

Original Research Paper

# Subjective Perception and Causal Attributions for Poverty in Italy

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**Abstract:** Does a relation between subjective perception of one's own socioeconomic status and what one believes about impoverishment exist? Are people's causal attributions for poverty related to their concern for cost of living, their evaluation of economic situation in the last 12 months or prevision for next 12 months? This paper aims at studying these relations in order to better understand people's viewpoint on what originates poverty. The study considers data collected into a research carried out in 2012, in Italy and that has involved around 1000 participants. A Principal Component Analysis has allowed detecting three main components and the following analyses have showed significant relations between attributions and factors like, e.g., the perception of the personal socioeconomic status and concern for cost of living.

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

## Introduction

Poverty is one of the most present problems in current public debate: while the World Bank dreams *a world free of Poverty* (WB, 2014) and keeps on producing policies and intervention to fight it, EU has proclaimed 2010 "European year for combating Poverty and Social exclusion" (EU, 2011) and has stated the fight to Poverty as one of the seven priorities of EU 2020 (EC, 2014).

Although political institutions, in the early 15 years of the third millennium, seem to mobilize against poverty, the basic question about this phenomenon is still unanswered: What is Poverty? Does anyone know an adequate definition of Poverty and the most suitable ways of measuring it?

The most usual definitions of poverty, indeed, are based primarily on poor income or assets that do not ensure physical fitness from this point of view (Guillaumont and Wagner, 2014; Turner and Lehning, 2007; Verger and Lollivier, 1999), Poverty is measured primarily through monetary well-being indicators based on income or consumptions (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008; Green and Hulme, 2005; Woolard and Leibbrandt, 1999, Blaylock and Smallwood, 1986).

In the last decades, more complex and multidimensional visions of this economic and social

phenomenon have emerged (Ravallion, 2011; Sen, 1992; 1999; Sen and Hawthorn, 1988). These approaches have bettered the understanding of Poverty, expanding this concept in many directions (for *vulnerability* see Gooby, 2004; Castel, 2013; Duclos *et al.*, 2006).

Studying psychological dimension of Poverty is one of the most stimulating perspective on this topic (Misra and Tripathi, 2004; Singh and Pandey, 1990) that still owns an "enormous application potential" (Mohanty and Girishwar, 2000). Differently from 'traditional' measures of poverty, the subjective approach refers to the individual's perception of his socio-economic status (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008; Garner and Short, 2005; Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004), acknowledging him as the main expert about his well-being.

The contribution given by subjective measures lies, mainly, in the opportunities of enriching our view of the phenomenon and of capturing the complexity of a person's well-being (Rojas, 2008). Furthermore, considering subjective perception of individual's status allows comparing the subjective data with objective measures of well-being derived from the data on income or consumption (Ravallion, 2008; 2010).

Despite the opportunities introduced by subjective measures, it is necessary to consider also its limitations. Firstly, the subjectivity makes difficult the interpretation and comparison of outcomes between

different contexts. The differences in the perception of living conditions, the mix of emotional aspects, personal aspirations and expectations (Crettaz and Suter, 2013), represent some problematic issues that this approach faces. Furthermore, a great degree of variability in answers given by the same respondent if asked in different times often occurs (Kristensen and Westergaard-Nielsen, 2007; Krueger and Schkade, 2008) or individuals may not want to acknowledge their socio-economic status (Santarelli, 2013). Lastly, subjectivity and cultural influence (Santarelli, 2013) may reproduce patterns of discrimination and exclusion (for example, due to sex or ethnicity).

*Poverty and Attributions in Italy: Aims and Method*

This paper discusses the relation between causal attribution for poverty and how people experience some socioeconomic aspects of their life: concern for cost of living, ability to face with an unexpected expenditure of 600€, perceived socioeconomic status, evaluation of household's economic trend for the last 12 months and forecast for the later 12 months.

This work follows the lead of other studies that similarly have focused on relation among people's characteristics and their beliefs about impoverishment (Norcia and Rissotto, 2015; Norcia *et al.*, 2010; 2012a; 2012b). Data analysed in this study were collected in 2012, in Italy (Lazio) and data collection has involved almost 1000 subjects (n = 992. See Table 1).

This study aims at analysing some characteristics of people having different ideas about impoverishment. "In your opinion, why a *common man* gets poor?": This was the question addressed to respondents. On the other hand, the suggested attributions for poverty were: his characteristics; his behaviours; bad luck; natural disasters; other people's actions; illness/accidents; society; failures of the institutions/economic crisis. In the following step, respondents were asked to indicate their concordance rate per item, according to a 5-point Likert scale.

In order to detect possible grouping factors, a PCA has been carried out. The analysis has allowed for identifying three factors explaining an adequate amount of variance (more than 60%. See Table 2 and 3).

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

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

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

The analyses shown below have tested the relationship between causal attributions grouped by the PCA and a series of independent variables: Concern for cost of living, perceived ability to face with an unexpected expenditure of 600€, perceived socioeconomic status, evaluation of household's economic trend for the last 12 months and forecast for the later 12 months.

As for concern for cost of living, respondents were grouped into four categories, depending on their level of worry: People not worried at all, people worried little, people rather worried and, in the last category, people very concerned for cost of living.

Regarding the question about perceived ability to face an unforeseen expenditure of 600 €, on the other hand, people were distinguished among who considers he can afford an expenditure like this, who thinks he can't and, lastly, who has no clear idea.

As for perceived socioeconomic status, respondents were distinguished between who perceives his status as *low/below the average* and *over the average/high*.

Finally, both for evaluation of last 12 months and for forecast for the next 12 ones, three categories of

responses were made: Negative evaluations/forecasts, positive evaluations/forecasts and the "I don't know" response option.

## Results

### Concern for the Cost of Living

Data show that, when thinking of impoverishment, people not worried for cost of living tend generally to choose more internal ( $p = ,047$ ) than external (powerful others/chance) explanations. On the other hand as the worry for cost of living increases, also external explanations for poverty increase ( $,000 < p < ,081$ ), whereas internal ones decrease (see Table 4).

### Could you Afford an Unexpected Expense?

Data seem to show that people thinking not to be able to afford an unexpected expense more frequently believe that poverty is originated from external factors ( $p = ,000$ ). On the other hand, the same group of individuals seem to choose less frequently internal explanations, although the outcomes are not significant (see Table 5).

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

		N	M	SD	SEM	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€

		N	M	SD	SEM	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*

Data about perception of socio-economic status seem to highlight similar trends as real income (Norcia, 2015; 2011; 2010): as the subject's perceived status increases, significantly increases internal attribution for poverty ( $p = ,005$ ) and decrease external attributions ( $p = ,006$ ;  $p = ,000$ . See Table 6).

*Evaluation of the Last 12 Months*

Examining Table 7, some significant relations seem to emerge: people who evaluate their socioeconomic situation as stable or worsened in the last year, choose more frequently *powerful others* factor to explain impoverishment ( $p = ,006$ ). On the other hand, respondents who perceive their situation

as improved more frequently prefer *chance* explanation.

### *How do you expect to be your Socio-Economic Situation in the Next Year?*

Data show similar trends (although less pronounced) to what has emerged about evaluation of last 12 months: people who report a better outlook for the following 12 months choose more frequently internal attributions for poverty than others ( $p = .002$ ). On the other hand, who expects that his socioeconomic conditions will remain stable or will even worse, chooses *individualistic* attributions less frequently. Outcomes about *external* attributions seem more difficult to be interpreted: *Powerful others* category is chosen little by all respondents, whereas *chance* attribution results to be more chosen both by people having positive and negative outlooks (see Table 8).

## Discussion

In this study, causal attributions for Poverty have been correlated with some nodal aspects of people's perception of their own socioeconomic status.

Enhancing our understanding of causal attributions for Poverty, indeed, has a clear impact on policies and welfare programs. As Bradshaw (2007), 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" (Blank, 2003).

The first point emerging from this study is that respondents refer clearly to three main explanations for poverty. Individualistic beliefs: Fall into poverty or escaping from it is in one's power, it depends most on individual's values, choices and behaviours. On the contrary, when people believes that their socioeconomic condition originates from factors beyond their means, generally refer to two distinct groups of components: Something that you cannot change (illness, Fate, bad luck, God's will...) or that is modifiable with difficulty (Society, Economy, actions from other persons).

Going on examining results of this study, a common thread seems to emerge. People having a negative perception (justified or not) of reality around them tend to "move" the origin of one's socioeconomic situation far from the individual (other people's influence, bad luck and so on). Besides, these results are similar to what emerge crossing causal attributions with income: Low-income people choose external attributions more frequently than others (Norcia and Rissotto, 2012a, 2015; Norcia *et al.*, 2010; 2012b; Lever and Trejo, 2004; Hayati and Karami, 2005; Morcol, 1997). Bearing in mind the intuitive relation between real income and its perceptive "neighbourhood" - all the perceived socioeconomic aspects of life - a tendency to attribute events to factors beyond one's own forces seems to emerge. Hence, people who evaluate negatively the past

or the following 12 months, people who perceive their socioeconomic status as low and so on, seem to activate a dynamic that could be aimed at avoiding the perception of 'failure', current or expected (i.e., if related to forecasts. See *defensive externality* by Hochreich, 1975).

On the contrary, who in general has opposite subjective perceptions less often identifies Poverty as a condition arising from outside individuals. Following the path of the previous reasoning, we could define as *proud internality* when people who self-place on a higher status position take credit for it: "I feel to be a well-off person because I am highly capable/I worked hard".

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## 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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