

THE PROCESS OF CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION OF POVERTY

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF A SURVEY IN ITALY

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Abstract: This study analyses the attributions of causality for poverty and wealth in order to better understand people's viewpoint. According to literature, we can detect three main attributions, depending on the return of the condition of poverty (or wealth) to individual, structural and mixed factors. The data we analyzed refer to a 2008 research which has been carried out on 2000 participants in Italy. A Principal Component Analysis has allowed the identification of three components relating to external, internal and fatalistic attributions of the phenomena of poverty and wealth. Following analysis have showed significant relations between attributions and factors like economic status (real or perceived), sex, education level, political orientation and media use.

Keywords: attributions about stratification, poverty beliefs, poverty explanations, social perception, wealth beliefs

I. INTRODUCTION

Quoting Klugel & Smith, authors of one of pioneer research study about attributions regarding poverty and wealth, "stratification is a basic aspect of society" [29, p. 29]. This is the reason why topic about attributions about social stratification has generated since '60s what Wilson defines a "growing amount" [56, p. 413] of research studies in socio-psychological and economic field. The fundamental questions about attributions concern what people think about social stratification and inequality: do they believe that poverty results from insufficient individual effort or from failures of the economic system? Likewise, do they give credit for wealth to the individual himself (for his hard work or for his talents) or to structural factors, like unequal opportunities?

A review of the literature allows us to reconstruct the landscape of theories of social stratification from both the social perception (people's attributions) and the examination of welfare programs: as Bradshaw describes [10], indeed, "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" (p. 8), or "different views about the underlying causes of poverty leads to very different policy choices" [8, p.458].

It is therefore possible to identify three main streams in which to place the different theories about phenomena of 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" [31, p.151]. A second group, in contrast, comprises contextual factors and trace poverty/wealth status back to structural variables. 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.

In this article, we are going to correlate people's perceptions with a series of factors, like educational background, sex, media using, real and perceived economic status and political culture, in order to find significant outcomes.

Information we are going to analyze were collected in 2008 by the Evaluation Research Group of Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies – National Research Council, over the research project for families poverty, funded by the Regional Authority of Lazio (Italy). The aim of this project has been to study the economic status of a sample of over 2000 subjects, paying particular attention to their perception of welfare. Data have been collected by using a semi-structured questionnaire in order to collect important quantitative and qualitative

information. In such a questionnaire we used two groups of items borrowed by a previous research carried out by the Czech sociologist Martin Kreidl [31], about the causal attribution of poverty and wealth.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A. *The study of attributions*

According to previous studies focused on themes of poverty and wealth from a socio-economic viewpoint, we can detect three main beliefs, depending on the attributing the condition of poverty (or wealth) to: 1) individual factors (“the individual is the only responsible for the condition s/he lives in”); 2) structural factors (“responsibilities have to be detected in the context, externally to the individual”; this is what Feagin calls “Social darwinism” [14]); 3) “Mixed factors”: more factors are present and interact one with each other.

B. *Individual factors: is it a “just” reality?*

Attributing the condition of poverty to the individual is the most common possible explanation [44]. This kind of assessment comes from archaic and religious beliefs according to which people difficulties (in this case, poverty) rise from a ‘divine punishment’. In more recent times this approach has been brought back by neoclassical economists, who considered the individual social destiny as a ‘mathematical result’ of individual choices.

The “Just World” approach, conjectured by Lerner [34], follows the same assumptions and describes a predictable ‘just world’, in which people have “what they merit”, that is what ‘mathematically’ derives from their actions. In such a belief is possible to detect a self-defensive and empowerment factor: by offering meaning and coherence to the world, the just-world beliefs also provide people with further benefits, like enhanced control, motivation, self-efficacy, self-worth, mental health, and normative prescriptions for behavior [37], [34].

Alston and Dean highlight that attributing poverty condition to individual characteristics is an implicit sign of poor blaming [4]. This kind of attribution emerges particularly in two circumstances: in the case of those people who choose to live a ‘risky’ life (for instance, a life with alcohol, drug, etc.) or if people consider society they live in to be fair, because credit is given, ‘weak’ people are helped [52] and opportunity for advancement is generally available [51]. In the latter case, a link arises with the Defensive attribution theory [54], [9]: when a situation is perceived as extremely unlikely, responsibility is usually attributed to the individual. It is interesting to note that this kind of assessment,

that emerges more strongly in the case of risky-living people, radically changes in case of groups of people who decide to live a poor life for a religious reason or for other noble purposes.

Finally, it is interesting to mention a specification identified by Kreidl [31]: the individualistic/merited and individualistic/fatalistic attributions. In such a way, he makes a differentiation between what the individual does actively (merited factors are lack of engagement, force, will, etc.) and his innate characteristics or what depends on fate (fatalistic factors are lack of talent, belonging to discriminated groups, etc.).

C. *Structural Factors: “it’s not his fault”*

Rank criticizes the sociological research for pointing individual factors up, and consequently leaving the role of context out [44]; so, sex or race have been considered as mere individual than structural categories and in this way, the importance of social implication has been neglected. On the contrary, he mainly attributes the condition of poverty to the socio-economic system and for instance, talking about the american context, he argues that it is like “a game in which there are more losers than winners”. Bruch also refers to a more general concept of “system” which prevents the poor from participating in work, education and politics and does not allow people who live in bad social conditions to come out [11]. In Stephenson’s opinion, when this social imbalance emerges in a clearer way, for instance in the case of unfair contexts with a large number of needy people, individuals tend to make more structural attributions [52]. Blank, finally, refers to the “system” variable as originating poverty condition, and she makes it using stronger tones [8]. She quotes some studies in which the economic system of the ‘first world’ is responsible for the scanty development of other areas in the world: big-sized enterprises would keep salaries down in developing areas in order to save up for importations. Reviewing factors originating or favoring the emerging of socio-economic imbalance, certainly cultural components and of social building of phenomena have a significant weight: Bradshaw [10] talks explicitly about “culture of poverty” as 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. Likewise the Dominant ideology thesis [1], [16], [52], [31] underlines the importance of cultural factors: in all societies, the subordinate classes “introject” the socio-cultural values of the predominant class. Hilgartner and Bosk

[22], finally, in the “Public arena theory”, describe the social building process of several phenomena like poverty. This process occurs 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.” (p. 59). Stephenson, for instance, argues that in the ex-Ussr the attributions related to the condition of poverty are structural for cultural reasons [52]. It is easy to understand that the debate regarding the interventions to contrast poverty is very heated because there is no agreement on whether the most effective plan to act. On the one hand it is argued that programs involving the person (for instance improving individual skills) are more effective; on the other hand there are those who prefer structural interventions (for instance subsidies to poor people). Among the factors that determine the choice of either approach, surely the context under consideration plays a central role. Rank, for instance, focusing on the American framework, notes that policies are made in order to increase the “human capital”, excluding the context; he argues that “poverty researchers have in effect focused on who loses out at the economic game, rather than addressing the fact that the game produces losers in the first place” [44, p.1]. On the contrary, Alcock, criticizes programs carried out in British context because, in his opinion, they operate too much on a structural level (for instance, the income re-allocation among the social classes) [3].

In general, many researchers have demonstrated that the assumption of hastily-made programs against poverty can oppose to long-lasting policies and paradoxically worsen the situation [10]. In U.S., for instance, the conjecture which has recently generated a discussion is “welfare dependency” [10], [8], [39], [18], about the creation of disincentives to work caused by cash assistance programs. Moffitt demonstrates that the U.S. program called ADFC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) has created disincentives to work in terms of hours [39]. Rainwater explains that if cash incentives are provided for parents, such incentives will be provided for sons, too [43]. These data excited much interest at academic international level [5], [6], [38], [53]).

D. Mixed Factors: the spiral of poverty

It is interesting to note that in this theory many characteristics of the different approaches explained until now are interconnected with one another: in fact, such theory argues that when people become disadvantaged because of their social status or the

context they live in, their psychological abilities are affected. According to the “Cyclical theory”, multiple problems accumulate and create a sort of spiral [48], which can frustrate the individual [10]. This ‘spiral of poverty’ can create disinvestment and decline at community level and individual level (people become poorer, less self-confident) [48]. Such an approach can be detected in researchers like Alcock (2004) who distinguishes two factors as causes of individual and social changes: social system and agency. The first factor concerns the changes through the impact of sex, family relationships, economic forces, classes, institutions, social movements. The agency refers to the role of the individual, in particular to the way s/he negotiates and interacts with structural factors. In this case, inequalities would derive from the interaction between these two levels.

III. METHOD

The hereafter analysis have been run on data from a 2008 NRC poverty and Debt research which has been carried out on over 2000 subjects in Italy. It has allowed us to handle a large sample, wide-ranging at a socio-demographic level.

The poverty and wealth perceived causes have been detected by using 14 items (7 linked to poverty and 7 linked to wealth). To all respondents has been addressed the following introductory question: “In your opinion, which one among the following aspects do have an impact on poverty (wealth) condition in your town?”. As a consequence, they have been asked to indicate their concordance rate per item, according to the 5-point Likert scale: [1] never; [2] seldom; [3] sometimes; [4] often; [5] very often.

Moreover, the lowest scale score (score 1) have been assigned to a complete lack of concordance and the highest scale score (score 5) to a complete concordance in order to enhance a semantic consistence and as a consequence a friendly comprehension too.

The poverty attributions are listed hereafter:

1. Lack of ability or talent (PABIL).
2. Bad Luck (PLUCK).
3. Lack of effort by the poor themselves (PEFFORT).
4. Loose morals (PMORAL).
5. Prejudice and discrimination against some groups (PDISCR).
6. Lack of equal conditions and opportunities (POPPR).
7. Failure of the economic system (PSYST).

On the other hand, all wealth attributions are listed

hereafter:

1. Ability or talent (WABIL).
2. Luck (WLUCK).
3. Dishonesty (WDISHON).
4. Hard work (WHWORK).
5. Having the right connections (WKNOW).
6. More opportunities to begin with (WOPPR).
7. The economic system which allows to take unfair advantage (WSYST).

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A Principal Component Analysis (with Varimax rotation) has been carried out aimed at synthesizing all 14 items into two components: the first one can be associated to internal localization and the second one to an external localization of poverty and wealth (Table I). In this way we have tried to find a trend in subjects' explanations that refers to an internal or an external sense of control.

TABLE I:
TWO COMPONENTS PCA

Component	Item	Factor loading	Initial Eigenvalues		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
			Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)
Internal localization	PEFFORT	,733	2,513	17,948	2,483	17,734
	PMORAL	,677				
	PABIL	,670				
	WABIL	,512				
	WHWORK	,249				
External localization	WSYST	,658	1,952	13,942	1,982	14,156
	WOPPR	,582				
	POPPR	,581				
	WKNOW	,574				
	PSYST	,565				
	WDISHON	,520				
	PLUCK	,391				
	WLUCK	,383				
PDISCR	,370					
Cumulative percentage of variance			31,889		31,889	

The analysis outcomes show how the two components solution has led to an external positioning of the following items: Luck/Bad luck, prejudice and discrimination against some groups, lack of equal conditions and opportunities, failure of the economic system, dishonesty, having the right connections, more opportunities to begin with, the economic

system which allows to take unfair advantage. On the contrary, the following items have been internally positioned: ability or talent/lack of ability or talent, lack of effort by the poor themselves, loose morals and hard work. Nevertheless the applied two components solution can only explain 31,9% of variance.

Though, five clearer and understandable factors emerge by applying Kaiser's rule and considering all components having an eigenvalue higher than 1 (Table 2). Each factor loading allows us to interpret components as it follows: the first one pertains to wealth and includes the following items: having the right connections, more opportunities to begin with, the economic system which allows to take unfair advantage; this component can be interpreted as external wealth attribution. The second component is referred to internal poverty attribution: as a result all included items are lack of ability or talent, lack of effort by the poor themselves, loose morals. The third detected component includes other poverty items (such as prejudice and discrimination against some groups, lack of equal conditions and opportunities, failure of the economic system) and it is linked to an external poverty attribution. The fourth component can be classified as a "fatalistic" one and it is referred to Luck/Bad luck. In conclusion the last selected component is only referred to wealth and it is linked to an internal attribution. It includes the following items: ability or talent and hard work.

Table II shows that using the eigenvalue (without identifying in advance the number of components to be extracted) allows us to explain a much greater percentage of variance (nearly 60%).

The factor loadings let us also to draw three main conclusions: first of all, four distinct components have been outlined. It emerges that the internal or external attributions are distinguished between poverty and wealth: we can not talk, namely, about internalism or externalism transcending the separation between poverty and wealth. On the contrary, this clearly happens in the case of component we may call "fatalism": we are faced with high factor loadings (.862 and .877) that allow us to identify a clear pattern of responses that is common to poverty and wealth regarding items about luck and bad luck.

TABLE II:
SECOND PCA

Component	Item	Factor loading	Initial Eigenvalues		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
			Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)
Wealth external attribution	WKNO	,704	2,513	17,948	1,975	14,109
	W					
	WSYST	,672				
	WOPPR	,653				
Poverty internal attribution	WDISH	,646	1,952	13,942	1,835	13,111
	PEFFO	,776				
	RT					
	PMOR	,762				
Poverty external attribution	AL	,680	1,398	9,985	1,604	11,457
	PABIL	,776				
	POPPR	,744				
Fatalism	PDISCR	,550	1,254	8,956	1,537	10,977
	PSYST	,550				
	WLUC	,877				
Wealth internal attribution	K	,862	1,195	8,536	1,360	9,713
	PLUCK	,862				
	WHWO	,794				
	WABIL	,624				
Cumulative percentage of variance			59,366		59,366	

Finally, 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 prefer less external explanations.

The following analyses will test the relationship between hidden response patterns emerged and a series of independent variables:

- *Sex*. The assigned attributions have been analyzed starting from the sex of the respondent.
- *Education degree*. In this case all respondents have been asked to specify their education level; those who did not have any education degree have been excluded. The remaining part has been grouped into 3 other similar categories: “first level education”, “second level education”, and “degree/master degree level”.
- *Media*. The open question used is: “Which media channel do you normally use in order to keep you informed?”. All respondents have been divided into 2 groups according to the number of used media channels: one media channel, 2 or more media channels.
- *Political orientation*. The open question used is: “Is there any political party which reflect your opinion?”. A re-coding process has been implemented by dividing all the indicated political

parties into two areas: Right wing (DX) and Left wing (SX).

- *Income*. The open question used has been addressed to the respondents: “In the over whole could you please tell us, what is your family money availability per month?” (in order to get the sum of all family members incomes: wage and salaries, company professional asset, old- age pension, other revenues, etc.). The indicated incomes have been divided into 4 similar groups having similar numerical components.

- *Economic perceived status*. The question is: “What is your economic status, in your opinion?”. The answers to the question have been categorized into 5 different answers: [1] poor; [2] below the average standard; [3] average standard; [4] beyond the average standard; [5] rich.

Through data analysis points 1, 2 (“poor” and “below the average standard”), 4 and 5 (“beyond the average standard” and “rich”) have been grouped in order to reach an adequate number of cases.

V. ANALYSIS

A. Sex and attributions

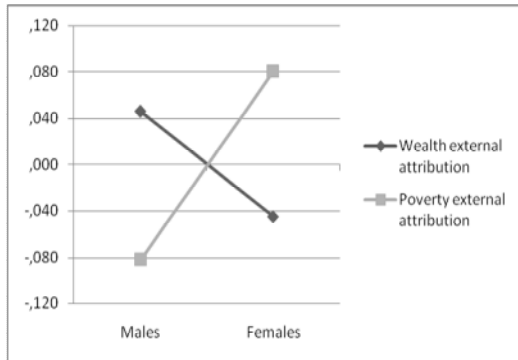
TABLE III:
SEX AND ATTRIBUTIONS

Component		Tot (N=1821)	Females (N=920)	Males (N=901)	F	p
Poverty internal attribution	<i>M</i>	0,00	-0,04	0,04	3,454	,063
	<i>SD</i>	1,00	0,97	1,03		
Poverty external attribution	<i>M</i>	0,00	0,08	-0,08	12,105	,001
	<i>SD</i>	1,00	0,96	1,03		
Wealth internal attribution	<i>M</i>	0,00	-0,03	0,03	1,365	,243
	<i>SD</i>	1,00	0,98	1,02		
Wealth external attribution	<i>M</i>	0,00	-0,05	0,05	3,750	,050
	<i>SD</i>	1,00	0,99	1,01		
Fatalism	<i>M</i>	0,00	0,04	-0,04	2,910	,088
	<i>SD</i>	1,00	0,97	1,03		

According to the analysis results (see above Table III), the sex of the respondent has a relevant impact on the external attribution of both poverty and wealth. More specifically, women are significantly more inclined to think that poverty is caused by problems that arise from outside an individual ($\bar{x} = 0,80$ vs - 0,82, $F = 12,105$, $p < ,001$). Nevertheless with

reference to wealth, the roles are inverted and as a consequence mostly men are especially prone to rather prefer an external localization ($\bar{X} = 0,46$ vs $-0,45$, $F = 3,750$, $p < ,050$).

FIGURE I:
SEX AND ATTRIBUTIONS



The issue emerged – even though partially – from the research carried out by the sociologist Kreidl [31]: in that case, data demonstrated that women favored structural explanations of poverty. It is often mentioned the fact that women are more inclined to external causes in the sense of control (“General externality” model: see [15]; see also [7], [16], [45], [50]; even though in some cases the variable Sex must be taken into account together with other important factors like age, education and employment.

Results show, besides, how male respondents are more inclined to attribute economic well-being (success) to individual factors. This outcome reflects what emerges in the specific literature, in which can be detected how men often choose internal attributions in case of success (including economic) [12].

Research studies concerning the relation between attributional styles and sex, however, lead to ambivalent outcomes, suggesting the existence of a variety models (about women, see [15]).

B. Education level and attributions

TABLE IV:
EDUCATION LEVEL AND ATTRIBUTIONS

Component		Total (N=1747)	First level education (N=602)	Second level education (N=807)	Degree/master degree level (N=338)	F	p
Poverty internal Attribution	M	0,00	0,11	-0,02	-0,17	8,848	,000
	SD	1,00	1,03	0,97	0,98		
Poverty external Attribution	M	-0,01	-0,18	0,05	0,16	15,196	,000
	SD	1,00	1,08	0,97	0,88		
Wealth internal Attribution	M	0,01	-0,18	0,08	0,19	19,018	,000
	SD	1,00	1,04	0,96	0,94		
Wealth external Attribution	M	0,01	-0,05	0,02	0,10	2,417	,090
	SD	1,00	1,12	0,93	0,91		
Fatalism	M	-0,01	0,13	-0,05	-0,15	10,065	,000
	SD	1,00	1,07	0,96	0,93		

With reference to the education level (Table IV), relevant results arise for both poverty localizations, internal wealth localization and “fatalistic” one too.

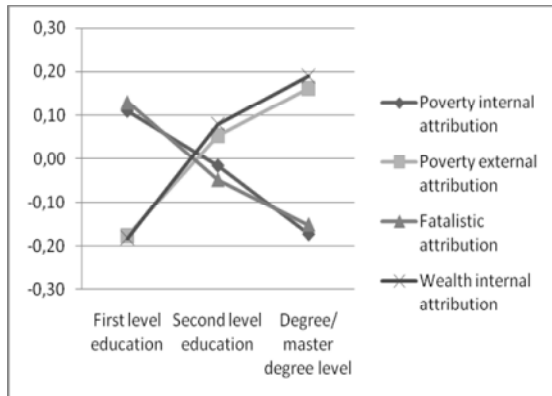
Specifically, data show that a higher education level corresponds to a higher external poverty attribution (together with the internal wealth ones) and a lower internal poverty attribution: $\bar{X} = -0,18$ vs $0,05$ vs $0,16$, $F = 15,196$, $p < ,000$ (external poverty), $\bar{X} = -0,18$ vs $0,08$ vs $0,19$, $F = 19,018$, $p < ,000$ (internal wealth) and $\bar{X} = 0,11$ vs $-0,02$ vs $-0,17$, $F = 8,848$, $p < ,000$ (internal poverty). Therefore, more an individual is educated, more he tends to attribute the poverty condition to external (not internal) factors and the wealth condition to internal factors. Reviewing literature on this point, Slagsvold and Sørensen argue that, in general, a higher level of education is interconnected with a higher sense of control over events [50]. In spite of outcomes of our research, Lever notes that, Mexican people with a high-level education have attitudes towards poverty as a problem arising from inside an individual [36]. In this regard, it would be interesting to test whether income affects individuals' ability to complete a course of study (in Mexico, almost half the population falls below the poverty line. [57]).

The analysis also show a weak tendency towards external explanations of wealth by the most educated: one may assume that a better qualification corresponds to a different working path and then a higher income. This conclusion would reflect what will be found later about the income factor: a higher income is significantly related to internal attributions for wealth.

In this same way it is possible to interpret the results reached by Feagin, in his well-known research [13],

and by Kluegel & Smith [29]: 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.

FIGURE II:
EDUCATION LEVEL AND ATTRIBUTIONS



Our data also show that a higher education level corresponds to a lower fatalistic attribution ($\bar{x} = 0,13$ vs $-0,05$ vs $-0,15$, $F = 10,065$, $p < ,000$).

If we examine other previous cases, the same conclusions are drawn by Kreidl in his research [31], in which a negative correlation between education levels and fatalistic explanations emerges: the more education increases, the more fatalistic explanations decrease.

C. Media and attributions

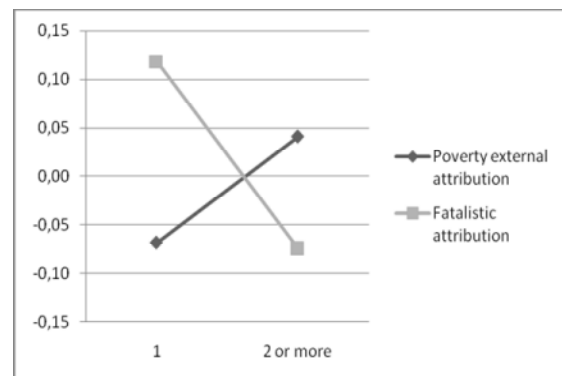
TABLE V:
NUMBER OF MEDIA USED AND ATTRIBUTIONS

Component		Tot (N=1776)	1 media used (N=655)	2+ media used (N=1121)	F	p
Poverty internal Attribution	M	0,01	0,05	-0,02	2,115	,146
	S D	1,00	1,06	0,97		

Poverty external Attribution	M	0,00	-0,07	0,04	4,998	,026
	S D	1,00	1,05	0,97		
Wealth internal Attribution	M	0,01	-0,13	0,09	21,08 2	,000
	S D	1,00	1,05	0,95		
Wealth external Attribution	M	0,01	-0,06	0,05	5,180	,023
	S D	1,00	1,10	0,93		
Fatalism	M	0,00	0,12	-0,07	15,45 2	,000
	S D	1,00	1,04	0,97		

With reference to poverty, data in Table V show that an increase of media using results into an external localization increase: $\bar{x} = - 0,0687$ vs $0,0409$, $F = 4,998$, $p < ,026$. On the contrary, thanks to a fatalistic component analysis, data show that a use of different media channels does not lead to Luck/bad Luck poverty Condition attribution ($\bar{x} = - 0,1184$ vs $0,0749$, $F = 15,452$, $p < ,000$).

FIGURE III:
NUMBER OF MEDIA USED AND ATTRIBUTIONS



“Through the course of education, individuals are exposed to information, showing that inequality is due not only to individual sources but also to structural ones. Similarly, higher the education, more a person will make use of the media, increasing the chances to receive information on unequal opportunities and different ways of discrimination”. This sentence by Kluegel & Smith [30, p.26] will let us assess the relationship between the number of media used and the attributes: essentially, even in this case, the same conclusions can be drawn.

As noted in the research carried out by the Czech sociologist, even in Lazio it emerges that higher the number of media used, more significant the fact that people have attitude towards poverty as a problem arising from outside an individual.

At the same time, data show how who usually use

more than just a media, is less inclined to make fatalistic attribution about poverty and wealth.

D. Political orientation and attributions

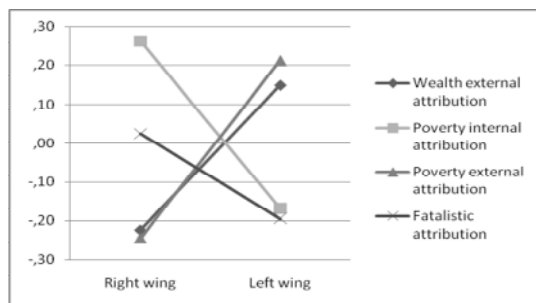
TABLE VI:
POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ATTRIBUTIONS

Component		Tot (N=546)	Left wing (N=264)	Right wing (N=282)	F	p
Poverty internal Attribution	M	0,05	-0,17	0,26	24,531	,000
	S	1,04	1,04	1,00		
	D					
Poverty external Attribution	M	-0,02	0,21	-0,24	28,409	,000
	S	1,03	0,92	1,06		
	D					
Wealth internal Attribution	M	0,11	0,07	0,14	,874	,350
	S	0,99	0,97	1,00		
	D					
Wealth external Attribution	M	-0,04	0,15	-0,22	19,639	,000
	S	1,00	0,90	1,06		
	D					
Fatalism	M	-0,08	-0,20	0,03	6,543	,011
	S	1,01	1,01	1,01		
	D					

By considering the political orientation as independent variable, all data significantly show how this has a sharp impact on all 5 examined components (see Table VI).

According to the table it emerges that all left political orientated respondents attribute poverty condition to internal factors ($\bar{x} = 0,26$ vs $- 0,17$, $F = 24,531$, $p < ,000$) or to Fate ($\bar{x} = 0,03$ vs $- 0,20$, $F = 6,543$, $p < ,011$) less than conservative respondents. On the contrary, the same respondents are prone to attribute poverty/wealth condition to external factors: respectively $\bar{x} = - 0,24$ vs $0,21$, $F = 28,409$, $p < ,000$ and $= - 0,22$ vs $0,15$, $F = 19,639$, $p < ,000$.

FIGURE IV:
POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ATTRIBUTIONS



Such a result perfectly describes what emerges analyzing correlation between political orientation and attribution patterns in the case of several social phenomena: liberals tend to focus on situational or institutional explanations, whereas conservatives prefer personal explanations [49].

The same pattern seems to be valid also talking about poverty, as emerged in several studies [49], [17], [55], [58], [42]): conservative political orientations search the causes of economical inequalities inside the individual and progressive political orientations are more inclined to take into account context variables (government policies, economic dominance by a few and so on).

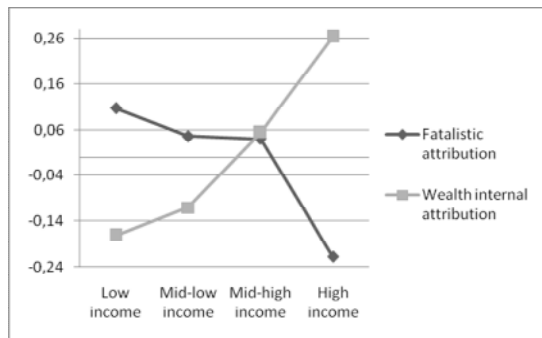
E. Income and attributions

TABLE VII:
INCOME AND ATTRIBUTIONS

Component		Tot (N=1081)	Low income (N=420)	Mid-low income (N=445)	Mid-high income (N=406)	High income (N=410)	F	p
Poverty internal Attribution	M	0,01	0,05	0,05	0,00	0,01	,722	,539
	S	1,00	1,06	0,99	0,99	0,96		
	D							
Poverty external Attribution	M	0,00	0,09	0,03	0,01	-0,08	2,276	,078
	S	1,00	1,00	0,99	1,01	1,00		
	D							
Wealth internal Attribution	M	0,01	0,17	0,11	0,05	0,26	16,420	,000
	S	0,99	1,01	0,99	0,98	0,94		
	D							
Wealth external Attribution	M	0,00	0,07	0,02	-0,03	-0,06	1,417	,236
	S	0,99	0,99	0,99	0,99	1,00		
	D							
Fatalism	M	0,00	0,11	0,05	0,04	-0,22	8,658	,000
	S	1,00	1,03	1,04	0,95	0,95		
	D							

If we examine the relation between income and attribution (see Table VII), it emerges that people who have a high income are more inclined to internal than external explanations (in this particular case, the most significant differences concern wealth: $\bar{x} = - 0,17$ vs $-0,11$ vs $0,05$ vs $0,26$, $F = 16,420$, $p < ,000$). People who have a high income tend to hand it to themselves and 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 ($\bar{x} = 0,11$ vs $0,05$ vs $0,04$ vs $-0,22$, $F = 8,658$, $p < ,000$).

FIGURE V:
INCOME AND ATTRIBUTIONS



Lachman & Weaver [33], as well as other researchers [19], [20], [21], [32], [35], argue that, in general, income is negatively related to fatalistic sense of control. Talking about poverty, Morcol reaches the same conclusion [40]. In addition, Lever [36], Fox & Ferri [16] and Gurin & Brim [19] argue that individuals who have low income are more inclined to external perceptions. This outcome seems also to recall the *Learned helplessness theory*¹ [46], [2], [47]: those who belong to a low income bracket, facing the perception of "failure", develop a tendency to attribute events to factors beyond their means. In this case "lower control beliefs reflect the reality of the lower income living situation" [33, p.764].

Outcomes about wealth, besides, seem to support *Complementary stereotype theory* ([41], [24], [25], [27], [28]), 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" [26, p.290]. For instance, taking away to the individual the merit for his own wealth status, but attributing it to the advantages of an unfair context, people rationalizes the unequal division of wealth by creating a context of equality.

F. Perceived economic status and attributions

TABLE VIII:
PERCEIVED ECONOMIC STATUS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

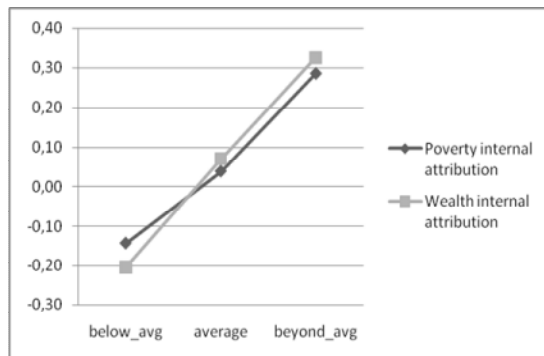
Component		Tot (N=1788)	Below the avg standard (N=531)	Avg standard (N=1148)	Beyond the avg standard (N=109)	F	p
Poverty internal	M	,00	-,14	,04	,29	10,93 8	,000

¹ This theory examines the effects of exposing individuals to aversive events which they cannot control: it hypothesizes that when events are uncontrollable the individual learns that its behavior and outcomes are independent, and this learning produces the motivational, cognitive, and emotional effects of uncontrollability.

Attribution	S	1,00	1,04	0,97	,98		
	D						
Poverty external	M	,01	,06	-,02	,03	1,360	,257
Attribution	S	1,00	1,02	,99	1,00		
	D						
Wealth internal	M	,00	-,20	,07	,33	20,27 9	,000
Attribution	S	1,00	1,04	0,96	,97		
	D						
Wealth external	M	-,01	,07	-,03	-,16	2,851	,058
Attribution	S	1,00	1,03	,97	1,05		
	D						
Fatalism	M	,00	,06	-,02	-,18	2,811	,060
	S	1,00	1,04	,98	,89		
	D						

The outcomes obtained in the assessment of the subjective perception of status position (self-placement on a scale of economic welfare) are similar to what has emerged about income: people who self-place on a low status position are much less inclined to think that poverty is caused by problems arising from inside the individual (see Table 8; $\bar{x} = -0,14$ vs $0,04$ vs $0,29$, $F = 10,938$, $p < ,000$).

FIGURE VI:
PERCEIVED ECONOMIC STATUS AND ATTRIBUTIONS



We could hypothesize that those people who perceive themselves as poor are inclined to believe that causes arise not from inside them but from independent external factors: a poor is a person whose condition is due to negative personal events or to an economic system that did not provide a great economic security (*"Defensive external"*² [23]). The subjective perception of status position is related to what people think about wealth: in fact, according to the data, it has emerged that people who have high subjective perception of status position less often think about problems arising from outside than from inside themselves ($\bar{x} = -0,20$ vs $0,07$ vs $0,33$, $F = 20,279$, $p < ,000$). In other words, people who self-place on a higher status position hand it to themselves: "I feel to be a well-off person because I have many skills/ I worked hard".

VI. CONCLUSIONS

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-economical factors. In this particular case, the Sense of control is related to some specific variables: Sex, education level, political orientation, number of media used, income, subjective social status. The results that have emerged demonstrate that, in several cases, the relationship does really exist.

If we consider the variable Sex, women tend more to an external orientation of the localization of causality, in case of poverty: the results are interesting because they demonstrate that women perceive the situation of need and subordination beyond their control. So, the specific condition can be attributed to external

² Blame protection: external orientation may serve a defensive function by allowing the individual to project the blame for personal inadequacies and failures onto bad luck or the malevolent influence of other people [23, p. 540].

factors, even to fate, but not exactly to specific characteristics of the individual or to factors that he can control.

Broadening the spectrum of analysis and considering women as a traditionally subordinate category compared with men, the results reflect the finding reported by Feagin in the American contest: blacks and Jews are more inclined to choose structural factors in explaining poverty [13].

With regard to media, the first hypothesis (argued by both [30] and [31]) is that more the media can be used, more a person will know about the phenomenon: in such a way, it is possible to let individuals know those factors that influence their own economic status by taking into account many other context variables. The results have demonstrated that the use of a large number of media is positively correlated to an external localization of causality. People who get more informed tend to think that poverty is due to external factors more than people who get less.

A possible in-depth examination can be done focusing on the news channel: for instance, the use of media that let the individual get more informed and be an acting user (daily news instead of radio and TV channel) should widen the individual's vision of such a phenomenon.

If we consider once more the importance of Kreidl [31] and his contribution, we can make a similar discussion about the education level; being more awakened of a particular complex situation, often related to a higher level of education, 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 level of 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.

With regard to the political orientation, the differences in the data can be interpreted as something deriving from traditional ideological categories, referring to the individual importance, role and enterprise (internal localization) in the liberalistic/conservative approach, and to the role and importance of society (external localization) in the progressive/sociodemocratic approach.

An important aspect to underline is the context in which the study has been carried out: Italy, a country influenced by a strong Christian tradition. This aspect might surely help interpret the data about the fatalistic aspect; we have to consider both Fate and Divine Providence. Data demonstrate that respondents with conservative political orientation (traditionally religious) tend more than others to give importance to

the fatalistic aspect (external localization) in their explanation of poverty. A way to detect the influence of the variable Religion could be to consider it separately, in order to 'neutralize' an aspect that should have influenced the answers of individuals, especially for the specific context taken into account. The variables Income and Subjective Economic status are similar one to each other, and easy to understand according to the concept of 'defensive externality': the tendency which emerges from the data demonstrates that there is a preference for external explanations of poverty, which are fatalistic for people having (or perceive to have) a not good economic status. The same individuals tend less than others to attribute wealth to individual abilities (internal localization). On the contrary, people who have (or perceive to have) a good economical status attribute their good/bad social status to individual, not to context factors.

The importance of studies like those we have just talked about is underlined by a sentence by Schiller (1989): "Which view of poverty we ultimately embrace will have a direct bearing on the public policies we pursue". It is possible to argue that the 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 personal background. On the contrary, an intervention for promoting job-providing (as Rank suggests [44]) reflects the attribution of poverty to factors external to the individual and to context inefficiency.

After this first level, there is a second one which is very important: all the interventions that are perceived as not planned *a priori*, 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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