Causal attributions for poverty in Italy: What do people think about impoverishment

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Abstract: What do people think about becoming poor? Should the poor be blamed? Are community or society mainly responsible for their condition? Or Bad Luck? This paper analyses the causal attributions for Poverty in Italy, in order to better understand people's viewpoint. According to literature, we can detect three main attributions, depending on explaining poverty as ascribable to individual, external-tangible or fatalistic factors. The data analyzed come from a study conducted in 2012, in Italy, which involved around 1000 participants. A Principal Component Analysis has allowed to 'weed-out' the items by identifying three main components. Following analyses have showed significant relations between attributions and factors like sex, age, education level and economic condition.

Keywords: causal attributions for poverty, Locus of Control, poverty, social perception

Introduction

Poverty is a problem that humanity has been facing for all of its history. In our world this topic is one of the most present in current public debate, showing that international Institutions care for (and to some extent are worried by) poverty: World Bank d*reams a World free of Poverty* [1] and has reached so far one of the Millennium Development Goals (halving, before 2015, the amount of people whose income is less than $1.25 a day). The proportion of who lives in extreme poverty, however, remains alarmingly high, about 1 Billion people (in 2011. *Ivi*). World Bank is determined to eradicate extreme poverty and to foster growth of income level in every Country. The first goal is supposed to be reached by moving the threshold of people living in extreme poverty to 3% (in 2011 was 17%. *Ivi*).Furthermore, WB intervention will be focused to the bottom 40% of income distribution in each Country and will aim to increase the income of this group of people. As for European Countries, EU has declared 2010 "European year for combating Poverty and Social exclusion" and has marked fighting Poverty as one of the seven priorities of EU 2020: letting 20 Million people out from poverty within 2020.
Political institutions, in the early 15 years of the 3rd millennium, seem to mobilize against poverty, inequality and extreme violations of human dignity.

Although this is a desirable project, seems not being enough to instil confidence in the future: in fact, these positions prove indirectly that these phenomena still raise great concern and that their persistence, despite modernity and progress, is a heavy issue for all societies. One of the obstacle most affecting these commendable purposes is that, although *poverty* is a common-sense term and despite attempts to provide "simplistic" [2] or reductionist interpretations [3], we are in the face of a complex phenomenon, influenced by multiple factors, related to defined contexts or to the impact of global phenomena on these levels [4][5][6]. Moreover, these factors are often intertwined, result from recent or distant events, but still able to influence the economic and political processes.
Seems to be necessary, hence, taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon and to identify a sufficiently inclusive definition of poverty that motivates the methodological choices assumed in the analysis.

On the other hand, taking a look at the world of research on this topic, remarkable weaknesses emerge: empirical investigations are seldom conducted in very close contact with the identification of relevant policies, but rather these two fields stand separate. In addition, studies often aim at identifying universal laws, valid in any context, not giving account of the specificity of their territorial, cultural and social features [7]. On the contrary, only a careful reflection on this variety and diversity can allow better understanding Poverty and identifying the most effective interventions

[8]. "Community anti-poverty programs are designed, selected, and implemented in response to different theories about the causes of poverty that 'justify' the community development interventions": with this sentence, Bradshaw [9:8] highlights how "different views about the underlying causes of poverty lead to very different policy choices" (*ivi*: 458). Then, studying people's beliefs about causes of poverty means focusing on factors strictly related to public policies and interventions. Examining literature, theories about what originates Poverty can be grouped into three main streams: a first group comprises the attributions that seek for responsibility of individual's condition in his own effort and abilities and in his "own doing or not doing" [10:151][11][12]. "Just world theory", for instance, upholds the idea that people have "what they merit", that is what 'mathematically' derives from their actions [13][10]: a sort of "Social Darwinism" [14].

A second group of theories comprises contextual factors and traces poverty/wealth status back to structural variables: Bradshaw [9] talks explicitly about "culture of poverty" as a subculture of poor people in which a set of shared values and norms that is separate from the culture of the main society is developed. Likewise, the Dominant ideology thesis [15] underlines the importance of cultural factors: in all societies, the subordinate classes "introject" the socio-cultural values of the predominant class. According to "Public arena theory", several social phenomena - like poverty - are built in specific 'places', the so-called 'public arenas' (media, cinema, science, etc.). In these places, social problems "are discussed, selected, defined, framed, dramatized, packaged, and presented to the public." [16:59]. Gwartney & McCaleb [17], finally, talk about "Welfare dependency", that is the creation of disincentives to work caused (and consequently poverty) by cash assistance programs [18][9][19]. The third set, finally, emphasizes "no tangible" explanations and includes attributions referred to God's will, fate or bad luck [20][21]. Several studies, finally, demonstrate that people often have more than one belief about poverty: they consider poverty as the result of the interaction between several factors, among which they detect sometimes a prevalent one. "Cyclical Theory", for instance, sustains that poverty originates from a sort of 'spiral' of problems of different kind which can create disinvestment and decline at community / individual level (people become poorer and consequently less self-confident and so forth) [9].

Poverty And Attributions In Italy: Aims And Method

The study presented in this paper analyses how sociological and economic categories are in relation with what people think about poverty. Specifically, the aim of this study is to better understand the causal attribution for poverty, that is people's opinion about what poverty originates from. This work come after other similar ones which have focused on relation among people's characteristics and their beliefs about impoverishment [22][23][24]. Data analyzed in this study were collected in 2012, in Italy (Lazio). Data collection has involved almost 1000 subjects (992), chosen complying Istat data about population stratums (stratified sample) [25]. Respondents were contacted by interviewers in different places and at different time in the day, in order to improve randomization of the sample.

Table 1: The sample

|	Education[1]			Age (years)						Sex		Total
	Low	Mid	High	0-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +	M	F	
N	390	421	181	108	172	190	154	143	225	478	514	992
%	39,3	42,4	18,2	10,9	17,3	19,1	15,5	14,4	22,7	48,1	51,9	100

In order to detect poverty perceived causes, the following introductive question has been addressed to all respondents: "In your opinion, why a *common man* gets poor?". The suggested poverty attributions were: his characteristics; his behaviours; bad luck; natural disasters; other people's actions; illness/accidents; society; failures of the institutions/economic crisis. In the following step, respondents were asked to indicate their concordance rate per item, according to a 5-point Likert scale.

In order to detect possible grouping factors, a PCA has been carried out. The analysis has allowed identifying three factors accounting for almost 61% of the variance in the data (see Tab.2).

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[1] Education levels: Low (primary and middle school); Mid (high school); High (degree and post-degree).

Table 2: Components, eigenvalues and explained variance

Components	Initial Eigenvalues		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)
Powerful Others[2]	2,28	35,3	1,703	21,3
Chance	1,05	13,1	1,638	20,5
Internal	,98	12,2	1,511	18,9
Cumulative percentage of variance		60,6		60,6
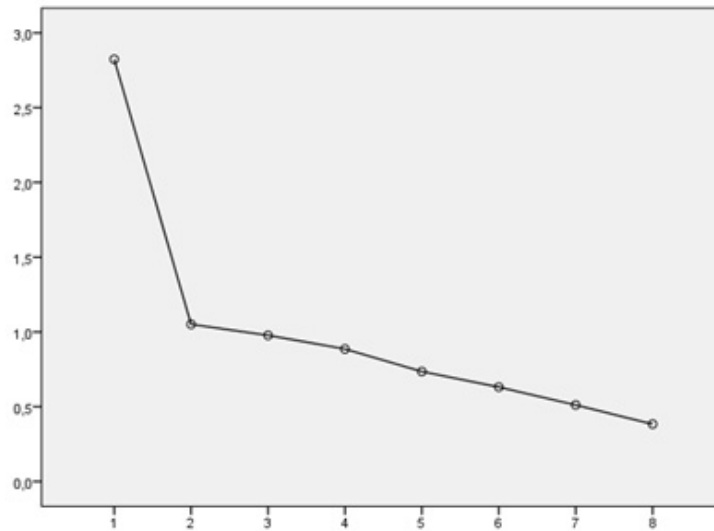
Figure 2: Scree plot of the eigenvalues of principal components (vertical axis: eigenvalues; horizontal axis: components).

Eigenvalues for the first three components were 2,28, 1,05 and 0,98. According to the eigenvalue >=1 criterion, we can reasonably retain these three components (although the eigenvalue for the third component was slightly below 1), a decision that fits with previous research [10][26].

Table 3: Varimax-rotated components

	Components		
Items	Powerful Others	Chance	Internal
Individual characteristics	,039	,060	***,861***
Bad Luck	,227	***,501***	,092
Natural disasters	-,035	***,830***	,116
Other people	***,635***	,027	,292
Individual behaviors	,210	,179	***,735***
Illness	,189	***,716***	,123
Institutions	***,852***	,140	,135
Economic system	***,855***	,153	,147

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[2]The names we have used have been borrowed from Levenson [26].

The first factor can be interpreted as internal attribution (Cronbach's α of this subscale =,57), and the other detected component is related to external attribution. The PCAs have furthermore allowed detecting a distinction into the external component: it emerges, namely, a first component that we could name "Powerful Others" (other people, Institutions, economic system. Cronbach's α =,66) and a second component "Chance" (or, rather, what people can't control. Cronbach's α=,63).

The factor loadings let also emerge that there is no significant inverse relationship between different causal attributions: individuals who tend, for instance, to choose internal attributions, do not necessarily choose less external explanations.

The following analyses will test the relationship between hidden response patterns emerged from PCA and a series of independent variables: sex, age, education degree and income.
In particular, respondents have been grouped for age, according to the following categories: 18-34, 35-64 and 65-99 years old. This categorization aimed at separating three main periods in people's life (at least in Italy): the course of one's studies (high school, university), starting a family/the entrance in labour market and the old age/retirement phase.

Educational qualification has been grouped as follows: elementary education and junior high school; high school; degree and postgraduate qualification (PhD, Master's degree).
Finally, as for income, poverty threshold has been detected according to OECD standards: low-income people have been defined as those who earn less than 60% of median household income; on the contrary, high-income respondents are those who earn more than 200% of the same median.

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Results

Sex of the respondent

Table 4: Causal attributions for poverty * sex of the respondent

|		N	M	SD	SEM	ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Male	445	,0225	,61471	,02914	between	,942	1	,942	2,690	,101
	Female	485	-,0412	,56986	,02588	within	324,951	928	,350		
	total	930	-,0108	,59228	,01942		325,892	929			
Powerful others	Male	447	-,0134	,57978	,02742	between	,042	1	,042	,129	,720
	Female	481	0,0000	,55902	,02549	within	299,919	926	,324		
	total	928	-,0065	,56884	,01867		299,961	927			
Chance	Male	445	-,0449	,59861	,02838	between	2,362	1	2,362	7,357	,007
	Female	481	,0561	,53519	,02440	within	296,586	924	,321		
	total	926	,0076	,56849	,01868		298,947	925			
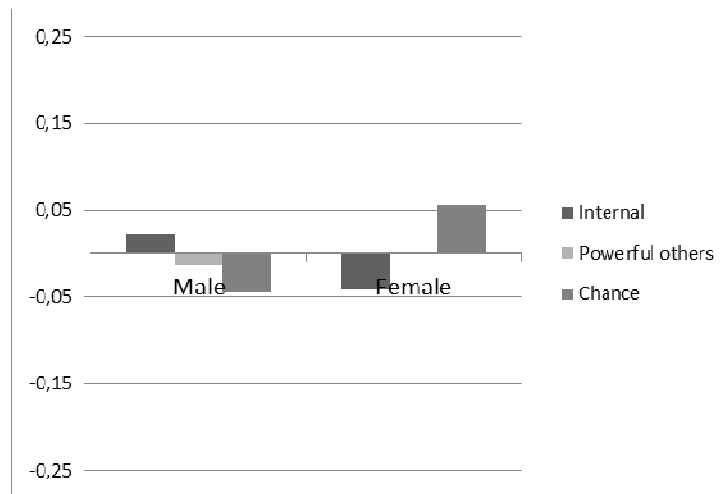
Figure 2: Causal attributions for poverty * sex of the respondent

Data show that, when thinking to impoverishment, women seem to choose external and fatalistic explanations more frequently than men do. The first difference is not significant.
Males, although this difference is weakly significant (p=,1), seem to prefer internal explanations of poverty.

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Age of the respondent

Table 5: Causal attributions for poverty * age of the respondent

|		N	M	SD	SEM	ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	18 - 34 y.o.	272	,1507	,59151	,03587	between	10,176	2	5,088	14,940	*,000*
	35 - 64 y.o.	459	-,0675	,61087	,02851	within	315,716	927	,341		
	65 - 99 y.o.	199	-,1005	,50247	,03562						
	total	930	-,0108	,59228	,01942		325,892	929			
Powerful others	18 - 34 y.o.	272	,0404	,55193	,03347	between	2,917	2	1,459	4,542	*,011*
	35 - 64 y.o.	459	,0109	,60375	,02818	within	297,044	925	,321		
	65 - 99 y.o.	197	-,1117	,49251	,03509						
	total	928	-,0065	,56884	,01867		299,961	927			
Chance	18 - 34 y.o.	272	-,0294	,56256	,03411	between	,528	2	,264	,817	,442
	35 - 64 y.o.	457	,0219	,56928	,02663	within	298,419	923	,323		
	65 - 99 y.o.	197	,0254	,57531	,04099						
	total	926	,0076	,56849	,01868		298,947	925			
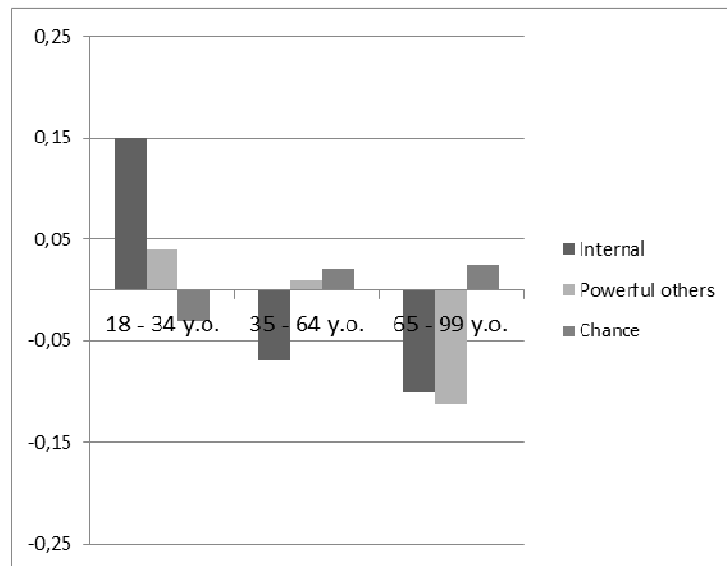
Figure 3: Causal attributions for poverty * age of the respondent

How the age of the respondent is related to his beliefs about impoverishment? Data show – significantly - that younger respondents think more frequently that poverty is in relation with individuals' behaviours or characteristics. Older respondents, on the other hand, think that when you get poor, you have to blame society, other people's actions, the economic system or the fate.

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Education level

Table 6: Causal attributions for poverty * education level of the respondent

|		N	M	SD	SEM	ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	low degree	348	-,0287	,56740	,03042	between	1,825	2	,912	2,586	,076
	medium degree	391	,0358	,61914	,03131	within	320,065	907	,353		
	high degree	171	-,0819	,58839	,04500						
	total	910	-,0110	,59508	,01973		321,890	909			
Powerful others	low degree	348	,0259	,56499	,03029	between	1,332	2	,667	2,059	,128
	medium degree	389	-,0077	,56754	,02878	within	292,598	905	,323		
	high degree	171	-,0819	,57830	,04422						
	total	908	-,0088	,56927	,01889		293,930	907			
Chance	low degree	346	,0029	,61148	,03287	between	,050	2	,025	,078	,925
	medium degree	389	,0129	,54898	,02783	within	291,839	903	,323		
	high degree	171	,0234	,51965	,03974						
	total	906	,0110	,56792	,01887		291,890	905			
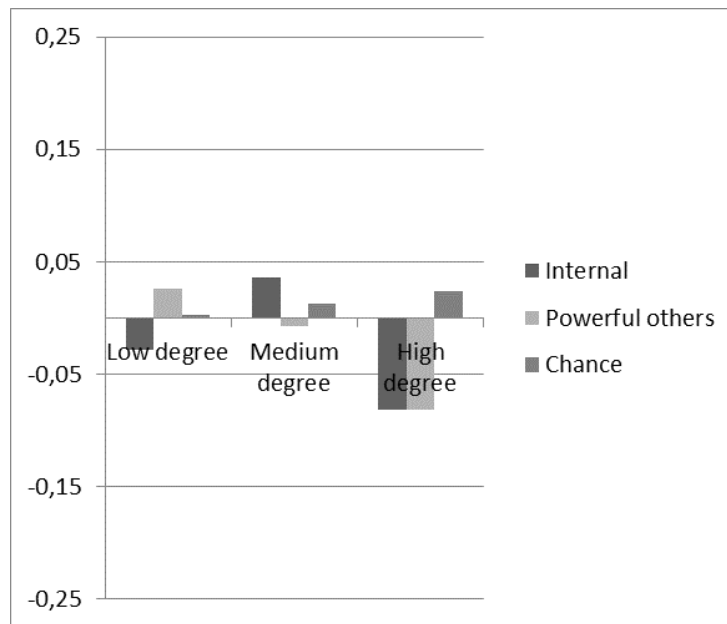
Figure 4: Causal attributions for poverty * education level of the respondent

Crossing education level with attributions for poverty, outcomes regarding 'powerful others' and 'fatalistic' attributions show clear trends, although not significant. 'Powerful others' beliefs, unlike 'fatalistic' ones, seem to be positively related with education level of the respondents. Furthermore, looking at the chart (fig.4), it emerges that low/high educated respondents choose less frequently internal explanations of impoverishment.

Household income

Table 7: Causal attributions for poverty * household income of the respondent

|		N	M	SD	SEM	ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	low	245	-,0286	,56829	,03631	between	,845	2	,423	1,224	,295
	medium	564	-,0053	,59450	,02503	within	313,150	907	,345		
	high	101	,0792	,59470	,05917						
	total	910	-,0022	,58773	,01948		313,996	909			
Powerful others	low	243	,0864	,64020	,04107	between	6,612	2	3,306	10,484	,000
	medium	564	-,0089	,50742	,02137	within	285,349	905	,315		
	high	101	-,2178	,64193	,06387						
	total	908	-,0066	,56736	,01883		291,960	907			
Chance	low	243	-,0082	,61652	,03955	between	7,810	2	3,905	12,368	,000
	medium	562	,0623	,53873	,02273	within	285,101	903	,316		
	high	101	-,2376	,55043	,05477						
	total	906	,0099	,56891	,01890		292,911	905			
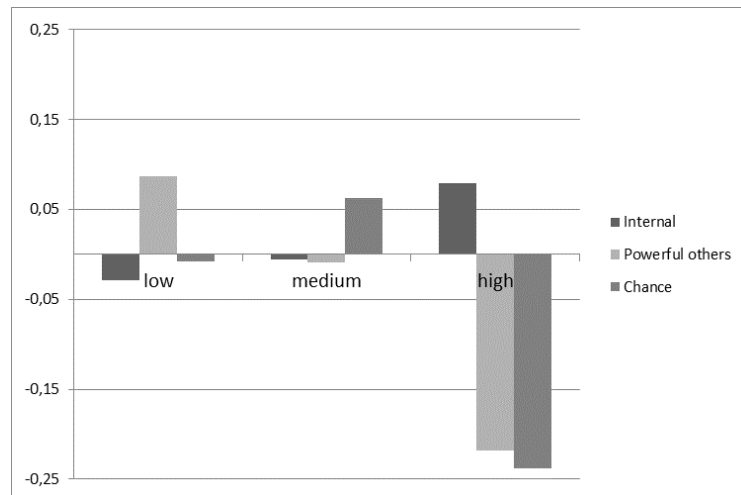
Figure 5: Causal attributions for poverty * household income of the respondent

Household income of the respondent seems to influence his beliefs about impoverishment: low income people prefer external (p>,000) but not internal explanations (results are not significant, p>,295). High income earners seem to prefer internal causes of impoverishment but not external/fatalistic (p>,000 for both crosses).

Discussion And Conclusion

This study has been carried out with the aim of focusing on relation between a group of social economic characteristics of individuals (sex, age, education level and income) and their attributions towards the causes of poverty.

Drawing on the pioneering study on attribution theory by Heider [27], many studies have been made about causal attribution for poverty. Since Gallup survey [28], Feagin's groundbreaking work [29][14] and, a few years after, Kluegel & Smith [30][31], USA has been the Country in which most relevant and earliest studies on this topic have been carried out (see also [32][33][34][35]). But studies on beliefs on impoverishment have been also realized in Europe [36][37][22][38][39][24][40][56], in Africa/Middle East [41][42][43][44][45] and in the East/Far East [46][47][48] [21][1][55].

Going through this broad literature, sex emerges as a clear intervening variable: consistently with the outcomes of the present study, women result to be more externalist but less internalist than men [38][22][34]. A satisfying explanation of these outcomes could be related to the cultural-grounded role of the man as "bread-winner", in charge

for sustenance of his family, and the woman who comes from periods in which discrimination generated problems beyond her personal control. Furthermore, discrimination that afflicted women calls to mind (*mutatis mutandis*) Feagin's work [14] in the American context: blacks and Jews – other minority groups –emerged to be more inclined to choose structural factors in explaining poverty.

Outcomes about age, on the other hand, seem to be more consistent with some studies [22][38], less with other ones [49]: as the age increases, the tendency to attribute poverty to internal causes decreases (in contrast with Feather's results) whereas fatalistic explanations for poverty increase. If we consider once more Kreidl's study [10], we can make a similar discussion about the age; being more awakened of a particular complex situation, often related to a higher age, can promote a different idea of the phenomenon, which takes into account a wider range of determining factors.

Our data also show that a higher education level corresponds to a general higher 'chance' attribution. If we examine other previous cases, opposite conclusions are drawn by Kreidl in his research (*Ivi*), in which a negative correlation between education levels and metaphysical explanations emerged: the more education increases, the more metaphysical explanations decrease. Outcomes, as already stated, are not significant at all.

Finally, crossing income with attributions for poverty, significant outcomes emerge for 'powerful others' and 'fatalistic' beliefs. As the income increases, both these dimensions decrease (with the exception of 'fatalistic' attribution for low income respondents). It seems easy to understand according to the concept of 'defensive externality': the tendency that emerges from the data demonstrates that people having a bad economic status prefer external/fatalistic explanations for poverty. Also Lever & Trejo [50], Hayati & Karami [43] argue that low-income individuals are more inclined to external perceptions. This outcome seems to recall the Learned helplessness theory [51][52][53]: in our case, low-income subjects would show a tendency to attribute events to factors beyond their forces, with the aim of avoiding the perception of 'failure'.

"Which view of poverty we ultimately embrace will have a direct bearing on the public policies we pursue". With this sentence, Schiller [54] highlights the importance of studies like the one we have just presented and which aims at bettering the connection between research and policies/interventions. Interventions for fighting poverty, indeed, are highly influenced by the people's vision of such a phenomenon: in a few words, a policy-maker who thinks that causes of poverty have to be detected in the individual's characteristics or lacks, will intervene on this by making policies that support people's improvement of their personal background.

This research introduces a number of suggestions for future research to investigate the implications and application of these results. For example, it will take future research to determine the relation between perceiving interventions as not being planned *a priori*, but as a result of debate and sharing, and their efficacy.

Second, outcomes of this study could be used as *pieces of a puzzle* in order to build a thorough model of Poverty that explains not only 'traditional' dimensions of this phenomenon but also all its psychological and sociological *surroundings*, related to the relationship between poor people and their living environment.

Finally, this study has one main limitation related to sampling design: the sample was stratified and stratums (as seen above) exactly complied Istat data about population [25]. In order to bettering randomization of data collection, it would be more advisable to use civil registry.

Acknowledgement

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