

The Impact of Realistic and Illusory Control on Psychological Distress: A Test of the Model of Instrumental Realism

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between sense of control and psychological distress. Rather than providing evidence for the view that rejection of responsibility for outcomes has a beneficial effect on the mental health of low status groups, our findings suggest that increments of control have their most dramatic effect among those with low status and resources. The results reported are consistent with the existence of a threshold of dysfunction beyond which point increased feelings of control are detrimental to one's well-being. Unlike previous research, though, this threshold effect was found to apply to both realistic and illusory control.

I INTRODUCTION

Efforts to explain social patterns of psychological distress have consistently focused on sense of control as a potential mediating factor. Our interest in such approaches arises in the context of our broader concern with the determinants and consequences of poverty (Callan, *et al.*, forthcoming; Whelan, *et al.*, 1991; Whelan, 1992a). Kane (1987, p. 405) notes that there has been a reluctance to discuss possible motivational defects among deprived groups out of fear of becoming involved in blaming the victim. The reluctance

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has arisen as a consequence of an onslaught by the radical right in the USA which has involved defining the *underclass* as a group characterised by a culture of dependency. The battle lines have thus been drawn so that restricted opportunities, and attitudes and values have been seen as competing rather than complementary explanations.

It is possible, however, to view motivation as the outcome of a complex set of interactions in which restricted opportunity plays a central rôle. Mirowsky and Ross (1990) identify three such influential perspectives.

- (i) the consolation prize theory of alienation;
- (ii) illusory control as false consciousness;
- (iii) the threshold of dysfunction.

An evaluation of these approaches leads them to suggest an alternative — the unified model of instrumental realism.

The consolation prize theory of alienation suggests that the impact of feelings of control on emotional well-being depends on the nature of the preponderant outcomes in one's life. Claiming responsibility for good outcomes enhances self-esteem, while accepting responsibility for negative outcomes damages self-esteem. The theory thus holds that for low-status people, neglecting the rôle of choice, effort and ability as determinants of life outcomes reduces distress (Hyman, 1966).

The importance of issues relating to social class/socio-economic status, sense of control and mental health is shown in the manner in which such questions are posed in a number of disciplinary contexts. The consolation prize theory was developed to explain the lower aspirations and commitment of lower status workers., Merton (1946) theorised that a belief in luck and a rejection of personal responsibility help people to preserve their self-esteem in the face of failure but also discourage endeavour. Despite the intuitive appeal of the theory, as Mirowsky and Ross (1990, p. 1,505) note, the empirical evidence offers little in the way of support for the hypothesis (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Wheaton, 1985).

Failure to confirm the central tenet of the consolation prize theory stimulated the development of a number of alternatives which suggest that *acceptance* of responsibility for outcomes in their own lives helps those of low status feel less distress. The first interpretation suggests that the distress normally associated with low status can be cancelled out by the illusion of personal control. The "illusory control" as false consciousness perspective suggests that a greater sense of control has positive mental effects irrespective of social status, resources or objective opportunity.

This approach is rooted in attempts to explain the legitimization of the status quo by those who lose out in the contest. The acceptance of personal

responsibility for one's economic fate provides an ideological justification for the unequal distribution of rewards. Sociological interpretations of such beliefs in terms of false consciousness have parallels, Mirowsky and Ross note (1990, p. 1,512), in notions of "magical control" in anthropology, and in the concept of defence mechanisms in psychology. A variety of studies provide evidence which is consistent with this perspective. Thus, studies consistently find that socio-economic status increases sense of control and that even when we take status into account, those who experience a greater sense of control are less distressed (Pearlin, *et al.*, 1981; Mirowsky and Ross, 1989; Ross and Mirowsky, 1989; Wheaton, 1980).

The major difficulty associated with the view that illusory control sustains emotional well-being is the idea that there is no limit to the comfort of self-delusion.

Reality is the only obstruction to the path of perfect bliss. Some consider illusory control as a social problem — an ideological narcotic with insidious social consequences. Others consider it a personal cure — an antidote to existential terms of life. Whichever view is taken it is reasonable to question whether the "dose-response" relationship is linear. As with a drug there may be a diminishing incremental effect of larger and larger "doses" of illusory control. There may even be a threshold beyond which increasing doses are more damaging than soothing. (Mirowsky and Ross, 1990, p. 1,515).

The threshold of dysfunction perspective also suggests that accepting responsibility for outcomes is beneficial but suggests that there are diminishing returns to an increased sense of control. It directs attention to the inherent tension between the need for realistic control and the need for psychological defence. The emotional benefits of a sense of control are perceived to be largely a consequence of effective action. Psychological distress is minimised by a sense of control that provides an effective balance of motivation and realism.

A number of studies provide support for the hypothesis of the existence of such a threshold. However, the results as presented by Wheaton (1985) describe a *fixed* threshold of dysfunction which implies, as Mirowsky and Ross (1990, p. 1,518) observe, that people of low status benefit up to that threshold just as much as people of high status. Thus, there is no relationship between objective resources and the optimum sense of control. This implication, they note, runs counter to the basic reasoning behind the model which emphasises the constraints of realism.

In attempting to deal with this difficulty, Mirowsky and Ross draw a distinction between realistic and illusory control. The former is that sense of

control attributable to socio-economic status and associated resources. The latter refers to that component of sense of control which is not predictable from information relating to status. Mirowsky and Ross make use of this distinction to develop what they describe as the "unified model of instrumental realism". Their approach takes as its starting point the assumption that if the marginal benefits of increased motivation are cancelled out by the consequences of unrealistic assessment, the threshold should increase with status. Thus, the optimum level of perceived control for a professional and managerial worker should be higher than for an unskilled manual worker. Mirowsky and Ross, however, suggest that a threshold of dysfunction applies only in relation to illusory control. In other words, there is no upper limit to the benefit to be derived from a sense of control based on the existence of objective resources associated with socio-economic status. With regard to illusory control, however, while optimism can have beneficial mental health effects, beyond a certain point a lack of realism is counterproductive.

II METHODS

In what follows we make use of the data from the Survey of Income Distribution Poverty and Usage of State Services carried out by The Economic and Social Research Institute in 1987 in order to assess the relative merits of these approaches.

Sample

The survey was designed to provide a representative national sample of all households. Interviews were conducted with all available adults in 3,294 households. Post-sample correction, through reweighting of results to take into account inter and intra household non-response, was employed. More detailed discussions of the sampling procedures can be found in Callan, *et al.* (1989) and Whelan, *et al.* (1991).

Measurement

Our choice of socio-demographic variables to be included in the analysis was influenced by the results arising from our earlier work relating to the determinants of psychological distress (Whelan, *et al.*, 1991; Whelan, 1992a).

The measure of psychological distress that we employ is the General Health Questionnaire ("GHQ") in its 12 item format. The GHQ was designed by Goldberg (1972) as a screening test for detecting minor psychiatric disorders in the community. The items included in the measure are designed to give information about the respondent's current mental state. It is neither a measure of long-standing attributes of personality, nor an assessment of the

probability of falling ill in the near future (Goldberg, 1972). It is most definitely not, however, a mere complaints inventory. It consists only of items that have been chosen from a substantial battery of items that have been shown to discriminate between groups of respondents in terms of their likelihood of being assessed as non-psychotic psychiatric cases.

In order to make it possible for the GHQ to be administered by interviewers, it was necessary to introduce some changes to the combinations of items and answer formats. The procedure adopted was intended to avoid grouping of "positive" or "negative" items or the need for repeated changes of response format. The approach taken was to divide the items into two groups of 6, each of which was allocated to one of the two possible response formats. The alpha coefficient for the 12-item scale was found to be .82. The split half correlation coefficient between the sub-scales using changed and unchanged response format was .73. The ranges of scores run from "0" representing the lowest level of psychological distress to "12" representing the highest.

Sense of Control

In measuring control we have employed a set of items which have been fairly widely employed in the literature (Pearlin, *et al.*, 1981). The statements to which respondents reacted were as follows:

- (i) I can do just about anything I set my mind to.
- (ii) I have little control over the things that happen to me.
- (iii) What happens in the future depends on me.
- (iv) I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life.
- (v) Sometimes I feel I am being pushed around in life.
- (vi) There is really no way that I can solve some of the problems that I have.
- (vii) There is a lot I can do to change my life if I want to.

The response format ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The alpha reliability coefficient is .68. The items are scored so that a high score indicates strong feelings of control and low scores strong feelings of fatalism. The scores were averaged and the variable thus has a potential range of scores going to "1" to "4".

Education

We distinguish between those (i) with primary education or less (ii) incomplete secondary education (iii) Leaving Certificate (iv) Third Level education. Education is included in our analysis as a set of dummy variables with primary education or less as the reference category.

Social Class

The class schema we have employed is the Irish Census-based Social Class Scale (O'Hare, Whelan and Commins, 1991) with the modification that we have allocated married women living with their spouses to class categories on the basis of their spouse's occupation. Class is scored from "1" for unskilled manual workers to "6" for higher professional and managerial respondents.

Physical Health Status

Respondents were asked if they "had any major illness, physical disability or infirmity that has troubled you for at least the past year or that is likely to go on troubling you." Respondents are scored "1" if they had such a problem and "0" otherwise.

Unemployment

The concept of unemployment adopted in this study, like that in the Census and Labour Force Survey is dependent upon the respondent's evaluation of their own employment status. A score of "1" is assigned to the unemployed and "0" to all others. Inability to work due to permanent illness or disability is also distinguished and a similar scoring procedure to that for unemployment is adopted.

Life-Style Deprivation

The life-style measures of resources we employ are based on the enforced absence of a range of life-style items. The choice of items to be included in the study was influenced by the range of indicators employed in other major studies of poverty. Mack and Lansley's (1985) items were chosen so as to exclude things which almost everyone has or every few people would miss. The 24 items on which our analysis is based are made up of 17 of the Mack and Lansley pool of items together with 7 additional items.

For each of 20 of the life-style items the head of the household or household manager was asked:

- (i) Whether the household had the item in question?
- (ii) If not, whether they would like to have it but must do without it due to lack of money?
- (iii) Whether they felt the item was a necessity, i.e., "Is something that every household (or person) should be able to have and that nobody should have to do without"?

In addition to the 20 items employing this format, the following set of items were included in the index, bringing the total number of items to 24:

- (i) Whether there was a day during the previous two weeks when the household manager did not have a substantial meal at all — from getting up to going to bed?
- (ii) Whether the household manager has had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money, i.e., having to go without a fire on a cold day, or go to bed early to keep warm or light the fire late because of lack of coal/fuel?
- (iii) Head of household has not had an afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight that costs money, because of lack of resources.
- (iv) Debt Problems:
 - (a) Household is currently in arrears on rent, mortgage, electricity and gas, or
 - (b) has had to go into debt in the last 12 months to meet ordinary living expenses such as rent, food, Christmas or back to school expenses, or
 - (c) has had to sell or pawn anything worth £50 or more to meet ordinary living expenses.

In our subsequent analysis we distinguish two dimensions of life-style deprivation. The first dimension which we label *primary life-style deprivation* involves the enforced absence of socially defined necessities such as new clothes, two pairs of shoes, a warm overcoat, a roast or its equivalent once a week, a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day; or living in a household which is experiencing severe debt problems, or in which the household manager is experiencing extreme food or heat deprivations. Scores on this variable range from "0" to "8". *Secondary* deprivation involves the enforced absence of a daily newspaper, a hobby, central heating, car, telephone, annual holidays or being unable to save or afford an afternoon or evening out in the previous two weeks. Scores on this variable range from "0" to "9".

III RESULTS

The Consolation Prize Theory of Alienation

This theory, as Mirowsky and Ross (1990, p. 1,508-1,509) observe, can be represented in the following two equations:

$$C = a_0 + a_1S + Uc \tag{1}$$

and

$$D = (b_0 + b_1S) + (b_2 + b_3S)C + Ud \tag{2}$$

where S represents socio-economic status and resources, C is the individual's sense of control, D is psychological distress and Uc and Ud are residuals.

These equations state that:

- (i) an individual's sense of control is increased by socio-economic status and resources;
- (ii) the effect of sense of control on psychological distress depends on the individual's status and resources.

The theory thus says that $a_1 > 0$ (status increases the sense of control) and that $b_1 < 0$ (status decreases distress). It also says that $b_2 > 0$ and $b_3 < 0$ (sense of control increases the distress of individuals of low status and resources and decreases the distress of those with high status and resources). The equation can be modified to represent a number of distinct statuses or resources.

In Table 1 we provide a test of these hypotheses employing a measure of social class. The results show that, as we expect, upper class respondents experience lower levels of psychological distress and a high level of sense of control reduces psychological distress. However, the sign of the coefficient for the interaction between social class and sense of control in Equation (2) is in the opposite direction to that suggested by the theory. The impact of sense of control on psychological distress *increases* as one descends the class hierarchy. Thus, for unskilled manual workers a difference of one unit in the sense of control dimension leads to a difference in GHQ score of 2.70 ($-3.04 + .34$). In the case of higher professional and managerial respondents an identical difference in control score produces a GHQ difference of 1.00 ($-3.04 + (.34 \times 6)$).

Table 1: *Multiple Regression Showing the Impact of Sense of Control and Social Class on Psychological Distress (GHQ-12)*

	(i) <i>Dependent Variable</i> <i>Sense of Control</i> <i>b</i>	(ii) <i>Dependent Variable</i> <i>Psychological Distress</i> <i>b</i>
Social Class	.07***	-0.98***
Sense of Control		-3.04***
Sense of Control \times Social Class		0.34***
Intercept	2.43	9.26
R ²	.071	.195
p	<.001	<.001
N	6,111	6,111

*** $p < .001$.

In Table 2 we substitute our measure of primary deprivation for the social class measure. The consolation prize theory of alienation suggests that the sign for the interaction term between sense of control and primary deprivation should be positive; in other words, we expect that differences in sense of control will have least impact among those who are most deprived. The expectation is not borne out by our results. Among those who suffer an enforced lack of none of the primary items a difference of a unit in sense of control score leads to a difference in GHQ scores of 1.45. At the other extreme, for those lacking all of the primary items, the corresponding difference in level of psychological distress is 4.17 (-1.45 + 8 (-0.34)). Thus the impact of sense of control increases as resources *decline*.

Table 2: *Multiple Regression Showing the Impact of Sense of Control and Primary Deprivation on Psychological Distress (GHQ.12)*

	(i) Dependent Variable Sense of Control b	(ii) Dependent Variable Psychological Distress b
Primary Deprivation	-.08***	1.18***
Sense of Control		-1.45***
Sense of Control × Primary Deprivation		0.34***
Intercept	2.72	4.67
R ²	.064	.245
p	<.001	<.001
N	6,111	6,111

*** p < .001.

These results are inconsistent with the consolation prize theory but are consistent with the threshold of dysfunction hypothesis. A direct test of the latter is reported in what follows.

The Threshold of Dysfunction

The notion of a threshold of dysfunction directs attention to the possibility that, while ignoring opportunities to influence one's environment because of fatalistic assumptions may be dysfunctional, equally it can be counter productive to fail to recognise that certain outcomes are simply not within one's control. The idea that there is a threshold below which increments of control are effective in reducing emotional distress and above which they are ineffective is represented in the following equations.

$$\hat{D} = b_0 + b_1C + b_2C^2 + Ud, \quad (3)$$

$$C \text{ optimum} = -b_1/2b_2 \quad (4)$$

The equations represent the idea that distress is minimised by a sense of control between the extremes. Equation (3) says that there is a parabolic relationship between psychological distress and sense of control. Equation (4) defines the sense of control at which the slope of the parabola is zero. The theoretical expectation is that $b_2 > 0$ (distress increases with deviation from the optimum sense of control) and $b_1 < 0$ (the optimum sense of control is positive).

In Table 3 we present the results of testing this hypothesis on our data set. Our results agree with those of Wheaton (1985) and indicate an optimum value of control at a score 3.84; 94.6 per cent of our respondents fall below this threshold. Beyond this score the impact of increases in control is to increase rather than decrease psychological distress. Given that the maximum score on the sense of control variable is "4", an optimum value of 3.84 suggests that the "problem" of experiencing too great a sense of control is much less substantively important than feeling that one has too little control. At this point, however, one becomes increasingly aware that specifying *one* threshold of dysfunction below which the vast majority of the population fall provides us with limited and, indeed, more than likely misleading information. Thus, given the relationship between social class and sense of control, almost inevitably, all of our lower class respondents would fall below this threshold.

Table 3: *Multiple Regression Testing the Threshold of Dysfunction Hypothesis*

	<i>b</i>
Control	-9.78***
Control ²	1.47***
Intercept	16.4
R ²	.228
p	<.001
N	6.111

***p < .001.

Mirowsky and Ross' (1990) theoretical discussion suggests that the threshold effect will operate for illusory control only and that, consequently, there will exist a variety of thresholds conditional on status and resources. In

order to test this hypothesis, it is necessary first to operationalise realistic and illusory control.

Realistic control is that sense of control which is predictable from the individual's socio-economic status and associated resources. Illusory control is defined in terms of departures from such expectations. We have taken advantage of the range of information available in the Poverty Survey to develop a measure of realistic control which is likely to be more precise than any employed in the literature heretofore. From Table 4 we can see that social class, life-deprivation, education and physical health status are significantly related to feelings of control. In addition, women and older respondents are likely to be more fatalistic. A variety of factors interact with gender. Thus, unemployment reduces sense of control primarily for men. Similarly, being separated or divorced has a particularly negative impact for women. The full set of resource and resource-related variables explain 23 per cent of the

Table 4: *Multiple Regression of Determinants of Feeling of Control*

	<i>b</i>
Social Class	.017***
Primary Deprivation	-.0555***
Secondary Deprivation	-.045***
Physical Health Status	-.197***
Primary Education or less	-.102***
Some Secondary Education	-.102***
Leaving Certificate	-.077***
Unemployment	-.024
Unemployment × Gender	-.090**
Gender	.07***
Income	.007***
Age	-.004***
Separated/Divorced	-.766*
Separated/Divorced × Sex	.702
Unable to Work due to Permanent Illness/disability	-.078***
Intercept	2.868
R ²	.229
p	<.001
N	6,111

*** p < .001

** p < .01

* p < .1.

variance in feelings of control. The predicted value of control \hat{C} arising from this equation becomes our measure of realistic control while the difference between actual control and predicted control is $(C - \hat{C})$ serves as our measure of illusory control.

The model of instrumental realism is represented in the following equation:

$$\hat{D} = b_0 - b_1\hat{C} - b_2(C - \hat{C}) + b_3(C - \hat{C})^2 \quad (5)$$

and

$$(C - \hat{C}) \text{ optimum} = b_2/2b_3. \quad (6)$$

In Mirowsky and Ross' terms

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Power} &= \hat{C} \\ \text{Realism} &= (C - \hat{C})^2 \\ \text{Optimism} &= (C - \hat{C}) \end{aligned}$$

Equation (i) in Table 5 indicates that the optimum deviation from the expected sense of control is .725; 97.6 per cent of our respondents fall below this threshold. The optimum level of control

$$C \text{ optimum} = \hat{C} + .725.$$

Table 5: A Test of the Instrumental Realism Hypothesis

	(i) <i>Illusory Control</i>	(ii) <i>Illusory and Realistic Control</i>
\hat{C}	-3.35***	-28.54***
$(C - \hat{C})$	-1.64***	-1.63***
$(C - \hat{C})^2$	1.13***	1.12***
\hat{C}^2		4.81***
Intercept	9.75	42.57
R ²	.228	.243
p	<.001	<.001
N	6,111	6,111

***p < .001

This prediction derived from equation (i) is based on the model of instrumental realism which assumes that the threshold of dysfunction effect applies to illusory but not realistic control. However, when we relax this assumption, as we do in Equation (ii) in Table 5, it is clear the squared term for realistic control is also highly significant, thus

$$\hat{D} = b_0 - b_1 \hat{C} - b_2(C - C) + b_3(C - \hat{C})_2 + b_4 \hat{C}_2$$

$$(C - \hat{C}) \text{ optimum} = \frac{b_2}{2b_3} = .73.$$

97.7 per cent of our respondents fall below this threshold.

$$\hat{C} \text{ optimum} = \frac{b^1}{2b_4} = 2.79.$$

9.35 per cent of respondents fall below this threshold.

Thus, for respondents with realistic control scores which do not exceed 2.97, the optimum level of control, as the unified model of instrumental suggests, is equal to realistic control plus a constant

$$C \text{ optimum} = \hat{C} + .73.$$

However, when realistic control goes beyond a score of 2.97, increments in control became counter productive suggesting that at this point the impact of outcomes which are beyond one's sphere of competence, irrespective of one's resources, comes into play.

IV CONCLUSIONS

The results we have reported clearly provide support for the rejection of the consolation prize theory of alienation. Rather than supporting the view that rejection of responsibility for outcomes has a beneficial effect on the mental health of low status groups, our findings suggest that increments of control have their most dramatic effect among those with low status and limited resources.

Our analysis also provides support for the notion of a threshold of dysfunction beyond which point increased feelings of control are actually detrimental to one's emotional well-being. Finally, for the vast majority of our respondents, the conclusion of Mirowsky and Ross that the optimum level of control is a function of realistic control plus a constant, which takes into account the optimum deviation from realistic control holds. Our results depart from theirs, though, in that realistic control is also found to display a threshold of dysfunction.

We have explored the possibility that unusually high feelings of control are achieved at the expense of supportive social relationships but we can find no evidence to support this hypothesis.¹ One possibility which would be interest-

1. For a more detailed discussion of the relationships between sense of control, social support and psychological distress see Whelan, *et al.*, 1991; Whelan, 1992b; Whelan, 1993.

ing to explore in future research would be that suggested by Mirowsky and Ross (1990, p. 1,531) that power over others may have rather different consequences than effective control over others.

Despite this departure from the expectations generated by the instrumental model of realism, our substantive conclusions do not differ significantly from those implied by the model. Thus, in general, effectiveness lies at the heart of the positive impact of sense of control. It is necessary to strike a balance between realism and optimism. The optimum level of sense of control is directly related to power and command over resources. The sense of control which is most beneficial to young professional workers who experience little in the way of life-style deprivation would be completely inappropriate for an unemployed manual worker living in a household in which the availability of basic items of food, heating and clothing is problematic.

Most people at all levels of status, however, are likely to benefit from enhanced feelings of control.

Fatalism and alienation are the recognition of a harmful reality and in no way soothe the discomforts. (Mirowsky and Ross, 1990, p. 1,531).

The Irish respondents were much more likely than the American ones to fall below this optimum level of control. The vast majority of them would benefit psychologically from greater optimism. A continuing emphasis on external attribution is psychologically harmful. Wheaton (1980) argues that instrumental coping leads to a search of the environment for potentially distressing conditions, to taking preventive steps, and to accumulating resources or developing skills or habits that will reduce the impact of the unavoidable. In contrast, fatalism leads to ignoring problems until they actually happen. In consequence, there is a magnification of differences with the fatalists suffering an increasing number of problems which reinforce a feeling of lack of control, in turn producing passivity in the face of difficulties. Lower class people may then carry a triple burden. They have more problems to deal with; their personal histories are likely to have left them with a deep sense of hopelessness, and that sense of hopelessness discourages them from marshalling whatever energy and resources they do have in order to solve their problems. The result for many is a multiplication of despair.

Earlier we drew attention to the reluctance to make reference to possible motivational deficits for fear that such analysis might be used to victimise the deprived. As we have sought to stress, however, it seems most sensible to view motivation as the outcome of a complex set of interactions in which restricted opportunities plays a central rôle. Psychological theory predicts that when faced with what are perceived to be uncontrollable circumstances,

people ultimately respond with learned helplessness. Kane (1987, p. 146) suggests that there are three basic messages to be derived from such an analysis.

Firstly, any motivational deficit observed among the persistent poor should not be thought of as an immutable personal pathology. Second, at the same time, someone who has been conditioned with a lack of control will not necessarily respond immediately to any new opportunities for control. Third, government can play a role, first in making real options available — in the way of jobs and education and just as important in making voluntarism salient as an opportunity for control.

This perspective recognises that people in poor conditions tend to be overwhelmed by the weight of their problems. Community development interventions, for example, hold out the possibility that creating an environment which provides encouragement and support may facilitate people in realising their own untapped talents in order that they may be more effective within the constraints of their situations (Chanan and Vos, 1990, p. 52).

Elsewhere we have shown that the correlation between sense of control and attribution of poverty to structural causes is close to zero suggesting that it is possible to facilitate people in developing feelings of personal efficacy without encouraging the tendency to make scapegoats of the deprived (Whelan, 1992c).

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