

Original Research Paper

Subjective Perception and Causal Attributions for Poverty in Italy

Maurizio Norcia and Antonella Rissotto

Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies-National Research Council

Article history

Received: 11-03-2015

Revised: 08-05-2015

Accepted: 08-05-2015

Corresponding Author:

Maurizio Norcia, Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies-National Research Council. Via San Martino della battaglia, Rome, Italy Tel: +39 06 44595237 Fax: +39 06 44595243 E-mail: maurizio.norcia@istc.cnr.it

Abstract: This study investigates the potential link between individuals' subjective perceptions of their socioeconomic status and their beliefs regarding the causes of poverty. Specifically, it explores whether people's causal attributions for poverty are influenced by their concerns about the cost of living, their assessments of the economic situation over the past year, and their expectations for the coming year. Our objective is to deepen the understanding of how individuals perceive the root causes of poverty. The analysis is based on data from a 2012 survey conducted in Italy, involving approximately 1,000 participants. Through Principal Component Analysis, we identified three primary components, and subsequent analyses revealed significant correlations between factors such as personal socioeconomic status perception and concerns about the cost of living. These findings aim to shed light on the complex interplay between subjective economic assessments and attitudes towards poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, Subjective Poverty, Causal Attributions for Poverty, Social Perception

Introduction

Poverty remains a central issue in contemporary public discourse. The World Bank envisions a world without poverty (WB, 2014) and continues to develop policies to combat it, while the European Union designated 2010 as the “European year for combating Poverty and Social exclusion” (EU, 2011) and identified poverty eradication as a top priority for its 2020 strategy (EC, 2014). Despite significant efforts from political institutions in the early 21st century, the fundamental question persists: What exactly is poverty, and how can it be adequately defined and measured?

Traditional definitions of poverty typically focus on insufficient income or assets, emphasizing material deprivation (Guillaumont and Wagner, 2014; Turner and Lehning, 2007; Verger and Lollivier, 1999). Poverty is often quantified through monetary metrics, assessing well-being based on income or consumption levels (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008; Green and Hulme, 2005; Woolard and Leibbrandt, 1999; Blaylock and Smallwood, 1986).

However, recent decades have seen the emergence of more sophisticated, multidimensional views of

poverty (Ravallion, 2011; Sen, 1992; 1999; Sen and Hawthorn, 1988), which expand our understanding of this social and economic issue to encompass broader aspects such as vulnerability (Gooby, 2004; Castel, 2013; Duclos et al., 2006).

Exploring the psychological dimension of poverty offers a particularly intriguing perspective (Misra and Tripathi, 2004; Singh and Pandey, 1990), one that holds vast potential for application (Mohanty and Girishwar, 2000). Unlike conventional poverty measurements, the subjective approach considers an individual's perception of their socio-economic status, positioning the individual as the primary expert on their own well-being (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008; Garner and Short, 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2004).

Subjective measures provide a valuable contribution by offering a more nuanced view of poverty and capturing the complexity of individual well-being (Rojas, 2008). They allow for the comparison of subjective perceptions with objective well-being indicators derived from income or consumption data (Ravallion, 2008; 2010).

Despite their advantages, subjective measures come with limitations. The inherent subjectivity poses

challenges for interpreting and comparing data across different contexts. Variability in perceptions of living conditions, influenced by emotional factors, personal aspirations, and expectations (Crettaz and Suter, 2013), as well as potential inconsistencies in responses over time (Kristensen and Westergaard-Nielsen, 2007; Krueger and Schkade, 2008), complicate the analysis. Moreover, individuals may be reluctant to acknowledge their socio-economic status (Santarelli, 2013), and cultural influences (Santarelli, 2013) may perpetuate discrimination and exclusion based on gender or ethnicity.

Poverty and attributions in Italy: aims and method

This paper explores the relationship between causal attributions for poverty and individuals' experiences with various socioeconomic aspects of their lives, including concern for the cost of living, the capability to manage an unexpected expense of 600€, perceived socioeconomic status, and assessments of household economic trends over the past and upcoming 12 months. Drawing inspiration from previous research that examined the connections between personal characteristics and beliefs about impoverishment (Norcia and Rissotto, 2015; Norcia

et al., 2010; 2012a; 2012b), this study analyzes data collected in 2012 from nearly 1,000 participants in Lazio, Italy (n = 992. Refer to Table 1).

The core objective of this research is to understand the attributes of individuals harboring distinct perspectives on impoverishment. Participants were posed with the question: "In your opinion, why does a common man become poor?" The proposed attributions for poverty included personal characteristics, behaviors, bad luck, natural disasters, actions of others, illness/accidents, societal factors, and failures of institutions/economic crises. Respondents then rated their agreement with each attribution using a 5-point Likert scale.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to identify grouping factors, revealing three factors that explained a significant variance (over 60%. See Tables 2 & 3). The primary factor was identified as internal attribution (Cronbach's $\alpha = .57$), with the subsequent factors relating to external attributions. Specifically, external factors were divided into "Powerful Others" (such as other people, institutions, and the economic system, Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$) and "Chance" (factors beyond individual control, Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$).

Table 1. The sample

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

Table 2. Varimax-rotated components

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

Table 3. Components, eigenvalues and explained variance

Components	Initial eigenvalues		Rotation sums of squared loadings	
	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)
Powerful others	2,284	35,3	1,703	21,290
Chance	1,051	13,14	1,638	20,475
Internal	,977	12,22	1,511	18,888
Cumulative percentage of variance		60,65		60,65

Interestingly, the factor loadings indicated no significant inverse relationship between different causal attributions; for example, individuals predisposed to internal attributions did not necessarily eschew external

explanations. Subsequent analyses examined the correlations between these causal attributions and various independent variables, including concern for the cost of living, the perceived ability to manage an unexpected expenditure of 600€, perceived socioeconomic status, and

evaluations of economic trends over the past year and predictions for the coming year.

Respondents' concern for the cost of living was categorized into four levels of worry, ranging from unconcerned to very concerned. Similarly, individuals' confidence in handling an unforeseen expense of 600€ was assessed, distinguishing between those who felt capable, those who felt incapable, and those uncertain of their financial resilience.

Perceived socioeconomic status was divided between individuals who viewed their status as low/below average and those who considered it above average/high. Lastly, evaluations of economic conditions over the previous 12 months and forecasts for the following 12 months were classified into negative, positive, and uncertain responses.

This study aims to deepen the understanding of how individuals perceive the causes of poverty, integrating both subjective experiences and objective measures to provide a comprehensive view of socioeconomic well-being and its implications for public policy and social science research.

Results

Concern for the cost of living

Our findings reveal a significant relationship between individuals' concerns about the cost of living and their

causal attributions for poverty. Specifically, individuals who are not worried about the cost of living are more likely to attribute impoverishment to internal factors ($p \leq .047$) rather than to external causes, such as the influence of powerful others or chance. Conversely, as concern for the cost of living escalates, there is a noticeable increase in the tendency to explain poverty through external factors ($.000 \leq p \leq .081$), with a corresponding decrease in the attribution to internal factors. This pattern suggests that personal economic anxiety influences perceptions of poverty's causes, shifting the focus from personal responsibility to external circumstances (refer to Table 4 for detailed statistics).

Could you afford an unexpected expense?

Our data indicate a clear trend: individuals who perceive themselves as unable to manage an unexpected expense are more inclined to attribute poverty to external factors ($p \leq .000$). Conversely, this same group tends to less frequently select internal factors as the cause of poverty, though these findings do not reach statistical significance (see Table 5). This pattern suggests that personal financial insecurity may influence perceptions of poverty's origins, shifting the emphasis towards circumstances beyond individual control.

Table 4. Causal attributions for poverty * Concern for the cost of living

						ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Not at all	21	,2857	,46291	,10102	between	2,793	3	,931	2,668	,047
	A little	103	-,0583	,53916	,05312	within	323,100	926	,349		
	Rather	469	,0128	,60256	,02782						
	Very worried	337	-,0475	,59572	,03245						
	Total	930	-,0108	,59228	,01942	Total	325,892	929			
Powerful others	Not at all	21	-,0952	,53896	,11761	between	10,953	3	3,651	11,672	,000
	A little	103	-,1553	,60646	,05976	within	289,009	926	,313		
	Rather	465	-,0710	,53871	,02498						
	Very worried	339	,1327	,57313	,03113						
	Total	928	-,0065	,56884	,01867	Total	299,961	929			
Chance	Not at all	21	-,1429	,72703	,15865	between	2,176	3	2,362	2,254	,081
	A little	103	-,0485	,45111	,04445	within	296,771	926	,321		
	Rather	469	-,0149	,58268	,02691						
	Very worried	333	,0661	,56650	,03104						
	Total	926	,0076	,56849	,01868	Total	298,947	929			

Table 5. Causal attributions for poverty * unexpected expense of 600€

						ANOVA					
						Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Yes	588	-,0051	,58805	,02425	between	,272	2	,136	,386	,680
	No	292	-,0103	,60629	,03548	within	325,621	925	,352		
	I don't know	48	-,0833	,57735	,08333						
	Total	928	-,0108	,59292	,01946	Total	325,892	927			
Powerful others	Yes	586	-,0631	,56487	,02333	between	5,125	2	2,562	8,022	,000
	No	294	,0918	,56193	,03277	within	294,836	923	,319		

	I don't know	46	,0870	,58977	,08696						
	Total	926	-,0065	,56946	,01871	Total	299,961	925			
Chance	Yes	584	-,0103	,55246	,02286	between	,549	2	,275	,853	,426
	No	294	,0238	,58079	,03387	within	296,424	921	,322		
	I don't know	46	,0870	,66084	,09744						
	Total	924	,0054	,56723	,01866	Total	296,973	923			

Table 6. Causal attributions for poverty * perceived socio-economic status

		ANOVA									
		N	M	SD	SEM	Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Low/below the average	674	-,0445	,59301	,02284	between	2,802	1	2,802	8,032	,005
	Over the average/high	254	,0787	,58447	,03667	within	323,090	926	,349		
	Total	928	-,0108	,59292	,01946	Total	325,892	927			
Powerful others	Low/below the average	672	,0253	,57851	,02232	between	2,474	1	2,474	7,684	,006
	Over the average/high	254	-,0906	,53685	,03369	within	297,487	924	,322		
	Total	926	-,0065	,56946	,01871	Total	299,961	925			
Chance	Low/below the average	670	,0522	,58015	,02241	between	5,345	1	5,345	16,897	,000
	Over the average/high	254	-,1181	,51252	,03216	within	291,628	922	,316		
	Total	924	,0054	,56723	,01866	Total	296,973	923	2,802		

Table 7. Causal attributions for poverty * evaluation of the last 12 months

		ANOVA									
		N	M	SD	SEM	Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Improved	41	,0488	,58954	,09207	between	,447	3	,149	,424	,736
	Stable	438	-,0320	,58500	,02795	within	325,44	926	,351		
	Worsened	412	,0049	,59599	,02936						
	I don't know	39	0,0000	,64889	,10390						
	Total	930	-,0108	,59228	,01942	Total	325,89	929			
Powerful others	Improved	41	-,1951	,60081	,09383	between	4,013	3	1,338	4,18	,006
	Stable	436	-,0505	,55686	,02667	within	295,95	924	,320		
	Worsened	412	,0485	,57318	,02824						
	I don't know	39	,1026	,55226	,08843						
	Total	928	-,0065	,56884	,01867	Total	299,96	927			
Chance	Improved	41	,1463	,47754	,07458	between	6,947	3	2,316	7,31	,000
	Stable	436	,0115	,56108	,02687	within	292,00	922	,317		
	Worsened	410	,0268	,57814	,02855						
	I don't know	39	-,3846	,49286	,07892						
	Total	926	,0076	,56849	,01868	Total	298,95	925			

Table 8. Causal attributions for poverty * forecast of the next 12 months

		ANOVA									
		N	M	SD	SEM	Variance	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	Sign.
Internal	Will improve	171	,1404	,63539	,04859	between	5,217	3	1,739	5,043	,002
	Will remain stable	320	-,0313	,54193	,03029	within	318,63	924	,345		
	Will worsen	218	-,041	,62449	,04230						
	I don't know	219	-,077	,57342	,03875						
	Total	928	-,013	,59106	,01940	Total	323,84	927			
Powerful others	Will improve	171	-,0058	,51446	,03934	between	3,293	3	1,098	3,412	,017
	Will remain stable	318	-,0566	,58634	,03288	within	296,67	922	,322		
	Will worsen	218	-,037	,57484	,03893						
	I don't know	219	,0959	,57064	,03856						
	Total	926	-,006	,56946	,01871	Total	299,96	925			
Chance	Will improve	171	,0234	,60345	,04615	between	,225	3	,075	,231	,875
	Will remain stable	320	-,0125	,57631	,03222	within	298,722	920	,325		
	Will worsen	218	,0092	,55142	,03735						
	I don't know	215	,0233	,55063	,03755						
	Total	924	,0076	,56911	,01872	Total	298,95	923			

Perceived socio-economic status

The analysis of how individuals perceive their socio-economic status reveals trends akin to those of actual

income levels (Norcia, 2015; 2011; 2010). Specifically, as participants' perceived socio-economic status rises, there is a notable increase in attributing poverty to internal factors ($p \leq .005$), accompanied by a decrease in external attributions ($p \leq .006$ and $p \leq .000$, respectively). Refer to Table 6 for detailed statistics). These findings suggest that perceptions of personal socio-economic standing significantly influence the propensity to view poverty as either a result of personal circumstances or broader systemic factors.

Evaluation of the last 12 months

An analysis of Table 7 reveals notable trends in how individuals perceive the causes of impoverishment based on their assessment of their socio-economic situation over the last year. Specifically, those who view their socio-economic status as stable or having deteriorated are more inclined to attribute poverty to the influence of 'powerful others' ($p \leq .006$). Conversely, respondents who believe their situation has improved are more likely to attribute poverty to 'chance'. This distinction highlights the impact of personal economic experiences on the perception of poverty's causation.

How do you expect to be your socio-economic situation in the next year?

Our data reveal trends that, while subtler, align with previous findings regarding evaluations of the past 12 months. Specifically, individuals with a positive forecast for the upcoming year are more likely to attribute poverty to internal factors ($p \leq .002$) compared to their counterparts. Conversely, those anticipating their socioeconomic conditions to either remain the same or deteriorate are less inclined towards individualistic explanations for poverty. The interpretation of external attributions presents complexities: the 'Powerful Others' category is infrequently selected by participants, whereas attributions to 'Chance' are notably more common among respondents with both optimistic and pessimistic outlooks (refer to Table 8 for detailed data).

Discussion

This study investigates the relationship between causal attributions for poverty and individuals' perceptions of their socioeconomic status, aiming to illuminate how these perceptions influence policy and welfare program development. As Bradshaw (2007) notes, "community anti-poverty programs are designed, selected and implemented in response to different theories about the causes of poverty that "justify" (p. 8). Similarly, Blank (2003) highlights that differing understandings of poverty's root causes lead to distinct policy choices.

The research identifies three primary explanations for poverty as perceived by participants:

Individualistic beliefs: The notion that one's economic status is largely determined by personal values, choices, and actions, suggesting that falling into or escaping poverty is within an individual's control.

Immutable factors: Attributions that include elements perceived as unchangeable, such as illness, fate, bad luck, or divine will.

Modifiable but challenging factors: Components like societal structures, economic conditions, or the influence of others, which are seen as difficult to alter.

An overarching theme from the study indicates that individuals with a pessimistic view of their surroundings tend to externalize the causes of their socioeconomic status, attributing it to factors like other people's actions or bad luck. This tendency aligns with findings that low-income individuals more frequently opt for external attributions (Norcia and Rissotto, 2012a, 2015; Norcia et al., 2010; 2012b; Lever and Trejo, 2004; Hayati and Karami, 2005; Morcol, 1997). Considering the intuitive link between actual income and its perceived "neighborhood," a pattern of attributing life events to external forces emerges. Thus, individuals with a negative evaluation of their past or future, or those perceiving their socioeconomic status as low, may engage in a dynamic aimed at mitigating the perception of failure, whether current or anticipated (i.e., related to forecasts, as described in the concept of defensive externality by Hochreich, 1975).

Conversely, individuals with more positive subjective perceptions less frequently identify poverty as a condition stemming from external circumstances. Extending this logic, we might introduce the concept of "proud internality," where individuals attributing their higher status to personal merit (e.g., capability or hard work) reflect a direct association between self-perceived success and internal attributions.

This exploration reveals the intricate link between how individuals perceive their socioeconomic environment and the attributions they make regarding poverty. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that resonate with the lived experiences and beliefs of those they aim to assist.

Funding information

This study was under Research Grant supported by Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies at Italian National Research Council.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Author's Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this work.

Ethics

This article is original and contains unpublished material. The corresponding author confirms that all of the other authors have read and approved the manuscript and no ethical issues involved.

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