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Causes of Poverty – What Do the Poor Think? Poverty Attribution and Its Behavioural Effects

Silvia COJANU[1]*, Cristina STROE[2]

Abstract

The manner in which we conceptualize any aspect of reality impacts on the way we address it. Thus, causal attribution of any problem will determine the solutions we choose for it. In this paper we focus our research on exploring how people think about poverty and its causes in Romania. We want to identify potential differences in the causal attributions of poverty, considering both society as a whole and the view of the group of persons that are, in fact, confronted to this phenomenon. Thus, in our study, we analyse comparatively both the national perspective and the specific perspective of the vulnerable group of the beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income (Law no. 416 of 2001 regarding the guaranteed minimum income, with changes and completions). We analyse data and information of thematic Eurobarometers, but also primary and very recent data collected through a survey with national statistic representativity for the social aid beneficiaries (guaranteed minimum income) - October 2016. We referred the data to the most commonly used taxonomy of poverty causes identified in the scientific literature, consisting of three categories – individualistic attribution, fatalistic attribution and structural causal attribution. In order to better understand the relation between the perceptions of poverty causes and the behaviour of the poor, we analysed them in connection to the three characteristics applied in the scientific literature on poverty attribution analysis: locus, stability and controllability.

Keywords: Poverty, poverty causes, poverty attribution, perceptions, mental framing.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we focused our research on exploring the manner in which people think about poverty and its causes in Romania. The work hypothesis was that differences might be identified in the causal attributions of poverty between the society as a whole and the group of persons that are in fact confronted with this phenomenon.

We used survey data collected in October 2016, through a representative sample on national level for the beneficiaries of social assistance for poverty alleviation (social aid for the guaranteed minimum income).

2. Problem Statement

Research showed that the causal attribution of poverty is highly related to the attitudes towards the poor [3]. And, although a whole body of research shows that, presently, most people causally attribute poverty to non-individual factors, to economic, structural factors – market failures, unemployment and the failure of the government in providing the needed economic stability [6], the perceptions that poor people have a clear and identifiable contribution to their difficult situation continue to co-exist. In fact, studies show that people confronted to economic difficulties, people that actually experience poverty first hand, are inclined, to a greater extent, to attribute poverty to social causes compared to people that are better off from an economic/financial perspective [2],[3]. Also, highly developed countries attribute rather individualistic and fatalistic causes to poverty; while the least developed countries explain poverty based on the injustices of the society [3].

Attitudes towards the poor are very important because they are determinants and thus predictors of behaviour towards the poor. In fact, it has been showed that causal attribution of poverty to individual factors is strongly associated to negative stereotypes towards the poor [4]. Some authors [3] consider that causal attributions may have indirect implications „on the legitimacy of social support measures and the fight against poverty". In fact, recent studies [15] show that attributions of poverty were significant predictors of welfare allocation and also influenced the manifested intensions in helping the poor (as cited in [3]). Others studies show that, in fact, causally attributing poverty to individual characteristics or behavioural faults is associated to a diminished willingness to accept spending on social protection and overall welfare judgment (see [16] or [18]).

Many of the studies on poverty perceived causality use a taxonomy with three categories of causes: individualistic, societal or structural and

fatalistic (see [4] cited in [3] or [5]). In fact, Feagin [7] had a decisive role in the development of this taxonomy on three categories.

The individualistic causal attribution focuses on all ranges of individual characteristics or behaviours that might have generated and maintained the situation of poverty for that particular individual, such as addictions (drugs or alcohol), laziness, low intelligence, etc.

The fatalistic causal attribution focuses on situations or events that escape the control of the individual and generate or maintain poverty – such as illnesses or disabilities, bad luck, etc.

The structural causal attribution focuses on political, economic or even cultural factors that create unfavourable conditions for certain people – such as discrimination, unemployment, lack of adequate support measures offered by the government, etc.

There is an identifiable transition from the individualistic causal attribution to the structuralist approach, as „while in 1976 blaming the poor was nearly as dominant as the idea of social injustice, in 1990 the greater proportion of Europeans have adopted the idea that poverty is due to social injustice in their societies"[17].

From a socio-demographic perspective, some studies show that:

- Women are more inclined than men to support the structural causal attribution of poverty (see [17] or [9]),
- The young rather attribute poverty to structural factors, while the older persons attribute poverty to individualistic and fatalistic causes (see [7]),
- People with an intermediate level of education attribute poverty to individualistic causes, while people with low educational level or, on the contrary, with high educational level attribute poverty rather to structuralist causes (see [7]).

It seems that perceptions are influenced by the economic situation and the social status of the person – people confronted to poverty are more inclined to believe that poverty has structural causes, while people that are not confronted to poverty are more inclined to support the other two causal approaches (see [3] for a literature review).

A number of studies put their focus on country level, rather than individual level. We can mention here the following sources: [1], [3], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [16]. The research of [16] identified three groups of countries according to the identified tendency on a societal level to causally attribute poverty. They consider that the Netherlands, the West Germany, the United Kingdom and Ireland make up the pluralistic group, as they assess poverty assigning a balanced mix of causes. Sweden, Norway and France are rather

inclined towards a structuralist position, on a societal level. In the same time, countries such as the United States of America, Italy, Austria, Spain, Canada and Portugal stand towards an individualistic causal attribution of poverty, on a societal level. Research of [1] identified a rather structuralist attribution of poverty in the Nordic countries, while[14] showed that Finland manifests a different approach towards poverty causality, considering that the individualistic and fatalist causes should be viewed as the most important. Costa and Dias, in their paper [3], have an exhaustive presentation of all these research results and also others that we didn't mention here.

The individualistic causal attribution of poverty is associated to a stigma put upon the poor members of the society, which is at the base of a vicious circle, as it generates discrimination and diminishes the chances of equal access and equal opportunities. This, in turn, generates inadequate coping strategies that only contribute to a further stigmatization (see [17] citing [8]), creating a self-enforcing and persisting culture of poverty.

In [17], the authors propose a taxonomy of four categories:

- individual blame (agency) – the poor are lazy, lack thrift and good moral,
- individual fate – the poor are unlucky,
- social blame – the poor are victims of the actions of others, victims of the social injustice,
- social fate – the poor are victims of uncontrollable societal and global developments.

The authors also emphasize the existing direct relation between a country's population tendency to perceive the causes of poverty along the two dimensions of blame versus the two dimensions of fate and the principles that govern its welfare state rules. In this line, the study identifies a divide between the Nordic countries and the Latin countries of Europe. It seems that the Nordic countries believe the state is responsible for the existence of poverty and this believe is associated to high spending for welfare and social protection. On the contrary, the Latin countries put the blame for poverty on specific actors and this tendency is associated with low spending for welfare and social protection.

In their research, Weiner, Osborne and Rudolph [19] analyze different studies that identify certain causal attributions for poverty. For example, „poverty among the elderly is likely to elicit beliefs about illness, poverty for immigrants could activate thoughts about lack of language skills and job opportunities, and for welfare recipients, laziness is often a dominant perceived cause of need [20]. Likewise, although low motivation and poor money management skills are perceived to be the dominant causes

of poverty for men, poverty among women is more often attributed to irresponsible reproductive patterns and failure to establish a traditional nuclear family [4]".

In [19], the authors focused on three causal characteristics or properties that can be used for poverty attribution analysis. These are:

- *Locus* – referring to the property of a cause to lie within (internal to) or outside of (external to) the actor. From this perspective, all individualistic causes of poverty are located within the actor, while structural causes as well as fatalistic causes are considered to be external causes.
- *Stability* – this property focuses on causal endurance. Some causes are enduring and unlikely to change over time. On the other hand, other causes manifest only temporarily.
- *Controllability* – referring to the property of a cause to be controllable or, on the contrary, out of the persons' control. Causes such as lack of effort are considered controllable by the person. On the other hand, causes such as physical illnesses, for example, are uncontrollable by the individual.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

In this paper we focused our research on exploring the manner in which people think about poverty and its causes in Romania. The work hypothesis was that there might be differences in the causal attributions of poverty between the society as a whole and the group of persons that are in fact confronted with this phenomenon.

We must emphasize **the importance of this research topic**, considering that Romania has the highest rate of poverty at UE level (25,4%, compared to 17% in 2014), with rural poverty exceeding the national level with approx. 10%., while more than 40% of Romanian population lives in rural areas. Thus a complex understanding of this phenomenon (economic, but also cultural and psychological) is needed for an adequate response in terms of policies improvement.

4. Research Methods

We used survey data collected in October 2016, through a representative sample on national level for the beneficiaries of social assistance for poverty alleviation (social aid for the guaranteed minimum income).

We used multistage stratified random sampling, taking into consideration the distribution of beneficiaries on counties and areas of residence (urban/rural). After that, the localities and households were selected randomly. The sample has a volume of 600 respondents, of working age, beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income. The sample has representativity for the beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum income of working age, at a 95% confidence level, with a maximum margin of error of 4%. The data collection took place during 3-17th of October 2016, with the aid of 40 interview operators.

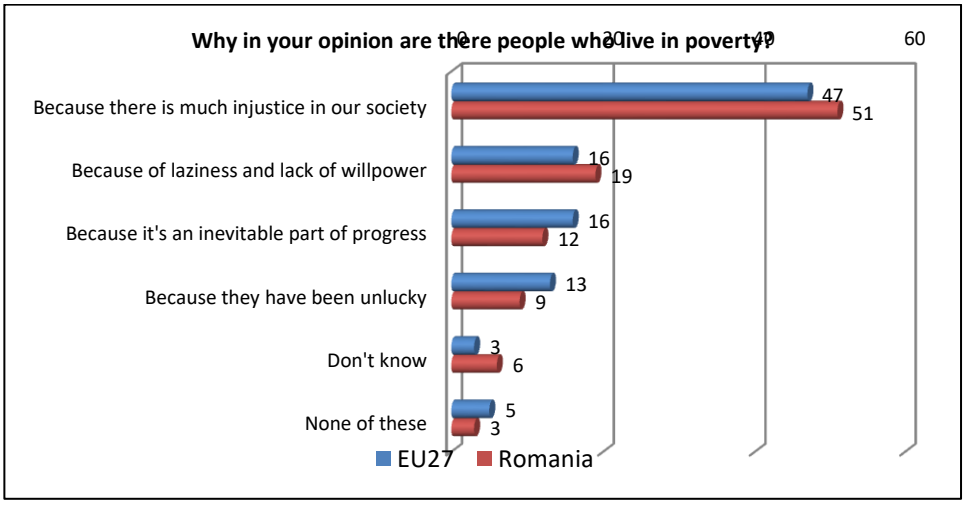
We also used data and information for Romania and EU countries collected through the thematic Eurobarometer "Poverty and Social Exclusion" (2010). For this Eurobarometer, the data was collected in August-September 2009 for Romania, through 1013 interviews, using random sampling.

5. Findings

Data shows that, both in Romania and EU27, people consider that injustice in society is the most important reason why people live in poverty, thus putting the focus on societal, structural causes (see Graph no. 1).

Attitudes regarding the causes of poverty seem to be relatively stable over time - the same causal attribution can be identified, for Romania, based on data from the World Values Survey 1998 and the 2009 Eurobarometer (with small differences in the formulation of the question).

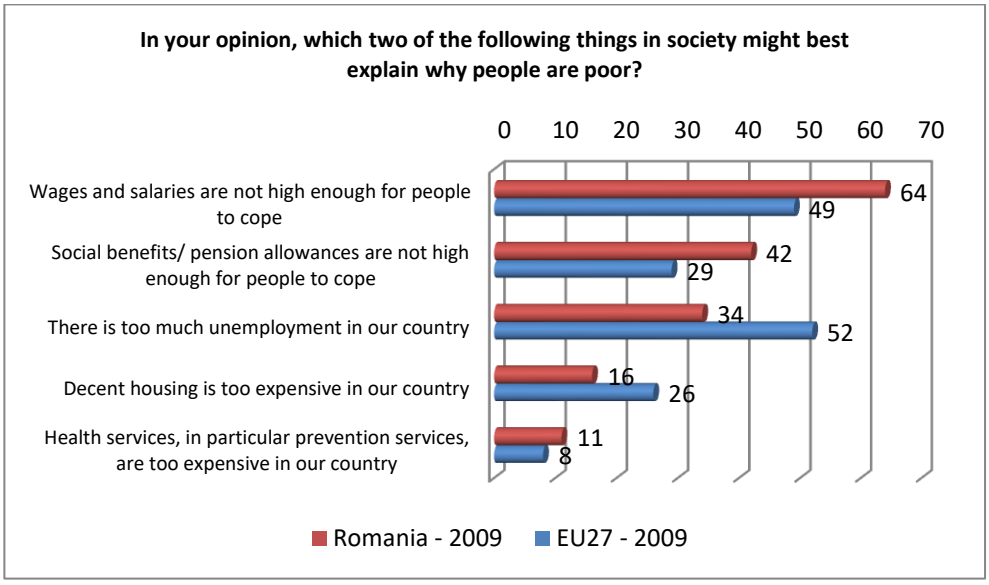
Graph no. 1



Data Source: Eurobarometer "Poverty and Social Exclusion" (2010)

For Romania, the most widely conjured cause of poverty is that of small salaries, this shows that poverty is significantly perceived as a phenomenon that affects employed people. This cause is mentioned by a higher share of respondents than the cause of unemployment. Unemployment is, at the EU27 level, the most invoked cause of poverty (see Graph no. 2).

Graph no. 2



Data Source: Eurobarometer "Poverty and Social Exclusion" (2010)

In Romania, the intergenerational transmitting of poverty is significantly acknowledged, compared to the situation in EU27 (40%).

Also, there is less importance given to the lack of necessary education, qualification or skills as a potential cause of poverty, for the Romanian respondents – while this is the most invoked cause at EU27 level (37%).

The family structure is perceived as an important causal factor in explaining poverty, in the case of Romania (see Graph no. 3).

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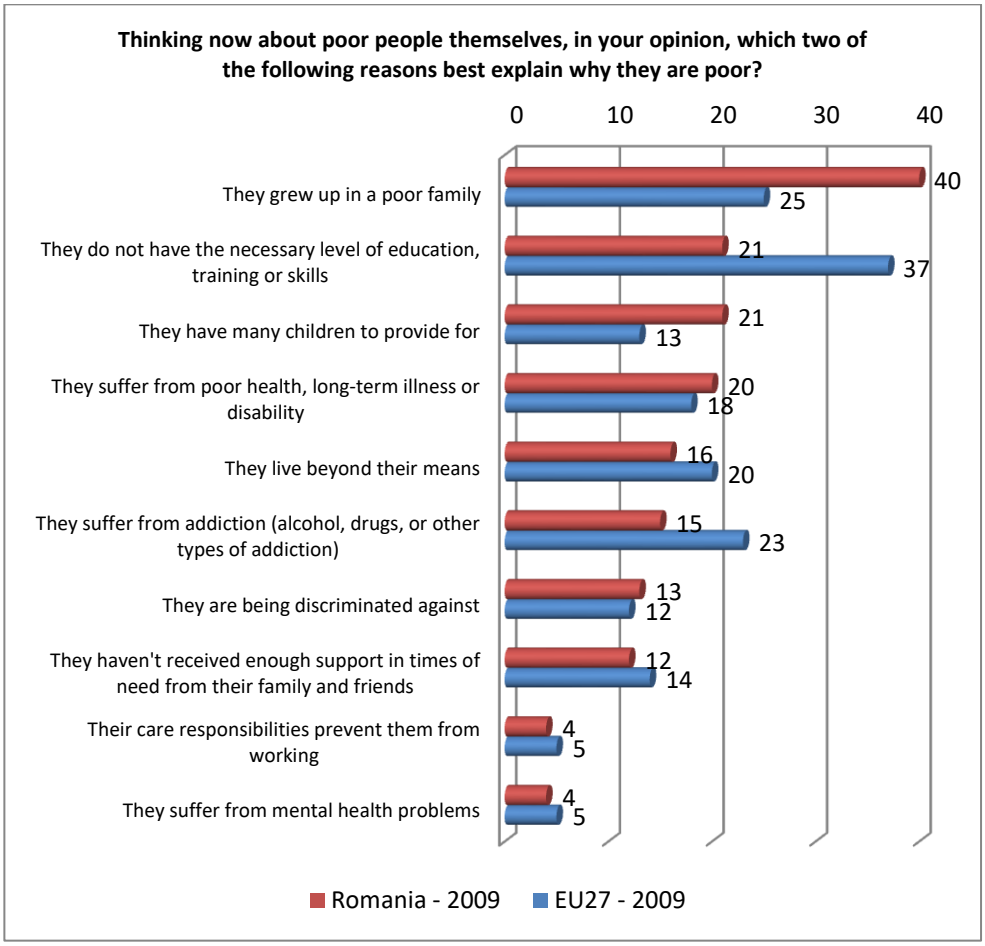
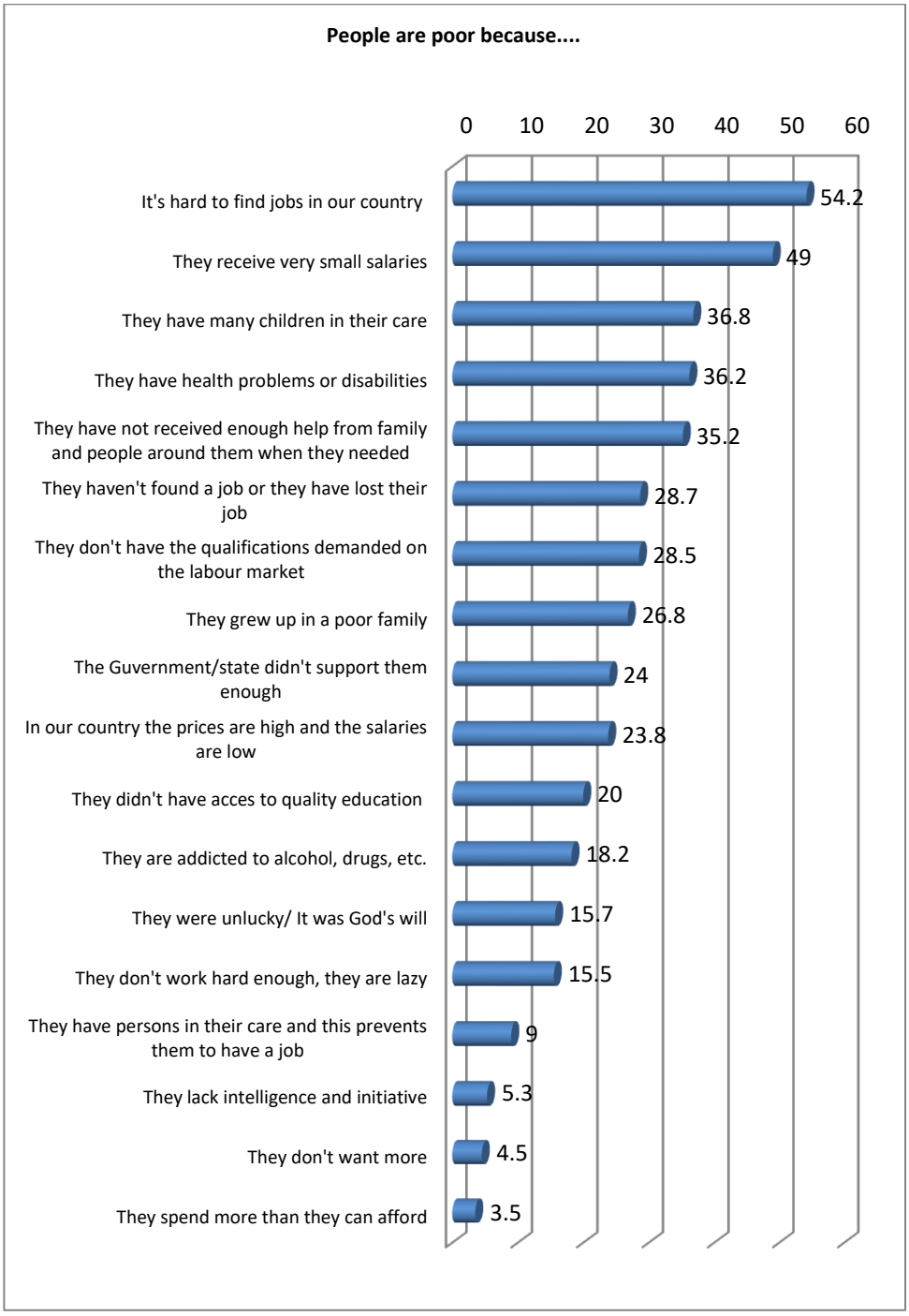
Graph no. 3



Data Source: Eurobarometer "Poverty and Social Exclusion" (2010)

The Graph below (Graph no. 4) presents the opinions of the poorest of the poor in Romania regarding poverty causes (beneficiaries of Guaranteed Minimum Income).

Graph no. 4



Data Source: INCSMPS Survey (maximum 5 choices)

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First and foremost, the respondents affirm the importance of the structural/societal causes – lack of jobs, small salaries (54,2% of respondents, respectively 49% of respondents). Among the fatalistic causes, the most mentioned is the one regarding disability and other health issues. Among causes that are connected to individual issues, the most frequently mentioned is the one connected to family structure – the high number of children in the family (36,8%). The lack of qualifications was mentioned by 28,5% of respondents. The trans-generational transmission of poverty is chosen as poverty cause by 26,8% of respondents. The other causes, whether individual or fatalistic are chosen by a smaller number of respondents.

As for poverty escaping solutions, on an individual level, most of the respondents consider that they might escape poverty through finding a job - 47,7%. It is interesting that 10% of respondents consider that they are too old to escape poverty (although the sample is made of persons of working age). Only 3,3% of respondents considered migration to be the solution for escaping poverty.

The poverty measures that were considered appropriate by the respondents are mostly connected to the causes of the phenomenon, as they are perceived by this vulnerable group – measures that would offer access to jobs, as well as higher social benefits. It is interesting that aspects connected to obtaining a better qualified labour force, with qualifications adequate to the demands of the labour market (through an improved education system, training and re-training programs) is a much less mentioned solution.

6. Conclusions

The problem of poverty causality is still opened to debate, as it can be noticed in the numerous identifiable studies of the scientific literature, although the multidimensionality of the phenomenon implies, of course, a mixed causality, a number of causal factors to be considered.

In the societal perception (EB-2009 for Romania), the small salaries represent the most frequent mentioned cause of poverty, but for the most vulnerable, the most important difficulty is to actually find employment. Some survey results are validated through other research findings – the respondents emphasise both the increased vulnerability of numerous families, as well as the trans-generational transmission of poverty and these two phenomena, analysed together, create the context of an alarm system in need of policy response.

The guaranteed minimum income beneficiaries explain poverty attributing causes external to the individuals, escaping their control and characterised through relative stability, with inaction being the identified behavioural effect of this attribution.

The attribution that generates action, behavioural change is characterised by internal locus, controllability and temporary manifestation. The respondents are less willing to emphasise in their responses this type of causes – the lack of needed qualifications or qualifications that are inadequate to the labour market demands are only marginally mentioned.

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