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Actors, observers and causal attributions of homelessness: Differences in attribution for the causes of homelessness among domiciled and homeless people in Madrid.

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Abstract

The study analyzes the differences in causal attributions of homelessness and attributions of responsibility among the members of three groups: Homeless Group, consisting of a representative sample of homeless people in Madrid, Spain (n= 188), Domiciled Service-Users Group, consisting of people at risk of homelessness (n=164), and Domiciled Non Service-Users Group, consisting of people at no imminent risk of homelessness (n=180). The Domiciled Service-Users Group and Domiciled Non Service-Users Group were matched to the Homeless Group for sex, age and nationality. The paper also analyzes homeless people's causal attributions as regards their own situation. The results show that compared to the Domiciled Non Service-Users Group, a higher percentage of members of the Homeless Group and Domiciled Service-Users Group attributed homelessness to individualistic causes, and they blamed homeless people for their situation to a greater extent. The results also show that there was no "actor-observer bias" in causal attributions for homelessness in Madrid.

Key words: Homeless, causal attributions, poverty, social exclusion.

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Introduction

In Spain, more than a quarter of the population (27.3%) is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EUROSTAT, 2014), and homeless people suffer from one of the toughest situations of social difficulty. According to the Spanish National Statistics Institute, the homeless population in Spain cared for in centres amounts to 22,938 people (INE, 2012), but various non-governmental organizations estimate that there are more than 30,000 homeless people (Plujá i Calderon, 2011). Homeless people not only live in extreme poverty, but also suffer from a high degree of family and social disengagement, with serious difficulties for reintegration into society and employment, and significant deficiencies in health (Vázquez, Panadero, Martín, & Díaz-Pescador, 2015).

Attributions for the causes of poverty are an important issue in the processes of social inclusion-exclusion, as they reflect attitudes that can direct behaviour at both individual and institutional level (Bullock, 1999; Lott, 2002). Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 1986; Weiner & Graham, 1989) bases motivation for achievement on the cognitive and emotional consequences of the causal attribution of the prior results obtained. As a result, the characteristics of the causal attribution and the psychological consequences experienced influence the individual's motivational state, therefor determine his/her future achievement behaviour. This effect may have important implications for the process of normalization of people in situations of difficulty or social exclusion since depending on the causal attributions for the individual's situation, the strategies deemed appropriate when attempting to alleviate or reverse the situation will differ (Vázquez, 2013). Likewise, attributions about the causes of poverty among the general population may influence both interactions with those suffering from poverty and/or social exclusion (Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001) and the design and implementation of policies to combat poverty and the support that those policies receive (Bullock, Willians, & Limbert, 2003).

Feagin's traditional classification of causal attributions of poverty (1972) makes a distinction between individualistic causes (which attribute responsibility to poor people for their own situation); societal causes (which make external forces responsible for people's poverty) and fatalistic causes (which attribute poverty to factors that are beyond the control of poor individuals, and are not the responsibility of society). Despite the criticisms of this model (Lepianka, Oorschot & Gelissen, 2009; Weiner, Osborne & Rudolph, 2011), this approach is the most widely used and has received empirical support (Bullock et al., 2003; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Wollie, 2009; Zucker & Weiner, 1993; Morçöl, 1997; Niemelä, 2008), and as such it has been used in this study as the basis for analysis of the attributional differences for the causes of homelessness in Madrid.

"Actor-observer bias" consists of "actors" and "observers" tending to give different explanations of the same event, in such a way that "actors" tend to focus on external or situational factors when explaining their behavior whereas "observers" tend to see others' behavior as caused by personal characteristics or dispositional factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

As regards poverty, the literature reflects the tendency of "observers" to over-attribute the causes of poverty to the dispositional characteristics of the individuals in this situation, and to under-attribute the causal impact on poverty of factors that are beyond the control of poor people. The opposite effect tends to be observed among "actors" (Campbell, Carr, & Maclachlan, 2001; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009). In general, errors of attribution predispose towards holding poor people responsible for their poverty, rather than situations that are beyond their control (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Feagin, 1972).

According to Weiner, Osborne and Rudolph (2011), the main perceived causes of poverty include excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, lack of effort and laziness, lack of skills and abilities, low wages, prejudice and discrimination, disease and physical disability, and bad luck. When homeless people attempt to account for their situation, the results of the few studies carried out suggest that they assign a particularly important role to events related to economic problems and interpersonal conflicts and the breakdown of relationships, as well as problems of physical and mental health and alcohol and drug abuse (Muñoz et al., 1999; Tessler, Rosenheck, & Gamache, 2001, Ji, 2006; Peressini, 2007).

Various authors (Campbell et al., 2001; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Mickelson & Hazlett, 2014; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009) have pointed out that middle-class individuals and those belonging to social groups with higher incomes, higher educational levels and less likelihood of being directly affected by poverty use attributions to individualistic rather than societal causes in their causal explanations for poverty. The opposite effect is apparent among those in a situation of poverty or those faced with the likelihood of suffering from it. Poor people in the United States (Bullock, 1999, 2004; Bullock & Limbert, 2003) and Great Britain (Furnham, 1982) have been observed as tending more towards societal causes in their attributions of poverty, while making few attributions to fatalistic causes (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Meanwhile, Bullock (1999) notes that poor people have a greater tendency than middle-class individuals to believe that people accessing care resources are cheating the system, and are lazy and idle. This author also suggests that people receiving welfare benefits are more likely than middle-class people to attribute poverty to structural problems and to reject political reforms aimed at making the welfare state more restrictive, but are nevertheless also more likely to consider social welfare recipients as being dishonest and lazy (Bullock, 1999).

Various studies suggest that the general population in most European countries is less likely to attribute the causes of poverty to individual factors than in the English-speaking countries (Oorschot & Halman, 2000; Alesina & Glaeser, 2004). In most European countries, there is a greater tendency to attribute poverty mainly to societal causes and fatalistic causes, unlike the results observed in English-speaking countries, where there is a greater tendency to consider individualistic factors as the main causes of poverty (Bullock, 1999; Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Niemela, 2008; Reutter et al, 2006; Shirazi & Biel, 2005; Oorschot &

Halman, 2000). Toro (2007) points out that the population in the United States and the United Kingdom tends to show less compassion for the homeless than in Italy and Germany.

Method

The research was conducted based on data provided by individuals belonging to three different groups:

- *Homeless Group (HG)* (n=188): a group consisting of a representative sample of homeless people in Madrid (84.0% men, 16.0% women), who were all adults (M age = 47.57 years, SD = 12.172), who had spent the night before the interview in a shelter or other facility for homeless people, on the street or in other places not initially designed for sleeping: abandoned buildings, basements, metro stations, etc. 71.8% were Spaniards and 28.2% were foreign. The sample size of the HG was determined from the available data on the total number of homeless people in Madrid. A strategy for random sampling in the street and in all housing resources for homeless people in Madrid was designed. According to each service capacity a specific number of participants proportionately and randomly in each service was selected. The sample selection in the street was carried out randomly and proportionally, as well, based on the number of homeless people sleeping on the streets of Madrid.
- *Domiciled Service-Users Group (DSUG)* (n=164): a group consisting of a sample of people who still had housing, but needed to use services for homeless people (soup kitchens, clothing exchanges, care associations and facilities, etc.). The members of this group were at a high risk of becoming homeless, and shared care facilities with homeless people. The DSUG sample was matched to the HG on sex (81.1% men, 18.9% women), age (M age = 45.54 years, SD = 10.818) and nationality (62.2% Spaniards, 37.8% foreigners). The sample was obtained by a random sampling procedure in soup kitchens and facilities providing care for people at risk of being homeless.
- *Domiciled Non Service-Users Group (DNSUG)* (n=180): this group consisted of a sample of people who still had housing, were not using services designed for the homeless, and were not at risk of becoming homeless. The sample was gathered in Madrid using a "quota sampling" strategy, and its alignment with the HG as regards sex (83.8% men, 16.2% women), age (M age = 45.36 years, SD = 14.037) and nationality (76.7% Spanish, 23.3% foreign) was checked.

After explaining the aims of the investigation and the treatment that would be given to the data obtained, the informed consent of the participants was requested, and those that took part were assured that their complete anonymity would be respected at all times. A structured interview instrument was used to collect information from the HG and the DSUG. The members of the DNSUG completed a self-administered questionnaire, designed in order to enable comparison with the data obtained in the HG and DSUG.

The instrument designed to gather information on causal attributions for homelessness consisted of the initial instruction "*Now, we would like your opinion on the causes that usually lead homeless people into that situation. I'm going to give various reasons and I'd like to know whether or not you agree with each one*" which was followed

by a list of 53 statements with alternative dichotomous responses: "agree" or "disagree". The interviewees in the HG were then asked an open question to ascertain the main reasons, in their opinion, that would explain their personal situation: *What are the three main reasons that explain your current situation?*

Results

The percentages of agreement with the various statements concerning the possible reasons why people are homeless in the three groups are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness among the "Homeless Group" (HG), the "Domiciled Service-Users Group" (DSUG) and the "Domiciled Non Service-Users Group" (DNSUG).

Causes of homelessness	HG % (n)	DSUG % (n)	DNSUG % (n)	χ^2
Because of excessive alcohol consumption	88.3% (159)	80.4% (131)	87.9% (153)	5.502
Because of taking the wrong decisions	87.1% (148)	80.6% (129)	76.1% (134)	6.820*
Because of having lost everything they had	85.8% (151)	88.1% (141)	86.9% (152)	0.399
Because of excessive drug use	81.9 % (149)	79.1% (129)	88.2% (157)	5.332
Because of having got used to the situation of being homeless and doing nothing to overcome it	78.5% (135)	71.7% (114)	63.6% (112)	9.386**
Because of being unable to keep their jobs	76.6% (134)	73.9% (116)	41.1% (72)	57.954***
Because of living beyond their means	76.4% (133)	74.8% (119)	58.6% (102)	16.522***
Because of having had problems with the family	76.4% (136)	74.1% (120)	64.8% (114)	6.555*
Because of having mental health problems	75.7% (134)	67.1% (108)	70.1% (124)	3.185
Because of a lack of support from the immediate environment (family, friends, etc.)	75.1% (133)	70.6% (113)	64.4% (112)	4.891
Because of being uprooted (migration, abandonment, etc.)	73.7% (126)	74.4% (119)	86.9% (152)	11.188**
Because of the meaninglessness of their life (lack of goals, objectives, hopes, etc.).	72.5% (124)	67.7% (107)	60.0% (105)	6.211*
Because of problems with their partners	72.4% (123)	65.4% (104)	65.4% (104)	32.071***
Because of having experienced a lot of traumatic situations	72.4% (123)	70.0% (112)	56.8% (100)	10.833**
Because of gambling addiction	72.1% (119)	67.3% (109)	76.3% (135)	3.392

Because of poor distribution of wealth	70.9% (122)	76.4% (123)	56.3% (99)	16.907***
Because of the economic crisis	70.5% (122)	84.0% (137)	78.7% (140)	9.009**
Because of coming from broken and troubled families	70.5% (122)	67.3% (105)	66.7% (118)	0.678
Because of not being able to take responsibility	69.0% (120)	71.5% (113)	46.2% (80)	27.886***
Because of a lack of knowledge about how to overcome the situation	68.8% (119)	72.8% (115)	56.9% (99)	10.256**
Because of a lack of self-confidence	66.9% (113)	68.2% (105)	58.1% (100)	4.335
Because of a lack of an ability to adapt to changes	66.9% (111)	60.9% (98)	41.0% (71)	25.218***
Because of an unwillingness to change their inappropriate habits and ways	65.9% (112)	62.0% (98)	41.9% (72)	23.036***
Because of social rebellion, not accepting the rules	65.5% (112)	69.9% (109)	49.4% (86)	16.440***
Because of low wages	65.1% (112)	69.3% (113)	46.0% (81)	22.084***
Because they don't fit in with the labour market	65.1% (108)	62.8% (98)	38.5% (67)	29.774***
Because of being lazy and not making enough effort	65.1% (110)	68.2% (107)	26.0% (45)	74.841***
Because of the inequality of opportunity in society	64.2% (106)	70.9% (112)	70.9% (112)	4.256
Because they don't want to work	63.9% (108)	56.4% (88)	35.1% (60)	30.361***
Because of fate or bad luck	63.5% (113)	61.8% (97)	61.1% (107)	0.219
Because of being very lazy, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting other people to sort it out for them	62.4% (108)	60.9% (95)	27.3% (47)	53.468***
Because of having been thrown out of their home as a child or adolescent	61.4% (105)	61.3% (98)	54.5% (96)	2.186
Because they don't know how to apply for social welfare support	60.5% (104)	65.2% (105)	38.9% (68)	27.197***
Because of having been in an institution (prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc.)	59.6% (102)	59.9% (91)	61.8% (107)	0.209
Because of not having access to social welfare support	59.3% (102)	63.6% (103)	45.3% (78)	12.453**
Because of being unable to control their basic impulses (aggression, sexual urges,	59.0% (102)	55.6% (89)	30.8% (53)	32.370***

etc.)

Because they don't know how to live with other people	58.2% (96)	56.9% (87)	31.2% (54)	31.171***
Because of a lack of training and advice for getting a job	58.1% (100)	70.4% (114)	45.7% (80)	20.977***
Because of suffering from illness and physical problems	56.5% (100)	40.5% (64)	45.1% (78)	9.242**
Because of rejection and misunderstanding by society	55.5% (96)	46.8% (73)	53.1% (93)	2.630
Because they value freedom above all else	54.9% (90)	41.9% (65)	22.4% (39)	37.916***
Because of the government	51.4% (89)	56.3% (90)	51.5% (87)	0.606
Because of prejudice and discrimination in society	51.1% (89)	50.3% (80)	54.0% (94)	0.513
Because of government incompetence/inefficiency	50.0% (80)	56.8% (88)	49.1% (86)	2.238
Because they want to be homeless	47.1% (80)	37.5% (60)	17.4% (30)	34.871***
Because of being born and raised in poor families	45.9% (78)	59.9% (95)	41.6% (74)	11.000**
Because of they did not have access to adequate education	43.9% (75)	56.2% (91)	37.3% (66)	12.441**
Because homelessness is an inevitable part of modern life	37.3% (62)	39.6% (63)	12.2% (21)	37.565***
Because the "homeless" life is the easiest solution to a lot of their problems	33.1% (57)	33.3% (54)	19.2% (33)	11.006**
Because of the lack of access to quality health care	28.2% (48)	26.5% (43)	20.1% (35)	3.376
Because they are not very intelligent	26.5% (43)	24.7% (39)	9.2% (16)	19.082***
Because it is God's will	17.0% (27)	15.1% (24)	2.3% (4)	21.347***
Because it is what they deserve	12.7% (22)	13.5% (21)	1.7% (3)	17.430***

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001

As seen in Table 1, there is some similarity in the causes of homelessness attributed by the highest percentage of respondents in all three groups (HG, DSUG, DSNUG). More than two thirds of the participants in all three groups agreed that homelessness was the result of various individualistic causes (excessive alcohol and/or drug consumption, gambling addictions, inappropriate decisions and/or loss of everything), fatalistic causes (mental health problems, being uprooted by migration or neglect, coming from problematic dysfunctional families and/or suffering from multiple traumas) and societal causes (economic crisis). In addition, in the HG and DSUG groups, two thirds of the participants also concurred with two

fatalistic causes for homelessness (lack of support from the environment and/or family problems) and one societal cause (poor distribution of wealth), as well as a significant number of individualistic causes: having become accustomed to homelessness and doing nothing to overcome it, being unable to keep a job, living beyond one's means, a lack of meaning in their life, inability to take responsibility, lack of knowledge about how to overcome their situation, lack of self-confidence and/or social rebellion and rejection of the rules.

However, more than two thirds of the members of all three groups (HG, DSUG, DSNUG) disagree with two fatalistic causes for homelessness (low intelligence and divine will), one societal cause (lack of access to quality health care) and one individualistic cause (they deserve their situation). Moreover, more than two thirds of the members of the DSNUG said they disagreed with a fatalistic cause of homelessness (homelessness is an inevitable part of modern life) and a wide range of individualistic causes: homeless people are lazy, they do not try hard enough, they are very idle, they do not take responsibility for their situation, they do not control their most primal impulses, they do not know how to live with other people, they value their freedom above all else, they want to be homeless and/or they see a homeless life as the easy solution to many of their problems.

Significant differences in the percentages of agreement between the members of the three groups were observed in 36 of the 53 causes of homelessness mentioned in Table 1. Compared with the HG-DSUG group, the members of the DSNUG gave a higher percentage of attributions to two societal causes (poor distribution of wealth and/or low wages) and two fatalistic causes (homelessness is an inevitable part of modern life and/or God's will). Meanwhile, a higher percentage of the members of the HG and the DSUG than the DSNUG expressed their agreement with a fatalistic cause for homelessness (being not very intelligent) and a large number of individualistic causes: lack of knowledge about how to keep a job, living beyond one's means, inability to take responsibility, inability to adapt to change, unwillingness to change old habits and customs, social rebellion and rejection of the rules, lack of adjustment to the labour market, being lazy and not trying hard enough, not wanting to work, being very idle, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting others to sort it out, not knowing how to apply for social welfare support, not controlling their primal urges, not being able to live with others, valuing freedom above all else, wanting to be homeless and/or deserving their situation.

When the members of the HG were asked for the main reasons that in their opinion explained their homelessness, there were 125 attributions to individualistic causes (grouped into 23 causes), 89 to societal causes (grouped in 9 causes) and 85 to fatalistic causes (grouped in 9 causes):

- Individualistic causes (number of attributions): Because of problems with their partner (30); Because of alcohol consumption (28); Because of drug use (20); Because of taking the wrong decisions (14); Because of the meaninglessness of their lives: lack of goals, objectives, hopes, etc. (5); Because of living beyond their means (4); Because of social rebellion and rejection of the rules (3); Because of being unable to adapt to the labour market (2); Because of a lack of ability to adapt to changes (2); Because of being lazy and not trying hard enough (2); Because of a lack of self-confidence (2); Because they don't know how to keep their jobs (2); Because they value freedom above everything else (2); Because of gambling addiction (2); Because of convenience, not taking responsibility for

their situation and expecting others to sort it out (1); Because of having lost everything they had (1); Because of their inability to take responsibility (1); Because they don't know how to apply for social welfare support (1); Because they don't know how to live with other people (1); Because of an unwillingness to change inappropriate habits and customs (1); Because of not wanting to work (1); Because of having got used to the situation of being homeless and doing nothing to overcome it (1); Because of a lack of training and advice for getting a job (1).

- Societal causes (number of attributions): Because of being unable to get or losing a job (43); Because of a lack of support from their immediate environment (15); Because of not having proper documentation (9); Because of the economic crisis (8); Because of government incompetence/inefficiency (4); Because of the government (4); Because of low wages (3); Because of not having access to social welfare support (2); Because of the inequality of opportunity in society (1).
- Fatalistic causes (number of attributions): Because of family problems (30); Because of suffering from illness and physical problems (22); Because of having mental health problems (10); Because of the death of a first-degree relative (7); Because of bad luck (5); Because of having been in an institution: prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc. (4); Because it is God's will (3); Because of being uprooted (migration, abandonment...) (3); Because of having experienced traumatic situations (1).

The level of attribution of responsibility to homeless people for their situation and the level of self-attribution of responsibility for the individual's own situation are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Attributions of responsibility for homelessness and their own situation among the "Homeless Group" (HG), "Domiciled Service-Users Group" (DSUG) and "Domiciled Non Service-Users Group" (DNSUG)

	HG % (n)	DSUG % (n)	DNSUG % (n)	χ^2
Do you believe that most homeless people are responsible for their situation?				34.692***
Very responsible	23.8% (41)	13.1% (20)	9.6% (17)	
Quite responsible	48.3% (83)	47.1% (72)	63.3% (112)	
Not very responsible	15.7% (27)	22.2% (34)	23.2% (41)	
Not responsible at all	12.2% (21)	17.6% (27)	4.0% (7)	
Do you consider yourself responsible for your current situation?				70.341***
Very responsible	43.0% (77)	26.9% (43)	62.6% (112)	
Quite responsible	30.7% (55)	32.5% (52)	30.2% (54)	
Not very responsible	10.6% (19)	17.5% (28)	7.3% (13)	
Not responsible at all	15.6% (28)	23.1% (37)	0.0% (0)	

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001

Table 2 shows that the closer the individuals are to being homeless, the higher percentage of people who believe that homeless people are "very responsible" for their situation. While 72.1% of the HG, 60.2% of the DSUG and 72.9% of the DNSUG considered that homeless people were "quite or very responsible" for their situation, 12%, 18% and 4% respectively felt they were not all responsible for it. When the respondents

were asked to what extent they considered themselves responsible for their own situation (without specifying what the situation was), 73.7% of the HG, 59.4% of the DSUG and 92.8% of the DNSUG considered themselves "quite or very responsible" for their situation. Most interviewees attributed a significant degree of personal responsibility to themselves, and this was especially pronounced in the case of the DNSUG.

While 24% of the HG and 13% of the DSUG thought that homeless people were "very responsible" for their situation, a much higher percentage, 43% and 30% respectively, considered themselves "very responsible" for their own situation.

Discussion

There were significant overlaps among the respondents from all three groups (HG, DSUG and DNSUG) in the attributions for the causes that usually lead people to become homeless. These attributions mainly refer to individualistic causes (which tend to attribute responsibility for their situation to homeless people themselves) and fatalistic causes (which attribute poverty to factors that are beyond the control of poor individuals and not the responsibility of society), with few attributions to societal causes (which hold forces external to poor people responsible for poverty), despite the situation of economic and social crisis experienced by Spain at the time the study was carried out.

The homeless respondents attributed their situation mainly to economic problems, interpersonal conflicts, physical and/or mental health problems, and excessive consumption of alcohol and/or drugs. These attributions for the causes of homelessness, with a marked tendency towards explanations derived from individualistic causes, largely match those reported by the respondents from all three groups as general causes of homelessness and the causes mentioned by homeless people themselves for their situation, as noted in previous studies (Tessler et al., 2001; Ji, 2006; Muñoz et al., 1999; Tessler et al., 2007).

Several studies have shown that in causal explanations for poverty, people who are less likely to be directly affected by poverty use more attributions to individualistic causes than to societal causes. This is the opposite effect to that found among people in poverty or facing the possibility of being affected by it (Campbell et al., 2001; Bullock, 1999; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Mickelson & Hazlett, 2014; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009). However, this situation seems to be reversed when attributions for the causes of homelessness in Madrid are studied, as homeless respondents (HG) or those at risk of that situation (DSUG) attribute homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent than the members of the DNSUG, which consists mainly of middle-class people. In fact, the members of the DNSUG show a higher level of disagreement with attributions of homelessness to individualistic causes than the homeless themselves (HG), who when asked about the causes for their situation, also mainly use attributions to individualistic causes.

In the same vein, people who are homeless (HG) or at risk of being in that situation (DSUG) hold most homeless people responsible for their situation to a greater extent than respondents who are not at risk of becoming homeless (DNSUG). While the level of assignment of responsibility for homelessness is very high in all three groups - more than 60% of the interviewees - the closer the interviewees' personal proximity to homelessness, the

higher the percentage who considered those in that situation were "very responsible" for it. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents in all three groups self-attributed a significant level personal responsibility for their situation: over 90% of the members of the DNSUG, 74% of the HG and 59% of the DSUG considered themselves responsible for their situation to some extent. The differences among the three groups may be attributed to "self-serving bias" (Miller & Ross, 1975). The self-serving bias refers to a tendency for people to take personal responsibility for their desirable outcomes, yet externalize responsibility for their undesirable outcomes. This bias is useful for the self-esteem, since attributions of success increase the self-esteem and denial of failure protects it. Therefore, the DNSUG, composed by middle class, 63% considered themselves very responsible for their situation and none considered themselves "not responsible at all" for their situation. On the other hand, 40% of people at risk of becoming homeless considered themselves little or not responsible of their situation. However, more than 70% of the homeless people considered themselves responsible for their situation, which may indicated that within this group the "self-serving bias" occurs in a lesser percentage, with the negative implications this may have in the self-esteem of the homeless person. While 24% of the respondents in the HG and 13% of the DSUG considered most homeless people very responsible for their situation, a much higher percentage (43% of the HG and 27% of the DSUG) considered themselves "very responsible" for their own situation.

"Observer-actor bias" (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) appears not to occur with regard to causal attributions for homelessness in Madrid, as homeless people (HG) self-attribute a greater responsibility for their situation than that attributed by those who are not at risk of homelessness (DNSUG). People in poverty, at risk of becoming homeless and who share care services with homeless people (DSUG) make causal attributions for homelessness similar to those made by homeless people themselves (HG). Direct contact with homeless people may help explain the attributions to individualistic causes made by members of the DSUG, which could be of a self-defensive nature (Vázquez & Panadero, 2007). The defensive attribution bias (Shaver, 1970) makes reference to the attributions made by the observer which allows them to reduce the perception of threat in a situation. However, the elevated percentage of attribution of responsibility toward the homeless people from the at risk group, could be derived from this group trying to avoid thinking they will find themselves in a homeless situation, considering that they have characteristics that differentiate them from the homeless people and that they would react in a different manner given those circumstances.

Compared to the English-speaking countries, among the population of continental Europe there is a lesser propensity to attribute the causes of poverty to individual issues (Oorschot & Halman, 2000; Alesina & Glaeser, 2004) and a greater tendency to attribute it to societal and fatalistic causes (Bullock, 1999; Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Niemelä, 2008; Reutter et al, 2006; Shirazi & Biel, 2005; Oorschot & Halman, 2000). In Madrid, people at no risk of becoming homeless (DNSUG) mainly from the middle class, showed a strong disagreement with many of the attributions for homelessness to individualistic causes, and this disagreement was much higher than that shown by people in poverty (DUSG) and/or social exclusion (HG). In this respect, attributions for homelessness among the middle classes in a continental European city like Madrid appear to be consistent with those observed in other countries in continental Europe.

The tendency to attribute homelessness to individualistic causes and make homeless people responsible for their situation may adversely affect the general perception of the collective and the belief that they do not deserve support, given the greater tendency to provide assistance when problems are attributed to causes external to those suffering from them (DeJong, 1980; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). As a result, as pointed out by various authors (Reutter et al., 2002; Bullock et al., 2003), attributions for the causes of poverty can influence the design and implementation of policies to combat poverty and the support those policies receive. In this vein, according to Toro et al. (2007), in the United States and the United Kingdom, where attributions to individualistic causes occur to the greatest extent, the population tends to show less compassion for the homeless than in Italy and Germany. Based on this criterion, the middle class (DNSUG) in Madrid would be more likely to show compassion for the homeless than those in social difficulties (DSUG) or who are homeless (HG).

However, the tendency among homeless people to attribute their own situation to individualistic causes could have some positive effects, since this may reduce the feelings of helplessness arising from an inability to control the societal and fatalistic causes. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1986; Weiner & Graham, 1989) postulates that the characteristics of causal attribution for the previous results obtained and psychological consequences experienced influence the individual's motivational state and therefore determine his/her future achievement behaviour. Attribution to individualistic causes could therefore facilitate the activation of personal resources among the homeless that are focused on overcoming their situation, as the causal attributions made regarding a given situation are linked to the strategies considered effective in addressing it (Panadero & Vázquez, 2008).

This study is limited to Madrid, Spain, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to other contexts. However, the data obtained may be useful in designing intervention strategies aimed at working on causal attributions of homelessness, both among the general population - with the implications that this may have on the design and implementation of policies fighting against poverty and public support for them - and with homeless people themselves, encouraging attributions focused on facilitating a resolution of the situation, with the positive impact that this may have on processes of social inclusion.

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