



# Merit and blame in unequal societies: Explaining Latin Americans' beliefs about wealth and poverty



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## ABSTRACT

Popular beliefs about the causes of inequality are often thought to reflect the actual processes behind social stratification. We use the case of Latin America to challenge this assumption. In these rigid and unequal societies, people are more likely to believe that wealth and poverty depend on individual merits or faults rather than structural constraints. Drawing on data from the 2007 Social Cohesion Survey, we use multinomial logistic regression and counterfactual simulation to investigate the factors that drive popular beliefs about wealth and poverty at the individual level, as well its distribution across countries. Our findings provide partial support to theories maintaining that being in an advantaged social position leads to favoring individualistic beliefs. We, however, report a novel effect of social class. More importantly, we show that unobserved country-level factors are the most powerful predictors and the only source of cross-country variation in the distribution of beliefs about the origins of inequality, thus ruling out a compositional explanation for cross-country heterogeneity.

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## 1. Introduction

Popular beliefs about the origins of social inequality have been construed by sociologists to reflect the degree of legitimacy of a given stratification structure, the notions of social justice widely adhered to, and the potential for social conflict generated by inequality. As such, they have been a central concern of the discipline for well over a century. More recently, as inequality has dramatically increased in most advanced economies, there has been a renewed academic interest about popular views on inequality, and the ways in which such views react and relate to actual social stratification (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; McCall, 2013; Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015). At the heart of this debate lies the assumption that a link exists between the actual level of inequality people experience and the attitudes they maintain about it.

We use the case of Latin America to challenge this assumption. Latin American countries represent an extreme situation of decoupling between actual stratification in society and people's beliefs about it: while this region is characterized by a combination of high levels of income inequality together with limited levels of social mobility (De Ferranti, 2004; Fields, 2009; Torche, 2009, 2014), a majority of the population believes that people are personally

responsible for their own economic success or failure – they perceive, in other words, a socioeconomic meritocracy. Conversely, the impact of structural factors, such as discrimination and social background, is viewed as less important in public opinion (Valenzuela, Schwartzman, Biehl, & Valenzuela, 2008). This decoupling constitutes an empirical puzzle in need of an explanation.

To tackle this puzzle, this article studies popular beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty in seven Latin American countries. We build up on sociological theories that conceive of beliefs about inequality as a product of both an individual's location in the social structure and societal influences operating at the macro level (Feagin, 1972; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Thus, we posit that understanding the prevalence of individualistic beliefs in the Latin American context involves answering two intertwined research questions. First, are Latin Americans more prone to individualistic narratives about the causes of inequality because of their sharing specific individual traits, or are their beliefs mostly shaped by specific national contexts? Second, how do these factors combine to produce the distribution of beliefs we observe across these Latin American countries?

In order to formulate an answer to these questions, our analysis develops in two moments. First, we study the factors that lead an individual to believe that wealth and poverty are earned, instead of inherited or ascribed. We examine the influence of both individual- and country-level factors using multinomial logistic regression with fixed effects by country. Secondly, using counterfactual simulation, we investigate how these factors aggregate to

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produce the observed distribution of beliefs and its variation across countries. We leverage a unique and underused dataset on seven Latin American countries, the *Encuesta de Cohesion Social 2007*,<sup>1</sup> a survey specifically designed to measure different dimensions of social cohesion in the region. Unlike previous research which focuses on beliefs about poverty, this article studies beliefs about both wealth and poverty as two separate phenomena potentially driven by different factors.

Our findings contribute to current knowledge both theoretically and empirically. First, we demonstrate that the influence of individual characteristics on people's beliefs about inequality in the Latin American context are highly comparable to those found in other national and cultural contexts, such as the US and Europe. In particular, our results provide partial support for theories that maintain that being in advantaged social position makes individuals more inclined toward beliefs that stress the importance of merit, as well as for theories that claim an "enlightening effect" of education. In contrast, we find a novel effect of social class,<sup>2</sup> where professionals appear to be the class most inclined toward structuralist views about wealth and poverty, while unskilled workers and small owners are more prone to individualistic beliefs. The second major finding of this research is that country-level factors are the most consequential for people's beliefs in the Latin American context. Moreover, they are the only source of cross-country variation in the distribution of beliefs, thus ruling out a compositional explanation for cross-country heterogeneity. These findings highlight the importance of considering contextual, macro-level factors when attempting to explain both people's beliefs on wealth and poverty as well as variation in the distribution of these beliefs across countries. We interpret our results regarding the effect of country-level factors as questioning the idea that people's views reflect the actual sources of stratification in their societies. Our study constitutes, to our knowledge, the first empirical attempt to investigate popular beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty in comparative perspective across Latin American countries, thus significantly expanding the scope of the debate.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Beliefs about wealth and poverty

Several scholars have noted that popular beliefs on social inequality are relevant because they may reflect the degree of legitimacy of a given stratification structure, the notions of social justice widely adhered to, and the potential for conflict generated by inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Beliefs about inequality may further translate into relevant social outcomes, such as differential support and demand for redistribution (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009; Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Andersen & Curtis, 2015; Benabou & Ok, 2001; Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Fong, 2001), voting behavior (Piketty, 1995) and social cohesion (Sachweh, 2011), among others.

Individual views about the sources of wealth and poverty can be categorized into two different types: those that emphasize the potential of individual agency and those that highlight the constraining nature of social structure. The literature refers to the former as "individualistic beliefs", while the latter are characterized as "structuralist beliefs" (Feagin, 1972; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Individualistic beliefs emphasize the importance of negative personal traits such as laziness, simplemindedness or moral

deviation as the main factors that lead to poverty. In this sense, the poor are considered responsible for their own condition, a form of victim blaming (Ryan, 1976). Regarding wealth, however, individualistic beliefs highlight virtues such as hard work, intelligence and ethical conduct as the core causes of economic success: affluence results from personal merit. The prevalence of individualistic beliefs about economic outcomes in a given society may indicate that socioeconomic differences are considered legitimate, in the sense that "everyone gets what they deserve".

On the other hand, structuralist beliefs emphasize that the poor are "trapped" in poverty as their condition is the result of factors that they cannot control, such as social background or discrimination. Regarding wealth, structuralist beliefs stress the importance of inter-generational transmission of privilege: economic success is seen as the outcome of social, economic and cultural capital heritage, passed on to an individual by their family and immediate social environment. The prevalence of structuralist beliefs within a society may indicate that socioeconomic differences are perceived as illegitimate (Oorschot & Halman, 2000).

Theories that aim to explain beliefs about inequality have emphasized both individual-level and country-level factors. The following sections discuss these theories.

### 2.2. Individual level factors

#### 2.2.1. Structural position: SES, education and social class

Most of the theories that focus on the relation between an individual's socioeconomic standing and their beliefs about inequality assume that the link between the two is either people's desire to legitimize their own situation or people's differential perception of inequality based on their social position. However, the observational data that is generally used in the study of beliefs does not allow to differentiate the effects of these two mechanisms. The literature on beliefs about inequality generally focuses on the effects of three dimensions of an individual's social position: socioeconomic status, social class and education.

Socioeconomic status is – net of its association with social class and education – a measure of material wellbeing. The "legitimation perspective" suggests that people of high socioeconomic status have individualistic beliefs about inequality because they wish to legitimize their economic superiority with a meritocratic narrative of success (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kreidl, 2000; Rytina, Form, & Pease, 1970). Similarly, people of lower socioeconomic status may blame society for their deprivation. Other authors claim that beliefs about inequality are based on the different perceptions of social constraints engendered by one's position on the social ladder. According to this argument, people of high socioeconomic status may have individualistic beliefs about inequality, because their personal experience may lead them to overestimate the fluidity and availability of opportunities in society. Conversely, those of low socioeconomic status will generally hold structuralist beliefs about inequality, because they perceive a higher rigidity and lack of opportunities (Hunt, 1996, 2004; Robinson & Bell, 1978). This argument is commonly known as the "underdog principle" (Kluegel & Smith, 1982; Robinson & Bell, 1978), and it has also been used to explain the beliefs of other socially disadvantaged groups such as women and ethnic minorities. Hence, following these theories, we expect that people of higher socioeconomic status will more likely to favor individualistic beliefs, while people of lower socioeconomic status will be more likely to promote structuralist beliefs ( $H_1$ ).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translation: Social Cohesion Survey 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Through this articles we use the concept of "social class" in the sense it is used in the literature on class mobility, that is, it refers to occupational categories (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> On a more empirical note, research has shown that what truly matters in determining beliefs about inequality is perceived, rather than observed, socioeconomic status (Gijssberts, 2002; Gijssberts & Ganzeboom, 2001).

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