THE PROCESS OF CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION FOR POVERTY

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF A SURVEY IN ITALY

M. Norcia[a], A. Castellani[a] and A. Rissotto[a]

[a]Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies, National Research Council, Italy.

[a]Corresponding author: maurizio.norcia@istc.cnr.it

Abstract: This study delves into the causal attributions for poverty and wealth, aiming to deepen our understanding of public perceptions on this complex issue. Drawing on existing literature, we categorize these attributions into three primary types: individual, structural, and mixed, each reflecting different sources of poverty or wealth. Our analysis is based on data from a comprehensive 2008 survey involving 2,000 participants across Italy. Employing Principal Component Analysis, we identified three distinct components of attributions: external, internal, and fatalistic, pertaining to the phenomena of poverty and wealth. Subsequent analyses revealed significant correlations between these attributions and various factors, including economic status (both actual and perceived), gender, educational attainment, political leanings, and media consumption patterns. These findings offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of how poverty and wealth are perceived, underscoring the influence of socio-demographic factors on individuals' viewpoints.

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

I. INTRODUCTION

Quoting Klugel & Smith, pioneers in researching attributions of poverty and wealth, they state, "stratification is a basic aspect of society" [29, p. 29]. This highlights the enduring interest in social stratification attributions, which, as Wilson notes, has seen a "growing amount" [56, p. 413] of research in the socio-psychological and economic domains since the 1960s. Central to this discourse are questions about societal views on stratification and inequality: Are poverty and wealth outcomes of individual effort or systemic failures? Is wealth credited to personal endeavor and talent or to structural factors such as unequal opportunities?

A comprehensive review of literature enables the reconstruction of social stratification theories, juxtaposing social perception (people's attributions) with the analysis of welfare programs. Bradshaw articulates, "community anti-poverty programs are designed, selected, and implemented based on varying theories about the causes of poverty that 'justify' the interventions" [10, p. 8], indicating that "diverse understandings of poverty's roots lead to distinct policy decisions" [8, p.458]. This analysis delineates three primary frameworks for interpreting poverty and wealth phenomena: one focusing on individual responsibility, another on contextual and structural variables, and a third "mixed" approach that sees these conditions as the interplay of individual and structural factors.

In this article, we aim to correlate individuals' perceptions with variables such as educational background, gender, media usage, economic status (both actual and perceived), and political orientation to identify significant patterns.

The data for this analysis were collected in 2008 by the Evaluation Research Group at the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies – National Research Council, as part of a project on family poverty funded by the Regional Authority of Lazio, Italy. The project's goal was to assess the economic status of over 2,000 individuals, with a particular focus on their welfare perceptions. Through a semi-structured questionnaire, we gathered both quantitative and qualitative data, incorporating item groups from a study by Czech sociologist Martin Kreidl [31] on the causal attribution of poverty and wealth. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how socio-economic factors and personal perceptions interconnect to shape views on poverty and wealth within a specific cultural and temporal context.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

IIa. The study of attributions

In exploring the socio-economic dimensions of poverty and wealth, research unveils three principal beliefs concerning the origins of these conditions. The first belief attributes poverty or wealth to individual factors, encapsulating a viewpoint where the person's situation is seen as a direct consequence of their actions or inactions. This perspective, often summarized by the phrase "the individual is the only responsible for the condition s/he lives in", suggests a one-dimensional understanding of socio-economic status.

The second belief shifts focus from the individual to the broader environment, emphasizing structural factors. This angle, described as "responsibilities have to be detected in the context, externally to the individual", aligns with Feagin's notion of "Social Darwinism" [14]. It underscores the impact of systemic and external forces in shaping an individual's economic reality, challenging the notion of personal culpability.

The third belief, labeled "Mixed factors", acknowledges the complexity of socio-economic conditions by recognizing the interplay between individual choices and structural constraints. This nuanced perspective accepts that both personal actions and broader societal factors contribute to the conditions of poverty and wealth, suggesting a more comprehensive approach to understanding socio-economic outcomes.

IIb. Individual factors: is it a "just" world?

The attribution of poverty to individual failings is not only prevalent but also rooted in historical and religious contexts where adversity is often interpreted as divine retribution. This viewpoint has evolved, finding resonance in modern times among neoclassical economists who view an individual's socio-economic destiny as a consequence of personal choices. The "Just World" theory, as postulated by Lerner [34], builds on this belief, proposing a world where fairness prevails, and individuals receive outcomes directly tied to their actions. This theory offers psychological comfort by suggesting the world operates on a principle of justice, thereby offering individuals a sense of control and self-worth [37], [34].

However, this approach has its critics. Alston and Dean [4] argue that attributing poverty to individual characteristics often leads to victim-blaming. This is particularly evident when individuals are perceived to engage in risky behaviors or are deemed to be failing within a society that is considered equitable. The Defensive attribution theory [54], [9] suggests that in circumstances deemed highly unlikely, responsibility is often placed on the individual, especially among groups living in precarious conditions by choice or for higher purposes.

Kreidl [31] further dissects this into "merited" and "fatalistic" attributions, differentiating between the outcomes of personal efforts and those predetermined by innate characteristics or fate. This distinction adds a layer of complexity to the discussion on individual responsibility, highlighting the varied lenses through which poverty and wealth are perceived.

IIc. Structural Factors: "it's not his fault"

Rank offers a critical perspective on sociological research's focus on individual factors, arguing this approach overlooks the critical role of context in shaping socio-economic outcomes [44]. This perspective suggests that characteristics such as sex and race are often misinterpreted as purely personal attributes, ignoring their deep-rooted structural implications. Instead, Rank posits that the socio-economic systems play a pivotal role in creating an environment where the distribution of wealth and opportunity is inherently unequal, likening the American socio-economic landscape to a game predisposed towards producing more losers than winners.

Expanding on this theme, Bruch identifies systemic barriers that prevent the impoverished from participating fully in work, education, and politics, emphasizing the structural nature of poverty [11]. Stephenson adds that in situations of pronounced social imbalance, where the presence of the needy is highly visible, there is a tendency among observers to attribute poverty to structural rather than individual factors [52].

Blank further elaborates on this by linking poverty directly to the machinations of first-world economic systems, which, through their operations, contribute to the underdevelopment of other regions. She specifically criticizes large corporations for suppressing wages in developing areas to minimize import costs [8]. This systemic critique is complemented by Bradshaw's analysis of the 'culture of poverty,' which argues for the existence of a distinct subculture among the poor, characterized by unique norms and values divergent from those of the mainstream society [10].

The Dominant Ideology Thesis further explores the cultural dimensions of poverty, suggesting that subordinate classes tend to internalize the socio-cultural values of the dominant class, perpetuating a cycle of socio-economic disparity [1], [16], [52], [31]. Hilgartner and Bosk's 'Public Arena Theory' delves into the societal construction of social issues, including poverty, within public spheres like media and science, where these issues are selected, framed, and presented to the public, shaping the collective understanding and response to poverty [22]. Stephenson observes that in the former USSR, attributions of poverty are inherently structural, rooted in the cultural context that emphasizes systemic over individual causality [52]. This highlights the complexity of devising effective interventions to combat poverty. The discourse is divided between advocates of individual-focused programs aimed at enhancing 'human capital' and proponents of structural interventions, such as subsidies, aimed at addressing systemic failures [10], [8], [39], [18].

Focusing on the U.S., Rank critiques the emphasis on policies designed to bolster individual capabilities without addressing the underlying systemic issues, suggesting a misalignment in the approach to tackling poverty [44, p.1]. Similarly, Alcock critiques British anti-poverty programs for their overemphasis on structural solutions, like income redistribution, without adequately considering individual agency [3].

The debate extends to the efficacy of anti-poverty programs, with researchers cautioning against hastily implemented initiatives that may inadvertently exacerbate the issue. Discussions in the U.S. around 'welfare dependency' illustrate the contentious nature of such interventions, highlighting concerns that programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADFC) may discourage work by providing disincentives, thus deepening the poverty trap [39], [43], [5], [6], [38], [53].

IId. Mixed Factors: the spiral of poverty

Integrating elements from both individual and structural perspectives, the cyclical theory presents a dynamic understanding of poverty. This theory posits that socio-economic disadvantages and systemic barriers compound over time, creating a downward spiral that exacerbates individual and community hardship [48]. Researchers like Alcock [3] emphasize the interaction between societal structures and individual agency, arguing that inequalities result from this complex interplay.

This comprehensive approach underscores the multifaceted nature of poverty and wealth, advocating for solutions that address both the individual and systemic levels. It challenges simplistic narratives and calls for a deeper examination of the socio-economic landscape, highlighting the need for policies that are sensitive to the intricate realities of those affected by poverty and wealth.

III. METHOD

The subsequent analysis was conducted using data from the 2008 Italian National Research Council (CNR) Poverty and Debt research, involving over 2000 subjects in Italy. This allowed for a comprehensive examination of a large, socio-demographically diverse sample. The study identified perceived causes of poverty and wealth using 14 items, split evenly between the two concepts. Participants

were asked their opinions on factors impacting poverty (or wealth) in their locality, rating their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 (complete disagreement) to 5 (complete agreement), ensuring semantic consistency and ease of understanding.

The specific poverty attributions are listed below:
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 (PCA) with Varimax rotation was conducted to synthesize all 14 items into two components: the first one can be associated with internal attribution, and the second one with an external attribution of poverty and wealth (Table I). This approach aimed to identify trends in subjects' explanations related to an internal or external sense of control.

Table I. First PCA

Comp.	Item	F. load.	Initial Eigenvalues		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
			Eigenvalue	Var (%)	Eigen value	Var (%)
Internal attrib.	PABIL	,670	2,513	17,94	2,483	17,73
	PEFFORT	,733				
	PMORAL	,677				
	WABIL	,512				
	WHWORK	,249				
External attrib.	PLUCK	,391	1,952	13,94	1,982	14,15
	PDISCR	,370				
	POPPR	,581				
	PSYST	,565				
	WLUCK	,383				
	WDISHON	,520				
	WKNOW	,574				
	WOPPR	,582				
	WSYST	,658				
Cumulative percentage of variance			31,88		31,88	

The analysis results indicate that the two-component solution has resulted in an external alignment of the following items: Luck/Bad luck, prejudice and discrimination against certain groups, lack of equal conditions and opportunities, failure of the economic system, dishonesty, having the right connections, more initial opportunities, and the economic system that enables unfair advantage. In contrast, the following items have been internally attributed: ability or talent/lack thereof, lack of effort by individuals in poverty, loose morals, and hard work. However, this two-component solution can only explain 31.9% of the variance.

However, considering all components with eigenvalues greater than 1 yields five clearer and more interpretable factors (Table II).

Table II. Second PCA

Comp.	Item	F. load.	Initial Eigenvalues		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
			Eigen value	Var (%)	Eigen value	Var (%)
Poverty internal attrib.	PABIL	,680	1,952	13,94	1,835	13,11
	PEFFORT	,776				
	PMORAL	,762				
Poverty external attrib.	PDISCR	,744	1,398	9,985	1,604	11,45
	POPPR	,776				
	PSYST	,550				
Wealth internal attrib.	WABIL	,624	1,195	8,536	1,360	9,713
	WHWORK	,794				
Wealth external attrib.	WDISHON	,646	2,513	17,94	1,975	14,10
	WKNOW	,704				
	WOPPR	,653				
	WSYST	,672				
Fatalistic attrib.	PLUCK	,862	1,254	8,956	1,537	10,97
	WLUCK	,877				
Cumulative percentage of variance			59,36		59,36	

Each factor loading allows us to interpret the components as follows: the first one relates to wealth and includes the following items: having the right connections, more initial opportunities, and the economic system that enables unfair advantage; this component can be interpreted as an external attribution of wealth. The second component is associated with internal attribution of poverty and includes all the items related to lack of ability or talent, lack of effort by individuals in poverty, and loose morals. The third detected component includes other poverty-related items, such as prejudice and discrimination against certain groups, lack of equal conditions and opportunities, and failure of the economic system, and it is linked to an external attribution of poverty. The fourth component can

be classified as "fatalistic" and pertains to Luck/Bad luck. In conclusion, the last selected component solely pertains to wealth and 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 a priori specifying the number of components to be extracted) allows us to explain a much greater percentage of variance, nearly 60%.

The factor loadings also allow us to draw three primary conclusions. First and foremost, four distinct components have been identified. It becomes evident that internal and external attributions differ between poverty and wealth. In essence, we cannot speak of internalism or externalism transcending the division between poverty and wealth. However, this distinction becomes apparent in the case of what we may term "fatalism", where we encounter high factor loadings (0.862 and 0.877) that enable us to identify a clear pattern of responses common to both poverty and wealth, particularly concerning items related to luck and bad luck.

Finally, the data demonstrate that there is no significant inverse relationship between different causal attributions. Individuals who tend, for example, to choose internal attributions do not necessarily prefer fewer external explanations.

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

Sex: Attribution patterns will be analyzed based on the respondent's gender.

Education degree: In this case, all respondents were asked to specify their education level; those without any educational degree have been excluded. The remaining respondents have been grouped into three categories: "first-level education", "second-level education", and "degree/master degree level".

Media: The question used is: "Which media channel do you normally use to stay informed?". All respondents have been divided into two groups based on the number of media channels they use: one media channel or two or more media channels.

Political orientation: The question used is: "Is there any political party that reflects your opinion?". A recoding process has been implemented by dividing all the indicated political parties into two categories: Right-wing (DX) and Left-wing (SX).

Income: The question used has been addressed to the respondents: "In general, could you please tell us what your family's monthly income is?" (in order to calculate the sum of all family members' incomes: wages, salaries, company professional assets, old-age pensions, other revenues, etc.). The indicated incomes have been divided into four similar groups with comparable 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 five different responses: [1] poor; [2] below the average standard; [3] average standard; [4] above the average standard; [5] rich. Through data analysis, categories 1, 2 ("poor" and "below the average standard"), and 4, 5 ("above the average standard" and "rich") have been grouped to ensure an adequate number of cases.

This comprehensive analysis aims to explore the relationships between attribution patterns and various demographic and socioeconomic factors within the realm of psychology and social sciences.

IVa. Sex and attributions

Table III. Sex and attributions

Component		F (N=920)	M (N=901)	Tot (N=1821)	F
Poverty internal attribution	M	-,043	,044	,000	3,454
	SD	,974	1,025	1,000	
Poverty external attribution	M	,080	-,082	,000	12,105**
	SD	,961	1,032	1,000	
Wealth internal attribution	M	-,027	,028	,000	1,365
	SD	,982	1,018	1,000	
Wealth external attribution	M	-,045	,046	,000	3,750*
	SD	,990	1,009	1,000	
Fatalistic attribution	M	,040	-,040	,000	2,910
	SD	,971	1,028	1,000	

** p<,001
* p<,05

According to the analysis results (as seen in Table III above), the gender of the respondent exerts a notable influence on the external attribution of both poverty and wealth. Specifically, women are significantly more inclined to believe that poverty results from external factors beyond an individual's control (F = 12.105, p < 0.001). Conversely, when it comes to wealth, the roles are reversed, with a preference for external attributions being more common among men (F = 3.750, p < 0.050). This finding partially aligns with research conducted by sociologist Kreidl [31], who found that women tended to favor structural explanations for poverty. It is often suggested that women are more inclined toward external causes in terms of control (referred to as the "General externality" model; see [15]; also see [7], [16], [45], [50]), although it's important to consider that the variable of gender must sometimes be considered alongside other factors such as age, education, and employment. Additionally, the results indicate that male respondents are more likely to attribute economic success to individual factors. This outcome mirrors what is often observed in the literature, where men tend to choose internal attributions in the case of success, including economic success [12]. However, research on the relationship between attributional styles and gender has yielded mixed results, suggesting the existence of various models (for insights on women, see [15]).

IVb. Education level and attributions

Moving on to educational levels (as shown in Table IV), significant findings emerge for both attributions of poverty, internal attributions of wealth, and the "fatalistic" attribution as well.

Table IV. Education level and attributions

Component		1 (N=602)	2 (N=807)	3 (N=338)	Tot (N=1747)	F
Poverty internal attrib.	M	,11	-,02	-,17	,000	8,848**
	SD	1,032	,971	,979	,998	
Poverty external attrib.	M	-,18	,05	,16	-,010	15,196**
	SD	1,079	,972	,883	1,003	
Wealth internal attrib.	M	-,18	,08	,19	,010	19,018**
	SD	1,042	,962	,944	,997	
Wealth external attrib.	M	-,05	,02	,10	,010	2,417
	SD	1,119	,934	,912	,999	
Fatalistic attrib.	M	,13	-,05	-,15	-,010	10,065**
	SD	1,065	,962	,926	,998	

1 = First level education; 2 = Second level education; 3 = Degree/master degree level.
** p<,001
* p<,05

Specifically, the data demonstrate that a higher level of education corresponds to a greater tendency to attribute poverty (both externally and internally) to external factors and a reduced tendency to attribute it internally: F = 15.196, p < 0.000 (external poverty); F = 19.018, p < 0.000 (internal wealth); and F = 8.848, p < 0.000 (internal poverty). Therefore, individuals with higher education levels are more likely to attribute poverty to external factors and wealth to internal factors. Reviewing the literature on this matter, Slagsvold and Sørensen argue that, in general, a higher level of education is associated with a greater sense of control over events [50]. However, it's worth noting that our research outcomes differ from those observed by Lever, who noted that individuals in Mexico with higher education levels tend to view poverty as arising from factors within an individual [36]. In this context, it would be interesting to investigate whether income levels impact an individual's ability to pursue higher education (considering that nearly half of Mexico's population falls below the poverty line [57]).

The analysis also indicates a slight inclination toward external explanations of wealth among those with higher education levels. It's plausible to assume that better qualifications correspond to different career paths and higher incomes. This inference aligns with the later finding related to the income factor: higher income is significantly associated with internal attributions for wealth.

Similarly, we can interpret the results in line with the findings of Feagin in his well-known research [13] and Kluegel & Smith [29]. These studies suggest that individuals from lower social classes are more likely to explain poverty with individualistic rather than structural factors, much like what our data reveal regarding education levels. This seems to strengthen the connection between educational qualifications, employment status, and attributions.

Our data also illustrate that a higher education level corresponds to a lower tendency toward fatalistic attributions (F = 10.065, p < 0.000). In other words, as education level increases, fatalistic explanations decrease, a finding consistent with Kreidl's research [31], which also identified a negative correlation between education levels and fatalistic explanations: as education levels rise, fatalistic explanations decline.

IVc. Media and attributions

In regard to poverty, the data presented in Table V demonstrates that an increase in media usage corresponds to a heightened tendency toward external attributions (F = 4.998, p < 0.026). Conversely, when analyzing the attribution of poverty to Luck/Bad Luck, a fatalistic component analysis indicates that the use of multiple media channels does not significantly influence this attribution (F = 15.452, p < 0.000).

Table V. Number of media used and attributions

Component		1 media used (N=655)	2+ media used (N=1121)	Tot (N=1776)	F
Poverty internal attribution	M	,05	-,02	,010	2,115
	SD	1,061	,965	1,002	
Poverty external attribution	M	-,07	,04	,000	4,998*
	SD	1,046	,968	,998	
Wealth internal attribution	M	-,13	,09	,011	21,082**
	SD	1,048	,953	,995	
Wealth external attribution	M	-,06	,05	,010	5,180*
	SD	1,101	,927	,996	
Fatalistic attribution	M	,12	-,07	,000	15,452**
	SD	1,044	,972	1,003	

** p<,001
* p<,05

A quote from Kluegel & Smith [30, p.26] resonates with these findings: "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, the higher the level of education, the more likely a person is to use various media, increasing their exposure to information about unequal opportunities and various forms of discrimination.". This quote aligns with our assessment of the relationship between the number of media used and attributions. Essentially, it reinforces the idea that, even in this context, similar conclusions can be drawn.

As evidenced by the research conducted by the Czech sociologist and in the context of Lazio, a higher usage of media channels is associated with a greater tendency for individuals to view poverty as a problem stemming from external factors. Furthermore, the data suggests that individuals who typically use multiple media channels are less inclined to make fatalistic attributions about poverty and wealth.

IVd. Political orientation and attributions

Moving on to political orientation as an independent variable, all data significantly indicate its substantial impact on the five examined components (as shown in Table VI).

Table VI. Political orientation and attributions

Component		Left wing (N=264)	Right wing (N=282)	Tot (N=546)	F
Poverty internal attrib.	M	-,17	,26	,05	24,531**
	SD	1,041	,995	1,039	
Poverty external attrib.	M	,21	-,24	-,02	28,409**
	SD	,923	1,062	1,026	
Wealth internal attrib.	M	,07	,14	,11	,874
	SD	,971	1,002	,987	
Wealth external attrib.	M	,15	-,22	-,04	19,639**
	SD	,895	1,057	,999	
Fatalistic attrib.	M	-,20	,03	-,08	6,543*
	SD	1,010	1,007	1,013	

** p<,001
* p<,05

The table highlights that respondents with left-leaning political orientations are more likely to attribute poverty to internal factors (F = 24.531, p < 0.000) or to Fate (F = 6.543, p < 0.011) to a lesser extent than conservative respondents. Conversely, left-leaning respondents are prone to attribute poverty and wealth conditions to external factors (F = 28.409, p < 0.000 and F = 19.639, p < 0.000, respectively).

IVe. Income and attributions

Table VII. Income and attributions

Component		Low income (N=420)	Mid-low income (N=445)	Mid-high income (N=406)	High income (N=410)	F
Poverty internal attrib.	M	-,05	,05	,00	,01	,722
	SD	1,063	,989	,987	,955	
Poverty external attrib.	M	,09	-,03	,01	-,08	2,276
	SD	,998	,991	1,013	1,004	
Wealth internal attrib.	M	-,17	-,11	,05	,26	16,420**
	SD	1,007	,991	,980	,940	
Wealth external attrib.	M	,07	,02	-,03	-,06	1,417
	SD	,988	,986	,992	,996	
Fatalistic attrib.	M	,11	,05	,04	-,22	8,658**
	SD	1,029	1,036	,948	,953	

** p<,001
* p<,05

An examination of the relationship between income and attribution (see Table VII) reveals that individuals with higher incomes are more inclined to provide internal explanations rather than external ones (especially notable concerning wealth. F = 16.420, p < 0.000). Those with higher incomes tend to attribute their success to their personal efforts and are less likely to attribute it to external factors like luck or economic systems that favor them. This interpretation aligns with existing research, as Lachman & Weaver [33], among others, suggest that income, in general, is negatively correlated with fatalistic attributions. Regarding poverty, Morcol reaches a similar conclusion [40]. Furthermore, Lever [36], Fox & Ferri [16], and Gurin & Brim [19] argue that individuals with lower incomes are more inclined toward external attributions. This outcome appears to be consistent with the Learned Helplessness Theory [46], [2], [47], suggesting that individuals in lower income brackets, facing a perception of "failure", tend to

attribute events to factors beyond their control. In this scenario, "lower control beliefs reflect the reality of the lower income living situation" [33, p.764].

The findings concerning wealth seem to support the Complementary Stereotype Theory ([41], [24], [25], [27], [28]), which posits 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, by taking merit away from the individual for their wealth status and attributing it to the advantages of an unfair context, people rationalize wealth inequality by creating a context of equality.

IVf. Perceived economic status and attributions

Table VIII. Perceived economic status and attributions

Component		Below the avg standard (N=531)	Avg standard (N=1148)	Beyond the avg standard (N=109)	Tot (N=1788)	F
Poverty internal attrib.	M	-,14	,04	,29	,00	10,938**
	SD	1,04	0,97	,98	1,00	
Poverty external attrib.	M	,06	-,02	,03	,01	1,360
	SD	1,02	,99	1,00	1,00	
Wealth internal attrib.	M	-,20	,07	,33	,00	20,279**
	SD	1,04	0,96	,97	1,00	
Wealth external attrib.	M	,07	-,03	-,16	-,01	2,851
	SD	1,03	,97	1,05	1,00	
Fatalistic attrib.	M	,06	-,02	-,18	,00	2,811
	SD	1,04	,98	,89	1,00	

** p<,001
* p<,05

The results related to the subjective perception of one's economic status (self-placement on an economic welfare scale) mirror those regarding income. Individuals who perceive themselves as having a low status are less inclined to believe that poverty results from internal factors (see Table VIII; F = 10.938, p < 0.000). It can be hypothesized that those who perceive themselves as poor are inclined to believe that the causes of poverty arise from external factors rather than within themselves. This aligns with the concept of "Defensive External" [23], suggesting that individuals in lower status positions attribute their circumstances to negative personal events or an economic system that failed to provide economic security. This subjective perception of status is also correlated with individuals' views on wealth. According to the data, individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher status position are less likely to attribute problems to external factors than to internal ones (F = 20.279, p < 0.000). In other words, those who place themselves in a higher status position tend to attribute their success to their own abilities or hard work.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This research aims to delve deeply into attitudes towards the causes of poverty and wealth, intricately influenced by a plethora of socioeconomic factors. It particularly examines the relationship between the sense of control and various specific variables: sex, education level, political orientation, media consumption, income, and subjective social status. Our findings reveal a significant correlation in numerous instances, underscoring the complexity of these relationships.

When analyzing the variable of sex, it becomes evident that women tend to adopt an external locus of causality for poverty more so than men. This observation is intriguing as it suggests that women perceive poverty as a condition beyond their control, attributing it to external factors, including fate, rather than to individual characteristics or manageable aspects. This perspective aligns with the broader analysis of traditionally marginalized groups, mirroring findings within the American context by Feagin, who noted that blacks and Jews are more predisposed to attribute poverty to structural factors [13].

In the realm of media influence, the initial hypothesis posited by researchers [30] and [31] is that increased media access should enhance one's understanding of poverty's underlying factors. The data supports this, showing a positive correlation between the use of a wide range of media sources and the external localization of causality. Individuals who are more informed tend to perceive poverty as resulting from external, rather than internal, factors. This leads to an interesting consideration about the type of media, where platforms offering detailed information, such as daily newspapers, as opposed to traditional radio and TV channels, may expand an individual's perspective on the phenomenon.

Kreidl's discussion [31] on the impact of education level further supports this notion; a higher level of education correlates with a broader, more comprehensive understanding of poverty, considering a wider range of influencing factors. Data corroborates this, showing a direct relationship between education level and sense of control: individuals with lower education levels are more likely to view poverty as an internal, personal failure rather than the result of external circumstances.

Political orientation also offers insightful differences, interpreted through the lens of traditional ideological stances. The data suggests that views on poverty can be influenced by one's political beliefs, with a conservative/liberalistic outlook favoring an internal locus of causality, and a progressive/social democratic view leaning towards external factors. The study's Italian context, marked by a strong Christian tradition, provides a unique backdrop for understanding the fatalistic attitudes towards poverty, suggesting the influence of Fate and Divine Providence, especially among respondents with a conservative orientation, who traditionally emphasize the role of external, uncontrollable factors in poverty.

Income and subjective economic status, while closely related, elucidate the concept of 'defensive externality,' where the data indicates a propensity among those with lower economic status (or perceived as such) to favor external explanations for poverty. Conversely, individuals with a higher economic status are more likely to attribute their social standing to personal effort and abilities, rather than to external or contextual factors.

Echoing Schiller's poignant observation (1989), "Which view of poverty we ultimately embrace will have a direct bearing on the public policies we pursue", this research highlights the profound impact of individual perceptions on policy-making. Policies aimed at combating poverty can vary significantly, from enhancing individual capabilities to creating job opportunities, depending on whether poverty is attributed to personal deficiencies or systemic failures. Moreover, the effectiveness of these policies is greatly enhanced when they are the result of collaborative debate and participation, fostering a sense of involvement and empowerment among stakeholders.

Finally, the study underscores the efficacy of interventions that are not pre-planned but emerge from collective discussions and debates, highlighting the importance of participatory processes in fostering involvement and empowerment. This two-tiered approach to understanding and addressing poverty and wealth underscores the complex interplay of socio-economic factors and the critical role of informed, inclusive policymaking.

In conclusion, this study not only sheds light on the multifaceted perceptions of poverty and wealth but also emphasizes the critical role of these perceptions in shaping effective and inclusive public policies. Through a detailed examination of the interplay between individual variables and societal attitudes, it offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of socioeconomic status and the pivotal influence of informed, participatory approaches in addressing poverty.

REFERENCES

[1] Abercrombie, N., Turner, B. S. (1978). The Dominant Ideology Thesis. *The British Journal of Sociology*. 29 (2), 149-170. https://doi.org/10.2307/589886

[2] Abramson, L. Y., Seligman, M. E., & Teasdale, J. D. (1978). Learned helplessness in humans: critique and reformulation. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, *87*(1), 49. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.87.1.49

[3] Alcock, P. (2004). The influence of dynamic perspectives on poverty analysis and anti-poverty policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, *33*(3), 395-416. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279404007731

[4] Alston, J. P., & Dean, K. I. (1972). Socioeconomic factors associated with attitudes toward welfare recipients and the causes of poverty. *Social Service Review*, *46*(1), 13-23.

[5] Antel, J. (1988). Mother's welfare dependency effects on daughter's early fertility and fertility out of wedlock. *University of Houston, working paper*.

[6] Antel, J. J. (1992). The intergenerational transfer of welfare dependency: Some statistical evidence. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 467-473.

[7] Bar-Tal, D. (1975). Individual differences and attributional analysis of achievement related behaviour, Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center - University of Pittsburgh.

[8] Blank, R. M. (2003). Selecting among anti-

poverty policies: can an economist be both critical and caring?. *Review of social economy*, *61*(4), 447-469. https://doi.org/10.1080/0034676032000160949

[9] Blass, T. (1996). The Milgram obedience experiment: Support for a cognitive view of defensive attribution. *The Journal of social psychology*, *136*(3), 407-410. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1996.9714020

[10] Bradshaw, T. K. (2007). Theories of poverty and anti-poverty programs in community development. *Community Development*, *38*(1), 7-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330709490182

[11] Bruch, S., Ferree, M. and Soss, J. (2009). From policy to polity: democracy, paternalism, and the incorporation of disadvantaged citizens. University of Wisconsin, Madison.

[12] Parsons, J. E., Adler, T., & Meece, J. L. (1984). Sex differences in achievement: A test of alternate theories. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *46*(1), 26. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.46.1.26

[13] Feagin, J. R. (1972). Poverty: We still believe that God helps those who help themselves. *Psychology today*, *6*(6), 101-110.

[14] Feagin, J. (1975). Subordinating the poor, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.

[15] Fiorentine, R. (1988). Sex differences in success expectancies and causal attributions: Is this why fewer women become physicians?. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 236-249. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786922

[16] Fox, M. F., & Ferri, V. C. (1992). Women, men, and their attributions for success in academe. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 257-271. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786795

[17] Griffin, W. E., & Oheneba-Sakyi, Y. (1993). Sociodemographic and political correlates of university students' causal attributions for poverty. *Psychological Reports*, *73*(3_part_1), 795-800. https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941930733pt112

[18] Gwartney, J., & MeCaleb, T. S. (1985). Have Antipoverty Programs Increased Poverty?. *Cato Journal*, *5*(1), 1-16.

[19] Gurin, P., & Brim, O. G. (1984). Change in self in adulthood-the example of sense of control. *Life-span development and behavior*, *6*, 281-334.

[20] Gurin, G., & Gurin, P. (1970). Expectancy theory in the study of poverty. *Journal of Social Issues, 26*(2), 83–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1970.tb01717.x

[21] Gurin, P., Gurin, G., & Morrison, B. M. (1978). Personal and ideological aspects of internal and external control. *Social Psychology*, 275-296. https://doi.org/10.2307/3033581

[22] Hilgartner, S., & Bosk, C. L. (1988). The rise and fall of social problems: A public arenas model. *American journal of Sociology*, *94*(1), 53-78. https://doi.org/10.1086/228951

[23] Hochreich, D. J. (1975). Defensive externality and blame projection following failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *32*(3), 540. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0077102

[24] Jost, J. T., & Kay, A. C. (2005). Exposure to benevolent sexism and complementary gender stereotypes: consequences for specific and diffuse forms of system justification. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *88*(3), 498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.3.498

[25] Jost, J. T., Kivetz, Y., Rubini, M., Guermandi, G., & Mosso, C. (2005). System-justifying functions of complementary regional and ethnic stereotypes: Cross-national evidence. *Social justice research*, *18*, 305-333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-005-6827-z

[26] Kay, A. C., Czapliński, S., & Jost, J. T. (2009). Left–right ideological differences in system justification following exposure to complementary versus noncomplementary stereotype exemplars. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *39*(2), 290-298. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.500

[27] Kay, A. C., & Jost, J. T. (2003). Complementary justice: effects of" poor but happy" and" poor but honest" stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *85*(5), 823. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.823

[28] Kay, A. C., Jost, J. T., & Young, S. (2005). Victim derogation and victim enhancement as alternate routes to system justification. *Psychological Science*, *16*(3), 240-246. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2005.008

[29] Kluegel, J. R., & Smith, E. R. (1981). Beliefs about stratification. *Annual review of Sociology*, *7*(1), 29-56.

[30] Kluegel, J. R. and Smith, E. R. (1986). Beliefs about inequality: Americans' views of what is and what ought to be, Aldine de Gruyter, New York.

[31] Kreidl, M. (2000). Perceptions of poverty and wealth in western and post-communist countries. *Social Justice Research*, *13*, 151-176. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007597807110

[32] Lachman, M. E. (1968). Personal efficacy in middle and old age: Differential and normative patterns of change. *Life-course dynamics: Trajectories and transitions*, *1980*, 188-213.

[33] Lachman, M. E., & Weaver, S. L. (1998). The sense of control as a moderator of social class differences in health and well-being. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *74*(3), 763. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.763

[34] Lerner, M.J. (1980). The belief in a just world. New York: Plenum.

[35] Levenson, H. (1981). Differentiating among internality, powerful others, and chance. *Research with the locus of control construct*, *1*, 15-63.

[36] Lever, J. P., & Trejo, L. M. V. (2004). Pobreza y locus de control. *Revista Interamericana de Psicología/Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, *38*(2), 225-240.

[37] Malahy, L. W., Rubinlicht, M. A., & Kaiser, C. R. (2009). Justifying inequality: A cross-temporal investigation of US income disparities and just-world beliefs from 1973 to 2006. *Social Justice Research*, *22*, 369-383. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-009-0103-6

[38] McLanahan, S. S. (1988). Family structure and dependency: Early transitions to female household headship. *Demography*, *25*(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.2307/2061474

[39] Moffitt, R. (1992). Incentive effects of the US welfare system: A review. *Journal of economic literature*, *30*(1), 1-61.

[40] Morçöl, G. (1997). Lay explanations for poverty in Turkey and their determinants. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *137*(6), 728-738. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224549709595494

[41] Oldmeadow, J., & Fiske, S. T. (2007). System-justifying ideologies moderate status-competence stereotypes: Roles for belief in a just world and social dominance orientation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *37*(6), 1135-1148. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.428

[42] Pandey, J., Sinha, Y., Prakash, A., & Tripathi, R. C. (1982). Right–Left political ideologies and attribution of the causes of poverty. *European journal of social psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420120310

[43] Rainwater, L. (1987). Class, culture, poverty and Welfare, Brandeis University, Waltham.

[44] Rank, M. R., Yoon, H. S., & Hirschl, T. A. (2003). American poverty as a structural failing: Evidence and arguments. *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare*, *30*, 3.

[45] Ross, C. E., & Mirowsky, J. (2002). Age and the gender gap in the sense of personal control. *Social psychology quarterly*, 125-145. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090097

[46] Seligman, M. E., Maier, S. F., & Geer, J. (1979). Alleviation of learned helplessness in the dog. In *Origins of Madness* (pp. 401-409). Pergamon. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-023725-1.50049-5

[47] Sergent, J., & Lambert, W. E. (1979). " Learned helplessness" or" learned incompetence"?. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, *11*(4), 257. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0081596

[48] Sher, J. P. (1977). School Based Community Development Corporations: A new Strategy for Education and Development in Rural America in JP Sher (ed), Education in Rural America (pp. 291-346). *Boulder: West view*.

[49] Skitka, L. J., Mullen, E., Griffin, T., Hutchinson, S., & Chamberlin, B. (2002). Dispositions, scripts, or motivated correction? Understanding ideological differences in explanations for social problems. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *83*(2), 470.

[50] Slagsvold, B., & Sørensen, A. (2008). Age, education, and the gender gap in the sense of control. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *67*(1), 25-42.

[51] Smith, E. R. and Kluegel, J. R. (1979). Causal attribution outside the laboratory: explaining poverty, American Sociological Association.

[52] Stephenson, S. (2000). Public beliefs in the causes of wealth and poverty and legitimization of inequalities in Russia and Estonia. *Social Justice Research*, *13*, 83-100. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007541722131

[53] Solon, G., Corcoran, M., Gordon, R., & Laren, D. (1988). Sibling and intergenerational correlations in welfare program participation. *The Journal of Human Resources*, *23*(3), 388-396. https://doi.org/10.2307/145836

[54] Walster, E. (1966). Assignment of responsibility for an accident. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* *3*(1), 73–79. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022733

[55] Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review,* *92*(4), 548–573. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.92.4.548

[56] Wilson, G. (1996). Toward a revised framework for examining beliefs about the causes of poverty. *Sociological Quarterly*, *37*(3), 413-428. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1996.tb00746.x

[57] World Bank (2010). Mexico - Mexico country brief. Retrieved from: http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/MEXICOEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20185184~menuPK:338403~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:338397,00.html. [Access on 10/03/2010]

[58] Zucker, G. S., & Weiner, B. (1993). Conservatism and perceptions of poverty: An attributional analysis 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *23*(12), 925-943. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1993.tb01014.x