my own status, because I work hard.

Of the 28 interviewees who defined themselves as not poor, 13 stated that poverty was a changeable or unstable situation, emphasizing the role of the state and individual effort in poverty reduction, while 16 of them did not believe poverty could be eliminated, arguing that everything gets worse, not better. Interviewee 30 (40, female) argued that:

Extract 10   People do not give thanks to God. People should make much more effort. It depends on the effort of the individual, but the state should also be a social state; it should provide employment opportunities, otherwise poverty cannot be reduced.

2.2.5 Identity Management Strategies

Of those who defined themselves as poor, 16 interviewees emphasized individual mobility as a means of coping with poverty, six emphasized creative strategies and only two suggested a need for collective strategies. Those who emphasized individual mobility spoke about their hope of finding better jobs, or that their children would start working and help them, or even that they may find a working spouse. For example, Interviewee 29 (35, female) stated that she believed her living conditions would improve if she could find a new (third) spouse. Interviewee 1 (44, male) also stated that:

Extract 11   My daughter is starting work. At least she will no longer demand money from her father. Maybe she can support me. If that happens, things may be better.

The two interviewees who argued that collective effort was necessary stressed the importance of organization in changing the unequal socio-economic structure. Interviewee 11 (25, female) posited that:

Extract 12   The state's economic policies and the unequal allocation of resources are to blame. The poor should be aware of this, as this is where the solution lies. I think getting organized and making a collective demand for change is required to overcome poverty.

Those who supported the application of creative strategies argued on the whole that they are (the poor) at least honest, and earn from their own effort rather than through cheating people (*stressing the superior attributes of the poor*). They also claimed that they had to be grateful to God, as their situations could be much worse (*changing the comparative context*). Interviewee 4 (34, female) stated that:

Extract 13   Thank God, I live in relatively better conditions. At least I have my own house, I am not tenant. I spend what I earn. I earn due to my own effort.

Of those who defined themselves as not poor, seven emphasized individualistic strategies and 25 supported creative strategies, while none saw the benefit of collective effort. Those who mentioned creative strategies mostly shifted the comparison group from upward to downward, claiming that they should think about those who live in worse conditions than they do (*changing the comparative context*). They also made temporal comparisons between their current situations and their past lives (*changing the comparative context*). For example Interviewee 36 (35, female) mentioned that her husband had in the past been unemployed, and so they had lived under much worse conditions in the past. Nowadays, however, she said that they were fine since her husband had found a job, and so they felt they should be grateful.

Some of those who supported the use of social creativity cited the "poor but happy, rich but miserable" stereotype (*stressing the superior attributes of the poor*). For example Interviewee 8 (25, female) stated that:

Extract 14 If there is no peace at home, money doesn't matter. I don't want to be rich and unhappy. Thank God I am at peace right now.

2.3 Discussion: Logical Relationships Between Arguments and Identity Management Strategies

As seen from Table 1, the majority of interviewees who defined themselves as poor used similarity arguments, made upward comparisons, expressed their perceptions of illegitimacy and stability related to differences in status between the poor and the wealthy, and stated their individual expectancy of living under better conditions in the future. As a result, while the majority of this subgroup tended to use individual mobility strategies to deal with the negative identity of poverty, some used social creativity strategies and only the two emphasized the benefit of collective effort.

The majority of the interviewees who defined themselves as not poor used similarity arguments, made downward comparisons, and used arguments of illegitimacy when referring to the status difference between the poor and the wealthy. That said, related to the category of stability, half of the participants in this subgroup stated that change in a positive direction would occur in the near or distant future, whereas the other half stated that they did not believe in change in the socio-economic structure. Consequently, the majority tended to use social creativity to deal with a negative poor identity, while a few tended to use individual mobility strategies. Nobody emphasized the necessity of collective efforts.

The most apparent difference between the two subgroups is in the category of comparison groups, as such a difference seems to be crucial in the poor or not poor definitions of social identity. While all of the interviewees who defined themselves as poor tended to compare themselves with those with better living conditions, those who defined themselves as not poor compared themselves rather with those living in worse conditions. It would appear that the interviewees who made upward comparisons felt their poverty more deeply, realizing that they could have lived under much better conditions, and this is consistent with previous findings on relative poverty (Corazzini et al. 2011; Lister 2004; Tomlinson et al. 2008).

Another noticeable difference between the two subgroups was seen in the category of stability. Almost all the interviewees who defined themselves as poor used the argument that the inferior position of the poor will remain stable; while half of the interviewees who defined themselves as not poor seemed to believe that poverty may be reduced in the future. It would appear that beliefs related to stability steer individuals towards the promotion of a mobility strategy, independent of their definitions of identity as poor or not

poor. That said, defining one's identity as not poor seems to increase beliefs of instability, due probably to the habit of comparing oneself not only downwardly, but also temporally. That is, comparing their current situations with their personal pasts, and comparing the current social conditions with the past of that society may lead the interviewees to believe that gradual changes in a positive direction have taken place, although they may experience few feelings of individual control. In turn, a belief in change may direct them to endorse social creative strategies over individual or collective strategies.

In addition to the analysis of the general patterns of the arguments in each category, we also analyzed the logical relationships between the arguments used by each interviewee and his/her preferred identity management strategies. In general, all the arguments would appear to be positively related to each other in a logical sense, but with a few exceptions (see Table 2). The arguments of four interviewees were seemingly inconsistent with SIT assumptions. Interviewees 1 and 26 both used social creativity arguments, although they defined themselves as poor and made upward comparisons, and viewed the relationship between wealthy and the poor as illegitimate and unstable, all of which are assumed to result in a tendency for collective effort. However, looking at the details of their narratives in the stability category, both emphasized the role of the state in explaining their beliefs in social change. They may have confidence in the current state policies and just wait for change to take place, and if this is the case, the best strategy to deal with the negative implications of being poor would be social creativity.

Interviewees 10 and 11, on the other hand, who defined themselves as poor and made upward comparisons, viewed the relationship between the wealthy and the poor as illegitimate but stable. Consequently, it was assumed they would adopt a social creativity strategy, but in contrast, both supported collective efforts. Furthermore, when examining the details of their narratives it can be seen that they reverse the direction of the relationship between stability and collective strategy. That is, while SIT suggests that belief in change coupled with perceptions of illegitimacy leads individuals to endorse a collective strategy, these two interviewees argued that it is collective effort that is the prerequisite for social-structural change. The interviewees claimed that change will never take place unless they organize and struggle together against inequality. That said, they also stated that there was no such organization among the poor, and that the poor lacked the determination to struggle. It may seem reasonable for these individuals that others lack the will to act collectively to improve their inferior status, meaning that structural changes do not occur in favor of the poor, although they personally believe in the necessity of collective action.

Despite a few exceptions mentioned above, the analysis of individual arguments revealed that when people see group boundaries as permeable and the social structure as stable, they tend to move into higher status groups, even if they perceive the unequal social structure as illegitimate. On the other hand, when the social structure is perceived as stable, they tend to use creative strategies.

3 Survey Study

We conducted a survey study in order to examine quantitatively which one of the identity management strategies suggested by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978) would be adopted by poor people when attempting to address their negative poor identity. We proposed a model in which self-definition as a member of the poor group predicts the identity management strategies via perceptions of permeability, stability and legitimacy (Fig. 1). Specifically, we hypothesized that one's self-definition as a member of the poor group increases perceptions of illegitimacy and instability regarding the relationships
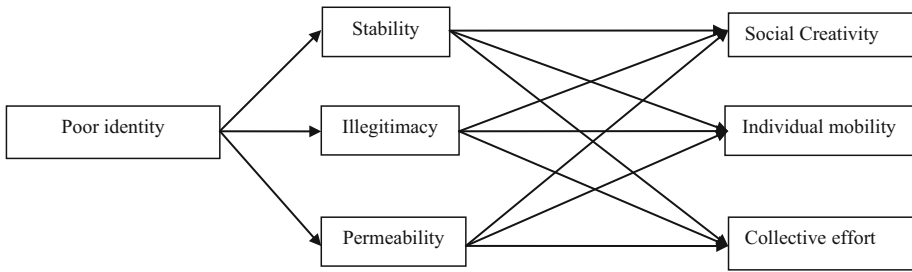
Fig. 1 The proposed model

between the poor and the wealthy group, which, in turn, increases the tendency to adopt social creativity or collective strategies, but decreases the tendency to use individual strategies. On the other hand, defining oneself as being poor decreases the perception of permeability between the poor and the wealthy, although a high perception of permeability increases the tendency to adopt individual strategies and decreases the tendency to use social creativity or collective strategies.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

A convenient sample of 170 adults (77 female, 93 male) participated voluntarily in the survey study. The participants, whose household income were below the poverty line according to a TURK-IS 2011 report, were from the suburbs of Adana. The mean age of the participants was 36.22 ($SD = 9.6$), ranging from 18 to 66. The monthly income of the participants ranged from 650 to 2750 TL.

3.1.2 Measures

The questionnaire sought to garner information from the participants related to identity definition, legitimacy perception, stability perception, permeability perception and identity management strategies, in addition to demographic data. All of the items in the questionnaire were developed based on the arguments put forward by the interviewees in the first study with the intention of enhancing comprehensibility.

3.1.2.1 Identity Definition A single 5-point Likert-type scale ("I define myself as a typical member of poor group", 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) was used to assess how the participants defined themselves as members of the poor group.

3.1.2.2 Illegitimacy Perceptions Scale Three items (e.g. "I think it is unfair that some people have to live in poverty while the others in wealth") were developed by the researchers to assess how just/fair the participants perceive the difference in status between the poor and the wealthy. Each item was assessed with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), with higher scores referring to a higher perception of illegitimacy. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be .82.

3.1.2.3 Stability Perceptions Scale   Five items (e.g. "I believe that a social structure that is based on economic inequality is hard to change") were generated by the researchers in order to assess the participants' beliefs related to the stability of the disadvantageous status of the poor. The items were ranked with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) (α = .84), with higher scores indicating high perceptions of stability of poverty.

3.1.2.4 Permeability of the Boundaries Scale   Four items were generated by the researchers to assess the participants' perceptions related to the permeability of group boundaries (e.g. "There is no real obstacle in the way of reaching better economic conditions"). The items were ranked with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) (α = .73), with higher scores indicating high perceptions of permeability.

3.1.2.5 Identity Management Strategies Scale   Twenty-four items were generated by the researchers to determine the participants' tendency to use the three identity management strategies (individual, creative and collective). The items were ranked with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). A principle axis factoring analysis with a varimax rotation showed that three items were either cross-loaded or non-loaded on the factors, and so these three items were removed, and the analysis was repeated. The results confirmed the three-dimensional structure of the scale. A KMO and Bartlett's test gave a sampling adequacy of .89. Accordingly, nine items (e.g. "What is important is not economic wealth, but richness of the heart") were loaded on the creative strategies factor (explained variance = 30 %, α = .93), six items (e.g. "Poverty can be destroyed only if the poor themselves fight against it collectively") were loaded on collective strategies (explained variance = 20 %, α = .90), and the remaining six items (e.g. "With enough effort, poor individuals can become wealthy") were loaded on individual strategies (explained variance = 17 %, α = .86).

3.1.3 Procedure

Those involved were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, and that all responses would be confidential. After completing the questionnaires, which lasted about 20 min, the participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.2 Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations of all measures were obtained through SPSS 13, and are presented in Table 3.

The results of multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA) showed that there was no significant effect of gender and age on any of the variables used in the proposed model.

The proposed model was tested through Lisrel 8.51. All the variables in the proposed model were observed variables, and hence it was a path model (Kline 2005). The goodness of fit statistics of the analysis showed that χ^2 (9) = 62.84, p = .000, χ^2/df = 6.98, SRMR = .13, AGFI = .70, GFI = .90, CFI = .82, AIC = 101.19 and RMSEA = .19. The modification indices suggested that the error terms between Stability and Permeability Perceptions, and the error terms between Social Creativity and Individual Mobility strategies were to be correlated. As stability and permeability perceptions are two different aspects of the social structure, and that social creativity and individual mobility are the two ways of coping with negative social

Table 3 Means, standard deviations and correlations of all measures

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Poor identification	2.87 (1.19)	1					
2. Illegitimacy	3.40 (1.14)	.229**	1				
3. Stability	3.44 (.99)	−.217**	−.216**	1			
4. Permeability	3.42 (.92)	−.283**	−.208**	.383**	1		
5. Individual strategies	3.41 (.94)	−.274**	−.094	.348**	.621**	1	
6. Creative strategies	3.41 (1.06)	−.249**	−.309**	.482**	.489**	.550**	1
7. Collective strategies	3.21 (1.00)	.334**	.503**	−.346**	−.204**	−.142	−.297**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

identities in Social Identity Theory conceptualization, the error terms of these two variable pairs were allowed to be correlated. The analysis was then repeated, after which the correlation coefficients between the error terms of stability and permeability ($r = .24$), and between the error terms of social creativity and individual mobility ($r = .22$) were not so strong. Furthermore, the parameter estimates of the before and after correlating the error terms were almost the same. The modified model fitted the data much better, with goodness of fit statistics showing that χ^2 (7) = 18.85, $p = .01$, $\chi^2/df = 2.69$, SRMR = .078, AGFI = .88, GFI = .97, CFI = .96, AIC = 60.85 and RMSEA = .10.

The results indicated that defining oneself as poor was a negatively predicted stability ($t = −2.88, p < .05$) and permeability ($t = −3.82, p < .01$) perceptions, and a positively predicted illegitimacy ($t = 3.05, p < .01$) perception. Stability perceptions positively predicted social creativity ($t = 4.78, p < .01$) and individual mobility ($t = 2.13, p < .05$), and negatively predicted collective effort ($t = −3.50, p < .01$). The beta coefficients of all significant relationships are presented in Fig. 2.

The results of the survey study mostly confirmed the proposed model, with the findings revealing that defining one's own social identity as poor increased perceptions of illegitimacy, which, in turn, increased the tendency to endorse a collective strategy, but decreased the tendency to use social creativity. On the other hand, identifying oneself as poor predicted stability perceptions negatively, which increased the tendency to use social creativity and individual mobility strategies, but reduced collective effort tendencies. Similarly, a poor identity was negatively predicted perceptions of permeability, which increased the tendency to adopt social creativity and individual mobility strategies.

4 General Discussion

The present paper has attempted to explore how poor people deal with the negative social identity related with poverty within the framework of SIT (Tajfel 1978) in Turkey. Unlike in mainstream psychological studies, we regard poverty in this paper to be a group level phenomenon, rather than considering the poor as separate individuals.

An analysis of the interviews revealed that when poor people perceived the group boundaries as permeable and the social structure as unstable, they tended to move into high-status groups, even if they perceived the unequal social structure to be illegitimate. On the other hand, when the social structure was perceived as stable, they tended to adopt
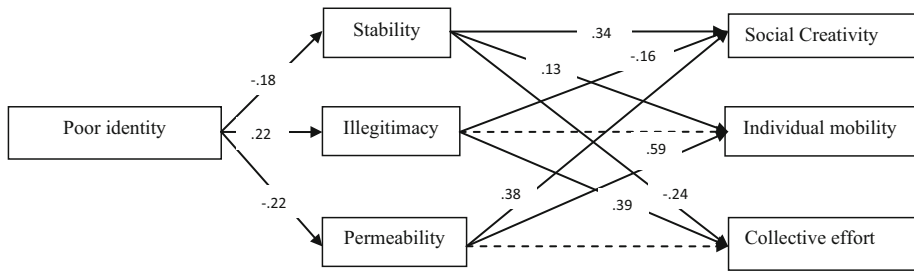
Fig. 2 Standardized coefficients after modification

creative strategies. The overall tendency to endorse collective strategies was very weak, regardless of the self-definition of the interviewee as a member of the poor group. The negative social identity related to poverty seems to trigger social creativity, and it may appear to be more tolerable for poor people to compare themselves to poorer groups rather with those that are better off. This strategy is considered to be the dominant response to differences in status between groups, which results in a consensual status system. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), similar groups compare themselves to each other, and the outcome determines their relative prestige. Increasing differences in status, however, reduces the similarity of perceptions, and hence comparability, just like in the case of the wealthy and the poor. In this regard, choosing the poorer group rather than the wealthier group as a comparison target seems to function as a means of protecting poor people from the negative implications of being members of the poor group.

That said, the other half of the interviewees in the present study compared themselves with people who are wealthier rather than poorer than them. Given the fact that general access to resources, such as housing, jobs, income and education, is vital for any group, for some poor people it would seem that the relevant comparison group (e.g. wealthier) would be unlikely to change or lessen in value. System Justification Theory (SJT, Jost and Banaji 1994) proposes that people are motivated to maintain the belief that the existing social structure is fair, legitimate, justifiable and necessary (e.g. Jost et al. 2003). Although it would appear that the interviewees in the present study believe that the unequal social structure is neither fair nor just, their perceptions of illegitimacy did not lead them to endorse collective strategies over creative strategies. According to SJT, the system of justifying beliefs among the members of disadvantageous groups may not be reflected in explicit measures. Members of inferior groups would be more likely to exhibit out-group favoritism in implicit and non-conscious cognitive, affective and behavioral measures (Correll et al. 2002). Future research might test directly the implicit system justifying beliefs of the poor with an appropriate research design.

On the other hand, the reason behind endorsement of creative strategies over collective strategies may lie in Turkey's historical and political context rather than in the system justifying beliefs. Participating in collective actions or even being organized in Turkey might have serious consequences for individuals, in that the oppressive socio-political climate for especially those on the left of the political spectrum came to dominate Turkey after the 1980 military coup, after which certain freedoms, including organizing, protesting and speech, were restricted (The Guardian 2014). It would be hard to claim that the oppressive climate has undergone a material change in later periods. Recently, in the spring of 2013, the Gezi Park demonstrations, accepted as the largest wave of protests in recent Turkish history, saw millions take to the streets to challenge the proposed destruction of

the park to make way for an Ottoman-themed shopping center, to which the government took an inflexible and oppressive stance. According to a Turkish doctors' organization, during the demonstrations eight people died as a result of police violence; furthermore, around 8000 people were injured, 104 people sustained serious head injuries and 11 people lost eyes, most as a result of plastic bullets fired by the police. Pressure on the media increased, and the people's demand for more rights were referred to as 'terrorist actions' by the government (The Guardian 2014). Such an oppressive climate may lead the poor to adopt some creative strategies in order to cope with the negative poor identity, rather than taking collective action in order to improve their status in reality.

The analysis of the interview study indicated that regardless of one's definition of identity as poor or not, the poor mostly endorsed social creativity. In contrast, the analysis of the survey data confirmed the proposed model, which assumes that a poor identity (defining one's self as a part of poor group) leads poor people to endorse one of three identity management strategies based on perceptions of permeability between the poor and the wealthy, and through perceptions of stability and illegitimacy of the status in the relationship between the poor and wealthy groups. The analysis revealed that defining one's own social identity as poor increased perceptions of illegitimacy, which, in turn, increased the tendency to endorse a collective strategy, but decreased the tendency to use social creativity. On the other hand, poor identity predicted stability perceptions negatively, which increased the tendency to use social creativity and individual mobility strategies, but reduced collective effort tendencies. Similarly, a poor identity was negatively predicted perceptions of permeability, which increased the tendency to adopt social creativity and individual mobility strategies. In another words, a poor identity stemming from the acknowledgment of being a part of the poor group increases perceptions of illegitimacy, which in turn leads poor people to endorse collective strategies. In contrast, a poor identity was seen to decrease perceptions of stability and permeability, both of which are associated positively with individual mobility and social creativity strategies. This apparently inconsistent situation may be related to personal beliefs in the need for collective action, rather than an intention to take a real part in a collective approach. That is, only behavioral tendencies were measured. However, in reality, collective action occurs only rarely. Future studies may focus on the predictive values of such behavioral tendencies related to participation in collective behavior.

The present research is not free of shortcomings. First of all, the results may be context specific, and there may be cross-cultural differences in propensities for individual mobility, social creativity or collective strategies. Although the results give insights into the underlying social psychological processes associated with poverty in the other countries whose social-political background is similar to Turkey, there is a clear need for them to be replicated in other cultures. Second, a temporal comparison dimension was not included in the current studies, although a temporal comparison, in addition to a group comparison, may play a crucial role in identifying when the poor engage in collective action, follow a route of individual mobility, or use social creativity to deal with a negative poor identity. It is possible that people may believe that the unequal social structure is not fair, however today's situation might appear to be better than it was in earlier times.

The findings of the present research point to the importance of inter group dynamics and processes in understanding the attempts of the poor to overcome their own poverty. Sociological and psychological works have uncovered several factors that lead poor people to perpetuate, or to overcome their own poverty. Studies have indicated the roles of culture (Lewis 1966; Hansen 2008), inter- and intra-generational transmissions (Plewis and Bartley 2014), causal attributions (Bullock and Waugh 2005; Cozzarelli et al. 2001), and

personality traits (e.g. Hart et al. 2008; Carr and Bandawe 2011) in social mobility processes, and also in poverty reduction efforts. That said, analyzing poverty at a group level contributes to the comprehension of interactional, contextual and hierarchical aspects of this wide-ranging social problem when seeking solutions.

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