WORDS ON POVERTY: PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS IN ITALY

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Abstract: This study analyses the attributions of causality and the representations about poverty and wealth in order to better understand people's perception and to suggest adequate and shared interventions. The data we analyzed refer to a 2009 research which has been carried out on a sample of 2000 participants in Italy. A Principal Component Analysis has allowed the identification of three components relating to internal, external and metaphysical attributions for the phenomena of poverty and wealth. Following analysis have showed significant relations between attributions and factors like real economic status (income), perceived socio-economic status, sex, education level, political orientation and media use. The second step has consisted in comparing respondent's perception of the phenomenon (his representation of impoverishing factors, related to himself or to others) and his attributional style, focusing on possible relations between the outcomes of this comparison and other socio-economic categories. In this way we have been able to focus on hypothetical "trends" of attributions, analyzing the dynamic of beliefs as the suggested scenario becomes closer and closer to the individual.

Keywords: Causal attributions, poverty, socio-economic status perception, multidimensional approach

INTRODUCTION

In this paper the *causal attributions* for poverty and wealth will be deepened, that is how people perceive factors that could drive to such conditions: *why do people become rich or poor?* Focusing on psychological concepts such as *causal attribution*, reflects a different approach in studying poverty from traditional ones, which are mainly based on income or consumptions; poverty should be considered as a multidimensional concept, entailing substantial lack at the economic level as well as at social and psychological levels because poverty not only means earning low wages, but it often includes being less educated, adapting personal aims and aspirations to limited resources and not being able to rely on a family or a group of friends.

Furthermore "stratification is a basic aspect of society" [1] and this is why topic about attributions for social stratification has generated since '60s a "growing amount" of research studies in socio-psychological and economic fields [2]. A review of the literature allows us to reconstruct the landscape of theories of social stratification from both the people's perception and the examination of welfare programs (that often reflect the different theories about the causes of poverty. [3]). It is therefore possible to identify three main streams in which placing the different theories about poverty and wealth: 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" (See the "Just world theory": people have what 'mathematically' derives from their actions. [4]; [5]; [6]); this is what Feagin [7] calls "Social darwinism". A second group, in contrast, comprises contextual factors and trace poverty/wealth status back to structural variables (See the "Dominant ideology thesis": in all societies, the subordinate classes "introject" the socio-cultural values of the predominant class [8]; see the "Public arena theory", the social building process of several phenomena like poverty. [9]; Bradshaw [10] talks about "culture of poverty", a subculture of poor people in which they develop a set of shared values and norms that is

separate from the culture of the main society). The third set, finally, includes "mixed" factors that consider poverty and wealth as the result of the interaction between several individual and structural factors, between individual agency and contextual variables (See the "Cyclical theory": a sort of 'spiral of poverty' can create disinvestment and decline at community level and individual level; people become poorer, less self-confident… [11]).

METHOD

Many studies regarding beliefs about economic inequality detect tendencies correlated to people's socio-demographic characteristics. Namely, it has been noticed that specific characteristics (i.e. being a woman) are frequently related to the ways in which a person of a specific socio-demographic group attributes the cause of difficulties. This way of attributing cause can be seen not only in a person's view of economic inequality, but also in a wide range of issues and can often be ascribed to cultural or historical reasons. The aim of this study is firstly to compare our findings on the correlation between socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and attributive styles with what has emerged from previous research. Secondly this study focuses specifically on the attribution for poverty by given categories of respondents, which has been studied less than other groups: for example contracted employees vs. self-employed workers. With this aim, respondents have been divided depending on their educational background, age, income and working conditions. Information we are going to analyse has been collected by the Italian National Research Council, with the aim of studying the economic situation and the perception of status of a sample of over 2000 subjects. Data have been collected by using a semi-structured questionnaire in which we used two groups of items borrowed by a previous research carried out by the Czech sociologist Martin Kreidl [5], about the causal attribution for poverty and wealth and two open questions to collect data about impoverishing factors. Two approaches have been used to analyze people's perception of economic inequality. In the first approach people's representations have been studied using categories derived from literature and data have been collected and analyzed using quantitative tools and methods. With the aim of digging deep into people's perceptions, two open questions have been addressed to respondents. Asking people what in their opinion were impoverishing factors, distinguishing 'general poverty' and 'personal poverty', has allowed to study people's perceptions as expressed in their own words. It required a qualitative approach with careful categorization and interpretation.

Poverty and wealth perceived causes

To detect poverty and wealth perceived causes, the following introductive question has been addressed to all respondents: "In your opinion, which one among the following aspects do have an impact on poverty [wealth] condition in your town?". The suggested poverty attributions have been: lack of ability; bad luck; lack of effort; loose morals; discrimination; lack of equal opportunities; failure of the economic system. About wealth: ability; luck; dishonesty; hard work; having the right connections; more opportunities to begin with; the economic system which allows to take unfair advantage. The following step has been to ask respondents to indicate their concordance rate per item, according to a 5-point Likert scale. In the PCA, poverty items have been separated from wealth ones, thinking that not necessarily exists a coherence of evaluation regarding economic inequality, but it changes depending on the subject (poverty or wealth): for example we can hypothesize that beliefs regarding poor people are influenced by further considerations, such as a sort of compassion, that avoid blaming poors. The outcomes of the PCA seem to support our hypothesis: dividing poverty items from wealth items and choosing a 3 factors solution each has allowed to explain an adequate amount of variance (more than 62%) and to detect mainly two factors both for poverty and for wealth: the first factor can be interpreted as internal attribution, and the other detected component is related to external attribution. The PCAs have furthermore allowed to detect a distinction into the external component: it emerges, namely, a first component that we could name "Powerful Others" and a second component "Chance". The names we have just used have been borrowed by Levenson [12]. The factor loadings let us also to draw two further conclusions: first of all, four main distinct components have been outlined. It emerges that the internal or external attributions are distinguished between poverty and wealth: we cannot talk, namely, about internalism or externalism transcending the separation between poverty and wealth. Secondly, data show 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 and a series of independent variables: Education degree. Income.

Words: impoverishing factors

Words about impoverishing factors have been collected using two questions. The first one has focused on general impoverishing factors:"In your opinion which factors could bring a normal person to poverty?". The second question has focused, instead, on what respondents consider could bring him to a

poverty condition: "In your opinion which factors could bring you to a poverty condition?". The aim was to compare people beliefs depending on whether they refer to themselves or to others. The first step of data analysis has consisted of categorizing the words (3217 words for both questions) into an internal or an external locus of control. 86% of the words used referred to an external locus, whereas 14% of words referred to an internal one. The following step has consisted in comparing words respondents had used addressing to themselves or to others: this has had the aim of focusing on possible incoherences between these two levels. The following analyses has tested the relationship between patterns emerged and a series of independent variables; in addition to the variables mentioned above, the further variables considered are: Working condition; Age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Income and attributions

High income people (see Table 1) seem to choose internal explanations (in this particular case, the most significant differences concern wealth). People who have a high income tend to hand it to themselves and to consider external factors less predominantly, like blessed events or economic systems allowing to take advantage. By following this interpretation, we can easily understand why higher the income, less fatalistic the explanations are, both for poverty and for wealth.

From the analysis of words (see Table 2) it emerges that people with a high income tend to mainly perceive structural factors, as an explanation for others' poverty. On the contrary, people with a low income tend to choose individual explanations for poverty.

Working conditions and words

Contracted employees who coherently externalize (that is choose external factors both for themselves and for others) poverty are more both in absolute and relating to expected frequency than self-employed. Self-employed coherently internalize more than contracted employees, relating to expected frequencies (Table 3).

Age and words

Young people tend to consider poverty as a condition that originates from the individual, when they talk about themselves, more than older respondents. On the contrary, older people are more numerous among those who think that poverty is something referable to characteristics and behaviors of the individual, when they talk about others; nevertheless, the same respondents think that poverty originates from external events when talking about themselves.

Education level and attributions

Data show that a higher education level corresponds to a lower internal poverty attribution and a higher external poverty attribution (see Table 5). Therefore, more an individual is educated, more he tends to attribute the poverty condition to external (not internal) factors. Also analysis of words (Table 6) shows that the higher the education level, the higher the tendency to attribute poverty to structural factors when talking about others. On the contrary, less educated people seem to perceive internal factors for others. Our data also show that a higher education level corresponds to a general lower metaphysical attribution.

CONCLUSION

This research has been carried out with the aim of getting to the core of the matter about attitudes towards the causes of poverty and wealth, both of them highly influenced by a wide range of socio-economic factors: we have focused on age, education level, income, working conditions.

Being more awakened of a particular complex situation, often related to a higher level of education or to the experience related to age, can promote a different idea of the phenomenon; i.e. the assumption of a vision taking into account a wider range of factors. This hypothesis is sustained by data which demonstrate a correlation between Education and Sense of control: people who have a lower level of education tend to explain poverty as a problem arising from inside the individual more than people with a higher one do, as emerges also from analyses on words. In general, one may assume that a lower qualification corresponds to a different working path and then to a lower income. This point would reflect our findings about income: a higher income seems to be significantly related to internal attributions for wealth. In this way it is possible to interpret the results reached by Feagin [13], in his well-known research, and by Kluegel & Smith [14]: people belonging to lower social classes are more likely to explain the poverty with more individualistic and less structural factors, just as it emerges from the data of this research in the case of the education level. This seems to strengthen the link between educational qualifications, employment status and attributions. It is not easy to interpret outcomes about wealth: if, on the one hand, it seems that a higher education level promotes external attributions, on the other hand it emerges the opposite, that is higher educated people seem to choose internal attributions (it reflects what emerges in past researches, that is a higher education is interconnected with a higher sense of control over events.[15].

Table 1: Income and attributions

Income / Component		Tot (N=1848)	Low (N=265)	Mid (N=1409)	High (N=174)	F	p
Poverty Internal	x̄	,01	-,04	,00	,11	1,237	,291
	s	1,00	1,08	,98	,99		
Poverty Pow. Others	x̄	,01	,04	,02	-,13	1,735	,177
	s	1,00	1,09	0,98	1,01		
Poverty Chance	x̄	,00	,22	-,01	-,28	13,232	,000
	s	1,00	1,11	,98	0,92		
Income / Component		Tot (N=1848)	Low (N=265)	Mid (N=1409)	High (N=174)	F	p
Wealth Pow. Others	x̄	,01	,00	,03	-,12	1,754	,173
	s	,99	1,08	,98	,96		
Wealth Internal	x̄	,00	-,29	,00	,50	34,281	,000
	s	1,00	1,05	,98	,88		
Wealth Chance	x̄	,00	,15	,00	-,18	5,770	,003
	s	1,00	1,02	1,00	,96		

Table 2: Income and words

Income / Attributions	Frequencies	Tot	Low	Mid	High	Chi-square	p
General External – Personal External	Observed	1003	769	231	3	26.517	,001
	Expected		789,0	211,6	2,4		
General External – Personal Internal	Observed	36	19	17	0		
	Expected		28,3	7,6	,1		
General Internal – Personal External	Observed	194	168	26	0		
	Expected		152,6	40,9	,5		
General Internal – Personal Internal	Observed	27	23	4	0		
	Expected		21,2	5,7	,1		
	Total	1257	979	278	5		

Table 3: Working conditions and words

Attributions \ Working conditions	Frequencies	Tot	Contracted employees	Self-employed workers	Chi-square	*p*
General External – Personal External	Observed	477	327	150	17,689	,001
	Expected		311,7	165,3		
General External – Personal Internal	Observed	21	9	12		
	Expected		13,7	7,3		
General Internal – Personal External	Observed	77	60	17		
	Expected		50,3	26,7		
General Internal – Personal Internal	Observed	14	8	6		
	Expected		9,1	4,9		
Total		589	404	185		

Table 4: Age and words

Attributions \ Age class	Frequencies	Tot	18-34 y.o.	35-54 y.o.	55-99 y.o.	Chi-square	*p*
General External – Personal External	Observed	1003	270	427	306	67,366	,000
	Expected		272,4	358,0	372,6		
General External – Personal Internal	Observed	36	18	10	8		
	Expected		9,8	12,8	13,4		
General Internal – Personal External	Observed	194	51	67	76		
	Expected		52,7	69,2	72,1		
General Internal – Personal Internal	Observed	27	10	9	8		
	Expected		7,3	9,6	10,0		
Total		1260	349	513	398		

Table 5: Education level and attributions

Component \ Education level		Tot (N=1914)	No d. (N=36)	1st level (N=605)	2nd level (N=844)	Degree/M.D. (N=429)	F	*p*
Poverty Internal	x̄	,00	,13	,10	,01	-,17	6,243	,000
	s	1,00	,87	1,02	,99	,99		
Poverty Pow. Others	x̄	,00	-,28	-,22	,07	,20	18,225	,000
	s	1,00	,93	1,08	,97	,87		
Poverty Chance	x̄	,00	,44	,16	-,06	-,14	11,251	,000
	s	1,00	1,08	1,12	,95	,87		
Component \ Education level		Tot (N=1914)	No d. (N=36)	1st level (N=605)	2nd level (N=844)	Degree/M.D. (N=429)	F	*p*
Wealth Pow. Others	x̄	,00	-,34	-,08	,01	,13	5,349	,001
	s	1,00	1,22	1,10	,95	,92		
Wealth Internal	x̄	,00	-,65	-,11	,03	,14	11	,000
	s	1,00	,97	1,04	,98	,96		
Wealth Chance	x̄	,00	,40	,06	-,03	-,07	3,511	,015
	s	1,00	1,00	1,04	1,00	,95		

Table 6: Education level and words

Attributions \ Education level	Frequencies	Tot	1st level	2nd level	Degree/M.D.	Chi-square	p
General External – Personal External	Observed	999	305	458	236	29,905	,000
	Expected		352,3	430,0	216,7		
General External – Personal Internal	Observed	36	8	18	10		
	Expected		12,7	15,5	7,8		
General Internal – Personal External	Observed	192	89	67	36		
	Expected		67,7	82,6	41,6		
General Internal – Personal Internal	Observed	28	14	10	4		
	Expected		9,9	12,1	6,1		
Total		1255	416	553	286		

A similar trend emerges talking about age: older respondents seem to choose words referring to external impoverishing factors, especially when the question is about the personal situation. A similar reasoning can be done about the working condition. As shown by words chosen by respondents, self-employed workers tend to choose internal impoverishing factors and this seems to support the hypothesis about the influence of *spirit of individual enterprise*: acknowledging its importance seems to have the effect of bringing more likely to individual the responsibility for his condition. The correlation between income and attributions is easy to understand according to the concept of '*defensive externality*': the tendency demonstrates that people having a not good economic status choose external explanations of poverty. On the contrary, people who have a good economic status attribute their good/bad social status to individual, not to context or fatalistic factors. This outcome seems also to recall the Learned Helplessness Theory (it examines the effects of exposing individuals to aversive events which they cannot control: this produces the motivational, cognitive, and emotional effects of uncontrollability. [16]): in our case, those who belong to a low income bracket, facing the perception of "failure", tend to attribute events to factors beyond their means. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that when the questions (related to beliefs about poverty and wealth or to words about poverty) gradually converge on the personal context of the respondent (up to his own life), low income people tend to "push away" the responsibility of poverty from the individual to external factors. Lower income people seem to choose external factors about wealth and it seems to support Complementary stereotype theory, that asserts the "legitimacy of the social system by suggesting that no single group in society holds a monopoly on all that is desirable (or undesirable), […] no group ''has it all'' and no group is bereft of valued characteristics" [17]. For instance, by taking away to the individual the merit for his own wealth status, but attributing it to the advantages of an unfair context, people rationalize the unequal division of wealth. The importance of studies like those we have just talked about is underlined by Schiller: "Which view of poverty we ultimately embrace will have a direct bearing on the public policies we pursue." [18]. Interventions for contrasting poverty are highly influenced by the individual 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 facilitate a person to improve his background. On the contrary, an intervention for promoting job-providing (as Rank suggests) reflects the attribution for poverty to factors external to the individual and to context inefficiency. Furthermore, interventions perceived as but as a result of debate and sharing, are surely much more effective because they are part and parcel of a participative process whose aim is to promote involvement and empowerment.

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