



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*,¹ 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,² 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).³

¹ Translation: Social Cohesion Survey 2007.

² 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).

³ 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).

Social class accounts for a set of factors (other than income or education) that may promote different perceptions of inequality. These factors include possession of the means of production, specialized skills, and control and authority in work environments (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Portes & Hoffman, 2003). The literature often assumes that individuals who perform tasks that require specialized skills will tend to hold meritocratic beliefs about inequality, as will those who control means of production. On the other hand, inferiority in work environments will favor structuralist beliefs (Andersen & Yaish, 2012; Kreidl, 2000; Svallfors, 1993, 2006). Then, according to this perspective, *we expect that the upper classes (professionals) may hold meritocratic beliefs about economic outcomes, while the working class may support structuralist beliefs (H₂).*

Turning to the effect of education, theories generally assume a process of differential perception. Scholars argue that beliefs about inequality depend on people's capacity to process information about stratification in their society's. Therefore, education may be a critical factor in shaping perceptions about inequality. In this sense, the so-called "enlightenment thesis" argues that education creates more sensitivity toward structural constraints, while lack of education tends to hide these constraints (Kane & Kyyro, 2001; Niemela, 2008; Robinson & Bell, 1978). According to this approach, *we expect that having a higher level of education will favor structuralist beliefs about wealth and poverty, while having a lower level of education will promote individualistic beliefs (H₃).*

2.2.2. Social mobility: intragenerational and intergenerational mobility

Social mobility is yet another factor that can shape beliefs about inequality. As many scholars have claimed, upward mobility might encourage individualistic views about inequality. People who manage to rise socially – regardless of their origins and destination – tend to attribute their success to their own work and ability, and they may similarly rely on their experience to explain the failure or success of other members of society (Ellemers, Jost, & Major, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Wegener & Liebig, 1995). Conversely, downward mobility may favor structuralist explanations of inequality, as failure in these cases is generally attributed to exogenous factors. The link between social mobility and beliefs about inequality may be the desire for self-legitimation or a biased perception of actual opportunities in society. Therefore, following these approaches, we expect that perceived upward mobility favors individualistic beliefs about wealth and poverty, while perceived downward mobility might promote structuralist beliefs. On the other hand, *the effect of immobility may depend on the original position, such that people who remain at an advantaged social position may attribute it to their own merit, and people who remain at a disadvantaged position may invoke structuralist explanations (H₄).*

2.2.3. Race, sex and age

The issue of racial and ethnic differences in relation to beliefs about inequality has been widely studied in the American context. Scholars have documented that historical marginalization and discrimination against African Americans has led to the enduring social identification of this group as a disadvantaged racial minority. This perception of discrimination generally transcends social class, income, and education (Hunt, 1996, 2004, 2007). Consequently, research has consistently found that African Americans are much more likely than whites to attribute economic differences to discrimination and much less likely to attribute social disadvantages – particularly poverty – to lack of abilities, will or motivation. Similar beliefs have been found in the case of Hispanics, although their increasing assimilation with whites has determined an increase in their tendency to explain inequality as the result of lack of motivation, and a decline in their propensity to

associate inequality with discrimination (Bullock & Waugh, 2005; Hunt, 1996, 2004, 2007).

Although no Latin American country has a recent history of institutionalized discrimination against racial minorities, it is a well known fact that discrimination exists as a deep source of social stratification in these countries (Telles & Paschel, 2014; Villarreal, 2010). Therefore, following these approach, *we expect that ethnic minorities, such as indigenous peoples or blacks, will be more likely to hold structural views about wealth and poverty, while "mestizos" and whites (the mainstream) will be more prone to hold individualistic beliefs (H₅).* However, findings in this regard are mixed. While Bailey (2002) finds that race has no effect on the probability of maintaining discrimination-based explanations for inequalities between blacks and whites in Brazil, Bailey (2004) reports that blacks and browns are significantly more likely than whites to mention discrimination or historical slavery as main causes behind black's economic disadvantage in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Additionally, recent research on beliefs about the causes of racial disparities in Latin America has found that the inhabitants of countries with large indigenous or black populations, regardless of race, tend to hold structural explanations of inequalities between racial groups. Authors have found that Brazilians are the most inclined to favor structural explanations, while Bolivians are the least likely to recognize discrimination. They interpret their findings as a contradiction to the theory that Latin American ideologies of "mestizaje" may mask ethnic and racial discrimination (Telles & Bailey, 2013).

Regarding the influence of sex and age, research has generally shown that, as predicted by the "underdog" hypothesis, women are more likely to hold structural views about inequality, while elderly people tend to maintain individualistic views (Gijsberts, 2002; Niemela, 2008). Additionally, since most of the research on this topic is based on cross-sectional data, it is often not possible to differentiate between age and cohort effects.

2.3. Country level factors

2.3.1. The reflection hypothesis

A common assumption in the study of inequality is that individual views about social stratification reflect the structural conditions of a given society (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995, p. 137; Hadler, 2005; Stephenson, 2000). This approach suggests that people's beliefs about inequality tend to be consistent with their society's objective degree of inequality. Regarding the processes behind this hypothesis, some authors assume that people's beliefs are mostly a "description" of what they perceive in society (Gijsberts, 2002), while other scholars take this assumption one step further, claiming that people may also be inclined to attribute normative value to the social regularities they observe. As stated by Homans (pp. 249–250), "The rule of distributive justice is a statement of what ought to be, and what people say ought to be is determined in the long run and with some lag by what they find in fact to be the case".

This approach leads us to expect that people's beliefs about the origins of wealth and poverty will be consistent with actual societal characteristics, such as the level and pattern of social mobility, the unevenness of the income distribution or the prevalence of poverty and wealth. Since rates of social mobility are indicators, however imperfect, of the degree to which an individual's chances of success depend on either achieved or ascribed characteristics (Breen, 2010), the more fluid a society is, the more likely its members will be of having individualistic beliefs about wealth and poverty; conversely, structuralist beliefs will prevail in more rigid societies. Moreover, since the effect of social mobility is based on people's perception of such mobility, the macroeconomic context may have a similar effect on people's beliefs, because "relative mobility" and "absolute mobility" are nearly indistinguishable

from an individual's point of view (Hout, 2014). Thus, periods of economic growth will favor the spread of individualistic beliefs because people may experience this growth as upward mobility, while recession will encourage structuralist beliefs (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2009; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Regarding income inequality, this may influence popular views less than social mobility, because country-level inequality might be more difficult to perceive than individual-level mobility. Nevertheless, a reasonable hypothesis is that exposure to higher socioeconomic disparities may generate increased sensitivity to social inequality, which in turn may translate into a higher tendency to maintain structuralist views. Following these hypotheses we expect that Latin Americans will support structuralist explanation of the causes of wealth and poverty, as their countries combine high income inequality and limited social mobility (H_6). Likewise, country-level differences regarding beliefs may reflect distinct levels of social mobility and inequality.

2.3.2. The moral economy of welfare institutions

Another line of thought argues that attitudes toward inequality and redistribution are shaped by the type of political institutions that prevail in society, particularly welfare systems. This argument is based on the assertion that welfare institutions are not normatively neutral. Rather, they transmit to citizens a set of implicit and explicit valuations about social issues such as justice and fairness, while also legitimizing welfare itself (Jaeger, 2009; Larsen, 2008; Mau, 2004; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Sachweh & Olafsdottir, 2010; Svallfors, 2006). As stated by Esping-Andersen (1990, p. 58): "Welfare states may be equally large or comprehensive, but with entirely different effects on social structure [...] Each case will produce its own fabric of social solidarity".

However, several studies in political science and political economics support the opposite causal relation (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005; Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Linos & West, 2003), that is, that a country's distributive policy depends on its citizens' preferences for redistribution and acceptance or rejection of inequality. Nonetheless, authors who address institutional influence complement this framework by bringing into play the relevance of the normative feedback between beliefs and welfare institutions. This theory could explain why public demand for redistribution is actually smaller in countries with higher inequality than in countries with lower inequality and stronger welfare regimes. For instance, Sachweh and Olafsdottir (2010) found that Americans are more likely than Swedes or Germans to perceive their society as unequal, but they also generally prefer that higher degree of inequality. This theory suggests that the State's more active role in fighting inequality and poverty would increase the prevalence of structuralist views. Along the same lines, weaker redistributive policies would favor the dominance of individualistic views.

In the case of Latin America, a plausible hypothesis is that the limited and fragmentary action of the state in addressing inequalities could favor the prevalence of individualistic beliefs among citizens, in spite of the elevated levels of social inequality. Marcel and Rivera (2008) argue that despite the significant progress achieved in the last decade, social protection is still in its early stages in many Latin American states. Thus, the region presents a relatively unstable set of programs and rules combined with policies that are in a perpetual process of change and instability. The exceptions to the rule may be Argentina, Brazil and Chile, often characterized as "potential" welfare regimes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Huber, Nielsen, Pribble, & Stephens, 2006; Marcel & Rivera, 2008). Hence, following this approach, we expect that living in a country with a weak welfare system promotes individualistic accounts of wealth and poverty, while a stronger welfare system will favor structuralist explanations (H_7).

3. Data, measures and analytical approach

3.1. Data

Data used in this study comes from the *Encuesta de Cohesion Social 2007*,⁴ (EcoSocial), which is part of a research project, *Nueva Agenda de Cohesion Social en America Latina*. The survey was implemented by CIEPLAN – a Latin American Think Tank,⁵ – in collaboration with UNDP and the Instituto Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru.⁶ The sample size consists of a total of 10,000 observations, representative of the adult population (over 18) living in large cities in each country. The sample size of each city is proportional to its population, according to the most recent census information, the sample design is probabilistic in all three stages (country, city, and households), and the survey was carried out through structured, in-person interviews. Post-stratification weights conforming to data from census and large household surveys in each country were used to adjust the distribution of sampling variables (sex and age), as well as educational attainment.

This poll constitutes a unique dataset for the purposes of research on popular perceptions of social cohesion and inequality. EcoSocial 2007 follows a rigorous sampling methodology and is one of the few surveys that collects information from a heterogeneous set of Latin American countries, with special emphasis on the topics addressed in this article. As such, it brings together a comprehensive set of measures that focus mainly on issues such as social mobility, legitimacy of inequalities, socio-economic, religious and political polarization, and confidence in institutions.⁷ The main limitation of this instrument is that its representation is restricted to large cities and could therefore conceal important differences in rural regions and smaller urban areas (see Appendix, Table A.1, for further details).

3.2. Measures

Unlike most of the research in this field, which focuses on beliefs about poverty, this article studies popular views about wealth and poverty as two separate phenomena, potentially driven by different factors. Consequently, our analysis has two dependent variables: one is based on beliefs about wealth while the other on beliefs about poverty. Each of these variables relies on two separate study questions. When analyzing beliefs about wealth, subjects are asked the following questions: "In your opinion, which of following factors is the most important in determining a person's wealth in this country?", and "Which is the second most important factor in this sense?". The response alternatives for both questions are: "Money inherited from family members"; "Initiative and hard work"; "Influence or social contacts"; "Great ability and personal talent". When analyzing beliefs about poverty, subjects are asked the following questions: "In your opinion, which of the following factors is the most important in determining a person's poverty in this country?", and "Which is the second most important factor in this sense?". The response alternatives for these two questions are: "Parents are also poor"; "Laziness and lack of initiative"; "Vice and alcoholism"; "Social discrimination" (see Appendix, Tables A.2 and A.3, for further details). Following the typology of Kluegel and Smith (1986), response alternatives are

⁴ 2007 Social Cohesion Survey.

⁵ For more information: <http://www.cieplan.org/>.

⁶ EcoSocial 2007 received funding from the European Commission and was coordinated by the Institute of Sociology of the Catholic University of Chile and the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies at Notre Dame University.

⁷ For other related studies using EcoSocial see: Birdsall, Lustig, and Meyer (2014), López-Calva, Rigolini, and Torche (2012), and Ferreira et al. (2012).

Table 1
Typology of beliefs about wealth and poverty.

| | | First most important | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| | | Structuralist | Individualistic |
| Second most important | Structuralist Individualistic | Structuralist Mixed | Mixed Individualistic |

categorized as either individualistic or structuralist, while the combination of similar answers for pairs of questions (for example, opining that both the first and second most important determinants of wealth are structural) creates two new variables used to measure beliefs about wealth and poverty. Overall, the combined variables can be classified as either individualistic, structuralist or mixed (if each response belongs to a different category). Table 1 illustrates this typology. By construction, if beliefs were randomly assigned to individuals, it would be observed that 25% of people had individualistic and structuralist views, whereas 50% had mixed views. This typology has been shown to be more reliable and methodologically robust than others for analyzing beliefs about wealth and poverty (Lepianka, Van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2009).

The independent variables in this study directly address the hypotheses presented above. The variables that account for a person's structural position are perceived socioeconomic status, occupational class, and education level. As an indicator of perceived socioeconomic status, interviewees are asked the following question: "Where would you place your current economic position in this scale?", followed by a prompt to grade themselves using a scale from 1 to 10. The occupational class variable is constructed according to the CASMIN scheme of social class (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), and the education level is measured using the ISCED standard UNESCO. As for social mobility, variables are constructed to assess perceptions of inter-generational and intra-generational mobility. These indicators are incorporate the difference between the variable for measuring perceived socioeconomic status and two variables based on the replies to the following questions: "Where would you place your economic position 10 years ago in this scale?" and "Where in this scale would you place the economic position of your mother and/or father when you were 15 years old?". Since both scales are also from 1 to 10, social mobility variables can take values between -9 and 9. Negative values indicate perceived downward social mobility and positive values upward indicate perceived social mobility. It should be noted that people's perception of social mobility is generally a combination of both relative mobility as well as absolute mobility experiences. Finally, variables that indicate the sex, race and age of respondents are also incorporated. It is important to note that the variable measuring race does not constitute an objective or external classification. It rather measures people's perception of their own race. As in the cases of perceived SES and mobility, it can be argued that perceived race is more directly linked to attitudes and beliefs than external racial classification, an issue that is of particular relevance in the Latin American context (Telles & Paschel, 2014). At the same time, perceived race may have the advantage of capturing the internalized racial boundaries that are specific to each society. At the macro-level, the study includes dummy variables for each country. These indicators capture and combine all the relevant country-level characteristics that cannot be directly observed in the data (such as society-wide levels of inequality, economic growth and the role of welfare institutions). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for all dependent ⁸ and independent variables, separated by country.

⁸ Supplementary analyses show that missingness in the dependent variable is unrelated to the predictors included in our models, with the minor exception of race and country: people who declared themselves as "indigenous" or "black" and people

3.3. Analytical approach

This study's analysis develops in two moments, beginning with a multinomial logistic regression to investigate the factors that explain people's beliefs about wealth and poverty. Building up on the regression results, we use counterfactual simulations to study the contribution of each explanatory variable to the country-level variation in the distribution of beliefs.

Multinomial logistic regression is used to model the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty, as these models are suitable when the outcome variable can take more than two values, making it reasonable to assume a multinomial distribution. Eq. (1) presents the model,

$$\eta_{ij} = \log \frac{\pi_{ij}}{\pi_{ij}} = \alpha_j + \mathbf{X}'_i \boldsymbol{\beta}_j + \mathbf{C}'_i \boldsymbol{\gamma}_j, \quad j = \{Mixed, Structuralist\} \quad (1)$$

where η_{ij} is the logit of individual i of having the j -type explanation of wealth or poverty, π_{ij} is the probability of the j -type belief and π_{ij} is the probability of "individualistic belief", which are set as the reference category (J). On the right-hand side of the equation, \mathbf{X}_i is a vector of individual attributes and $\boldsymbol{\beta}_j$ is the corresponding vector of regression coefficients. \mathbf{C}_i is a vector of indicator dummy-variables for countries and $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_j$ is a vector of fixed effects parameters associated to each country. Finally, α_j is a constant in the model. Thus, the probability that individual i , from country c , holding a j -type belief about wealth or poverty can be expressed as

$$\pi_{ij} = (\exp\{\eta_{ij}\}) \left(\sum_{j=1}^J \exp\{\eta_{ij}\} \right)^{-1}.$$

We use effect-coding for discrete variables, while continuous variables are centered on their means. This way, the intercept correspond to the log-odd ratios associated to the average individual in the multi-country sample, while the regression coefficients are deviations from this "grand-mean" $\hat{\alpha}_j$. This general model is applied in order to explain the two dependent variables in this study: beliefs about wealth and beliefs about poverty. The predictors in the models are derived from the theoretical framework presented above. Multinomial over Ordered Logistic regression is preferred because the parallel regression assumption does not hold (see Appendix: Tables A.4 and A.5).

This first part of the analysis aims to identify which factors affect the probability of individuals holding certain beliefs about wealth and poverty. However, it does not tell us how these factors contribute to produce a different distribution of beliefs across countries. We implement a set of simulations in order to investigate differences in the distribution of beliefs across countries. The rationale is the following: we can think of the probability of observing each j -type belief in each country (i.e., the percentage of people holding the j -type belief) as the average probability of the individuals living in that country holding the j -type belief. Formally,

$$\pi_{cj} = \mathbb{E}[\pi_{ij} | \mathbf{X}, \alpha_j, \boldsymbol{\beta}_j, \boldsymbol{\gamma}_j, C = c]. \quad (2)$$

In other words, the distribution of beliefs about wealth and poverty at the country level can be obtained by aggregating across the i individuals in the individual-level model (described in Eq. (1)). Thus, as Eq. (2) states, the proportion of people holding the j -type belief in a given country will depend on all the parameters involved in the individual-level model. However, given the setting of the model assumed here, there are only two sources of cross-country variation in the distribution of beliefs: the distribution of the individual-level factors in each country ($f_{x_k|c}(x_k | c)$) and the country-level factors ($\boldsymbol{\gamma}_{cj}$). All other parameters are constant across

who lives in Argentina or Brazil are only slightly more likely to present a missing value in the questions about beliefs (less than 1% and 3% more likely, respectively).

Table 2
Means of dependent and independent variables.

| | | Argentina | Brazil | Chile | Colombia | Guatemala | Mexico | Peru | Total |
|---------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Beliefs about | Structuralist | 0.26 | 0.18 | 0.18 | 0.15 | 0.07 | 0.12 | 0.05 | 0.15 |
| Wealth | Mixed | 0.49 | 0.54 | 0.47 | 0.48 | 0.54 | 0.44 | 0.39 | 0.48 |
| | Individualistic | 0.25 | 0.28 | 0.35 | 0.37 | 0.39 | 0.43 | 0.56 | 0.37 |
| Beliefs about | Structuralist | 0.2 | 0.11 | 0.1 | 0.13 | 0.05 | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.11 |
| Poverty | Mixed | 0.52 | 0.62 | 0.46 | 0.52 | 0.58 | 0.43 | 0.45 | 0.51 |
| | Individualistic | 0.28 | 0.27 | 0.44 | 0.35 | 0.37 | 0.5 | 0.46 | 0.38 |
| Education | Less than Elementary | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.16 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.04 |
| | Elementary | 0.34 | 0.22 | 0.1 | 0.26 | 0.4 | 0.31 | 0.17 | 0.25 |
| | High School | 0.37 | 0.58 | 0.59 | 0.45 | 0.32 | 0.48 | 0.45 | 0.47 |
| | BA or more | 0.28 | 0.17 | 0.3 | 0.27 | 0.12 | 0.17 | 0.37 | 0.24 |
| Occupational | NILF | 0.31 | 0.42 | 0.47 | 0.43 | 0.43 | 0.45 | 0.39 | 0.41 |
| Class | Unskilled worker | 0.18 | 0.12 | 0.1 | 0.12 | 0.12 | 0.14 | 0.18 | 0.14 |
| | Skilled worker | 0.09 | 0.04 | 0.09 | 0.05 | 0.1 | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0.07 |
| | Small owner | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.11 | 0.21 | 0.15 | 0.16 | 0.2 | 0.16 |
| | Non-manual routine | 0.24 | 0.23 | 0.19 | 0.15 | 0.18 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.18 |
| | Professional | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.04 |
| SES | Perceived SES | 4.87 (1.64) | 4.36 (1.83) | 4.46 (1.46) | 4.09 (1.85) | 4.61 (1.62) | 4.98 (1.76) | 4.19 (1.6) | 4.51 (1.71) |
| Perceived | Intra-gen mobility | -0.29 (1.93) | -0.01 (2.1) | -0.05 (1.97) | 0 (1.89) | 0.61 (1.7) | 0.2 (1.93) | 0.03 (1.83) | 0.06 (1.93) |
| Mobility | Inter-gen mobility | -0.36 (2.13) | 0.2 (2.21) | 0.15 (2.04) | -0.05 (2.05) | 0.39 (1.95) | 0.36 (2.04) | -0.15 (1.96) | 0.07 (2.07) |
| Sex | Woman | 0.52 | 0.52 | 0.51 | 0.52 | 0.54 | 0.51 | 0.51 | 0.52 |
| | Man | 0.48 | 0.48 | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.46 | 0.49 | 0.49 | 0.48 |
| Age | Age | 42.34 (17.1) | 40.15 (15.7) | 41.85 (16.5) | 39.81 (15.9) | 37.69 (15) | 38.55 (15.5) | 39.43 (15.8) | 40.01 (16) |
| Race | White | 0.65 | 0.43 | 0.44 | 0.38 | 0.29 | 0.13 | 0.08 | 0.34 |
| | Mestizo | 0.25 | 0.2 | 0.47 | 0.38 | 0.38 | 0.71 | 0.73 | 0.44 |
| | Indigenous | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.23 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.06 |
| | Black | 0.09 | 0.36 | 0.07 | 0.22 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.13 | 0.16 |
| | Observations | | 1400 | 1700 | 1400 | 1400 | 1200 | 1500 | 1400 |

Source: ECosociAL Survey 2007.

Note: All values correspond to proportions, except for perceived SES, perceived intra and intergenerational mobility and age. Standard deviations in parentheses.

countries.⁹ Building on this reasoning, we computed several counterfactual scenarios in order to assess the extent to which these factors produce the observed cross-country level heterogeneity in the distribution of beliefs.

Each scenario simulates the expected distribution of beliefs within countries under the assumption that they are uniquely determined by one predictor (x_k) at the time,¹⁰ while assuming all other factors have no effects on beliefs. Given that coefficients in our model correspond to deviation from the average individual in the multi-country sample, the assumption of no effect of a given predictor is equivalent to the assumption that the predictor does not produce departure from the “grand mean”. The general intuition behind these counterfactual simulations is that, in order to produce cross-country variation in the distribution of beliefs, an explanatory factor must meet two simultaneous conditions: it must present an effect on an individual’s beliefs and its distribution must differ across different countries. Following this logic, one simulation is implemented for each explanatory factor. The results from these simulations inform us on the extent to which differences in the distribution of beliefs across countries are due to variation in

the distribution of individual-level predictors and/or the effect of country-level factors. These results, however, cannot be interpreted in a causal fashion, offering rather a careful descriptive examination of the data.

Eq. (3) describes the computation of these simulated scenarios,

$$\hat{\pi}_{cj} = \frac{1}{N_c} \sum_{i=1}^{N_c} \left[\frac{\exp(\hat{\alpha}_{ij} + \hat{\beta}_{kj}x_{ki})}{\sum_j \exp(\hat{\alpha}_{ij} + \hat{\beta}_{kj}x_{ki})} \middle| C = c \right] \quad (3)$$

where $\hat{\pi}_{cj} \times 100$ is the predicted percentage of people holding the j -type belief in each country, x_k is the variable we allow to exert an influence on beliefs, β_{kj} is the corresponding regression coefficient and $\hat{\alpha}_j$ is the estimated intercept from the model. Coefficients come from the estimations presented in models M1 and M2 (see Tables 1 and 2).

This analytical strategy presents two main limitations. Firstly, an exhaustive explanation of differences between countries requires the inclusion of country-level characteristics in the model. Even though multilevel modeling is the natural choice for the purpose of this research, the reduced number of countries analyzed (7) may hinder the reliability of the results (Snijders & Bosker, 2011). In order to lessen this limitation, fixed effects are introduced to capture the joint influences of country-level factors. In this setting, however, these factors remain unknown. Moreover, in order to incorporate the nested structure of the data into the models, the assumption of independence among observations is relaxed: it is assumed that observations are independent between – but

⁹ A strong assumption of this model is that the influence of individual-level predictors does not differ across countries.

¹⁰ In cases in which a given predictor also includes higher order-terms or interactions in our regression models, these terms are also included in the simulation part.

not within – countries. This procedure yields robust standard errors, which affect the significance of the estimators but not the regression coefficients. The second limitation is that the effect of individual predictors is assumed to be equal across countries. Although it might be reasonable to relax this assumption, the opposite approach is taken due to the constraints imposed by the size of the sample and the need for a parsimonious explanatory model.

To assess the robustness of estimates, the explanatory model previously described is applied to predict responses to the following statement: “In this country, life achievements depend mainly on wealth and family prestige”, which arguably captures the same type of views measured by the typology of beliefs about wealth. Additionally, the robustness of the results to relaxing the assumption of Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) is tested using the Small-Hsiao Test and re-estimating all models with Multinomial Probit. Finally, sample sizes are equalized by means of sampling weights, to prevent estimates from being driven by the countries with larger samples, and these weights further adjust the distribution of sampling variables, to conform to data from census and large household surveys in each country. As for the counterfactual scenarios, a Bootstrap Monte Carlo simulation is implemented to provide confidence intervals for the simulated quantities of interest.

4. Findings

4.1. Beliefs about wealth and poverty in seven Latin American Countries

This research studies two dependent variables: beliefs about wealth and beliefs about poverty. Both types of beliefs are operationally categorized as either “individualistic”, “mixed”, or “structuralist”. By construction, the majority of responses in all countries belong to the “mixed” category. Table 2 shows that, as we would expect if beliefs were randomly assigned to individuals, about 50% of people in all countries would maintain mixed beliefs. In contrast, the comparison between individualistic and structuralist beliefs reveals that, in most countries, the former are disproportionately overrepresented while the latter are much lower than would be expected under random belief assignment (25%). Although variation is substantial between countries, individualistic explanations of poverty are more common than structuralist ones in all the countries analyzed. The same applies to wealth, with the exception of Argentina, where both views are equally represented. Extreme cases are Peru and Guatemala, where only 5% and 7% of individuals hold structuralist views about wealth, and 56% and 39% hold individualistic explanations, respectively. Regarding beliefs about poverty, 50% of the Mexican population presents individualistic views, while only 8% has structuralist beliefs. A similar pattern is observed in countries like Peru and Chile.¹¹ These results depart substantially from previous research on beliefs about the causes of racial inequality in Latin American countries, especially Brazil. Scholarship on this topic has consistently found consensual public opinion emphasizing the importance of structural factors over individualistic ones as the main causes of socioeconomic disparities between different racial groups (Bailey, 2002, 2004; Telles & Bailey, 2013).¹² However, these findings do not directly address

¹¹ Very similar results are reported by an independent survey – Encuesta Bicentenario – for the case of Chile in 2009 and 2013. For further details visit: <http://encuestabicentenario.uc.cl/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/UC-Adimark-2013ppt-final.pdf>, pp. 90–91.

¹² The reasons for this discrepancy are arguably two-fold. First, certain studies are based on surveys whose questions may unwittingly prime structuralist responses. In particular, Datafolha Instituto de Pesquisas survey asks “Blacks in Brazil were freed from slavery about 100 years ago. In your opinion, who is most responsible

the current study, because racial inequality is only one component of the societal inequality studied here, and because the salience of race-based disparities varies across the countries presently analysed.

4.2. Explaining beliefs about wealth and poverty

This section presents the results from the investigation of the determinants of beliefs about the causes of economic outcomes. As specified in the analytical strategy, beliefs about wealth and poverty are studied separately, but the same explanatory model is applied for both dependent variables. In this model, the dependent variable is the type of belief exhibited by the individual, and the reference category is the belief-type “individualistic”.

4.2.1. A model of beliefs about wealth

Table 3 reports results from a multinomial logit model of beliefs about the causes of wealth. Beliefs about wealth are modeled as a function of four different sets of covariates: variables that capture structural position, variables that account for perceptions of social mobility, demographic characteristics and country-level dummy indicators. We include interactions and higher-order terms in order to capture the potential non-linear effects of these variables (e.g. an heterogeneous effect of social mobility depending on perceived origins). Log-odd ratios using effect-coding are reported, such that coefficients correspond to log-odd ratios of holding structuralist or mixed beliefs instead of individualistic ones, as compared to a grand mean that could be interpreted as an average individual in the multi-country sample.¹³ The intercept shows that the average individual across countries has an estimated probability of 0.14 of holding structuralist views and a probability of 0.35 of holding individualistic views about wealth.¹⁴ Explanatory variables in this model can be interpreted as sources of deviation from this baseline, i.e., the mean individual.

Among the variables that indicate structural position, perceived socioeconomic status would seem to increase the likelihood of

for the fact that the black population still lives in worse living conditions than the white population?” (Bailey, 2002), DataUff asks “Some studies show that in general black persons have worse jobs, salaries, and education than white persons. I am going to mention some reasons that people say explain that situation” (Bailey, 2004) and the 2010 Americas Barometer asks “According to the Census, indigenous persons/black persons/darker skin persons are poorer. What do you think is the main reason for that?” (Telles & Bailey, 2013). Second, certain operationalization choices may drive results toward structuralist interpretations. For instance, regarding the question about the causes of racial socioeconomic gaps, Telles and Bailey (2013) decided to treat the answer “Because they have a low educational level” (referring to indigenous/black/darker skin persons) as an indicator of structuralist accounts of inequality. While the structural causes of educational attainment seem clear to sociologists, this may not be an obvious assumption for the non-academic, such that it is unclear whether a respondent associates educational level with structural factors or whether they consider it the outcome of individual merit. This operationalization decision is crucial because it alone accounts for 26% of the total answers to this question, ranging from 12% in Brazil to 46% in the case of Peru. In fact, if one were to label the education response as “individualist”, such accounts would comprise the majority in almost all countries (with the exception of Brazil). By contrast, EcoSocial frames the questions about the causes of poverty and wealth in strictly neutral terms and asks respondents to choose between alternatives that are unequivocally classifiable as either structuralist or individualist accounts (see Section 3.2).

¹³ It could be argued that the mean, cross-country individual exists only in the statistical model, and that comparisons to this individual are interpretatively meaningless. That said, consulting the descriptive statistics in Table 2 reveals a number of important similarities between the national samples, such as age (roughly 40 years), level of education (no more than high school), occupational status (skilled workers and professionals are minorities in all countries), and gender ratios (approximately half-half). This cross-national homogeneity lends some credence for a meaningful interpretation of the mean individual as the modal Latin American. However, significant discrepancies among self-reported race, perceived SES, and perceived social mobility caution against any overly-ambitious claims.

¹⁴ The corresponding 95% confidence intervals are [.12,.17] and [.32,.38].

Table 3
Multinomial logit regression predicting beliefs about wealth (M1).

| | | Structuralist vs individualistic | | Mixed vs individualistic | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|-------|
| Education | Less than elementary | 0.09 | (.11) | 0.17 | (.17) |
| | Elementary | -.35*** | (.08) | -0.06 | (.06) |
| | High school | -.17*** | (.04) | -.19* | (.08) |
| | BA or more | .42*** | (.05) | 0.08 | (.07) |
| Occupational class | NILF | -0.08 | (.10) | 0.03 | (.04) |
| | Unskilled worker | -.28** | (.10) | -0.15 | (.10) |
| | Skilled worker | -0.13 | (.10) | -0.09 | (.08) |
| | Small owner | -0.02 | (.06) | -0.03 | (.06) |
| | Non-manual routine | .16 [†] | (.08) | 0.06 | (.07) |
| | Professional | 0.34 | (.19) | 0.19 | (.14) |
| Perceived SES | SES | -.09 [†] | (.04) | 0.01 | (.02) |
| | SES ² | -0.01 | (.01) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| Perceived mobility | Intra-gen. mobility | -.08*** | (.02) | -0.03 | (.02) |
| | Intra-gen. mobility ² | -0.02 | (.01) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| | SES [†] Intra-gen. mobility | 0.03 | (.02) | 0.02 | (.02) |
| | Inter-gen. mobility | 0.00 | (.03) | -0.03 | (.02) |
| | Inter-gen. mobility ² | -0.00 | (.01) | 0.00 | (.01) |
| | SES [†] Inter-gen. mobility | -0.00 | (.02) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| Sex | Woman | -.14** | (.05) | -.08 [†] | (.04) |
| | Man | .14** | (.05) | .08 [†] | (.04) |
| Age | Age | .04** | (.02) | .05*** | (.01) |
| | Age ² | -.00** | (.00) | -.00*** | (.00) |
| Race | White | 0.11 | (.08) | .14 [†] | (.05) |
| | Mestizo | -0.12 | (.07) | -0.09 | (.05) |
| | Indigenous | 0.03 | (.17) | -0.10 | (.06) |
| | Black | -0.01 | (.09) | 0.06 | (.08) |
| Country | Argentina | 1.09*** | (.03) | .34*** | (.02) |
| | Brazil | .56*** | (.03) | .33*** | (.03) |
| | Chile | .31*** | (.02) | 0.02 | (.02) |
| | Colombia | .12*** | (.02) | -0.01 | (.02) |
| | Guatemala | -.64*** | (.04) | .09*** | (.02) |
| | Mexico | -.08** | (.03) | -.15*** | (.03) |
| | Peru | -1.36*** | (.04) | -.62*** | (.02) |
| | Constant | -.90*** | (.10) | .37*** | (.09) |
| | | N | 9141.00 | | |
| | N cluster | 7.00 | | | |
| | $\ell\ell_0$ | -9158.59 | | | |
| | $\ell\ell_{max}$ | -8751.80 | | | |
| | R^2_p | 0.04 | | | |

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

holding individualistic beliefs stressing the role played by talent and hard work as the main determinants of economic success. Likewise, perceived intragenerational mobility also favors individualistic views about wealth, but perceived intergenerational mobility does not present a significant effect. These results provide partial support for both theories: those that argue that beliefs about inequality stem from a desire for self-legitimation (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Rytina et al., 1970) as well as those that claim that advantaged and disadvantaged groups perceive social constraints differently (H_1 and H_4). Although adjudication between these hypotheses is beyond the scope of our data, research on the case of Chile confirms that people with higher household income, as well as people with post-secondary education perceive more inequality than the rest of the population (Castillo, 2011).

Nonetheless, not all variables that indicate structural position have the same influence on beliefs about wealth. Although the effect of class is statistically insignificant, point estimates suggest an influence that stands in stark contrast to the predictions of the literature (Kreidl, 2000; Svallfors, 1993, 2006). Results show that the upper classes are more likely than the lower classes to hold structuralist beliefs about wealth, thus contradicting what we

expected by H_2 . In particular, unskilled workers show a greater likelihood of having individualistic views about the origins of wealth, while the professional class is more inclined toward structuralist beliefs. Experimental research reports a similar pattern for the effect of social class on the extent to which economic elites in Chile are perceived favorably by the population at large (Mac-Clure & Barozet, 2014). A plausible interpretation is that members of the classes closer to the affluent are more aware of the factors that explain affluence; such people may also have a more demanding definition of affluence, and therefore may not identify themselves as “rich”. Similar results are found regarding the effect of education. While having an elementary or high school degree is linked with a higher propensity to hold individualistic beliefs, possessing a college degree increases the probability of holding structuralist views about wealth. These findings are partially in line with the “enlightenment hypothesis” (H_3), which states that education generates a greater sense of awareness of social constraints (Kane & Kyro, 2001; Niemela, 2008; Robinson & Bell, 1978). They could also indicate that people with less education perceive a larger distance in terms of skills and intellectual capacity with respect to the affluent, which may make them more prone to maintain meritocratic

Table 4
Multinomial logit regression predicting beliefs about poverty (M2).

| | | Structuralist vs individualistic | | Mixed vs individualistic | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------|
| Education | Less than elementary | 0.25 | (.16) | 0.06 | (.09) |
| | Elementary | -0.11 | (.09) | 0.03 | (.04) |
| | High school | -.27*** | (.07) | -0.07 | (.05) |
| | BA or more | 0.13 | (.12) | -0.03 | (.06) |
| Occupational class | NILF | .19** | (.07) | 0.098 | (.07) |
| | Unskilled worker | -0.13 | (.11) | -0.03 | (.06) |
| | Skilled worker | -.18* | (.09) | -0.07 | (.05) |
| | Small owner | -.27* | (.12) | -0.04 | (.06) |
| | Non-manual routine | 0.03 | (.09) | 0.02 | (.06) |
| | Professional | .36* | (.13) | 0.02 | (.1) |
| Perceived | SES | -.13*** | (.03) | -.04** | (.01) |
| | SES ² | 0.01 | (.01) | 0 | (.01) |
| Perceived mobility | Intra-gen. mobility | 0.00 | (.05) | -0.04 | (.02) |
| | Intra-gen. mobility ² | -0.00 | (.01) | 0 | (.01) |
| | SES* Intra-gen. mobility | -0.00 | (.02) | 0.02 | (.02) |
| | Inter-gen. mobility | 0.01 | (.01) | 0 | (.01) |
| | Inter-gen. mobility ² | -0.01 | (.01) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| | SES* Inter-gen. mobility | 0.01 | (.01) | 0.01 | (.01) |
| Sex | Woman | -0.08 | (.05) | -0.03 | (.04) |
| | Man | 0.08 | (.05) | 0.03 | (.04) |
| Age | Age | 0.00 | (.01) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| | Age ² | -0.00 | (.00) | 0 | (.00) |
| Race | White | -.26** | (.09) | -0.03 | (.04) |
| | Mestizo | -.14* | (.07) | -0.04 | (.03) |
| | Indigenous | 0.3 | (.18) | 0.06 | (.04) |
| | Black | 0.1 | (.06) | 0.02 | (.06) |
| Country | Argentina | 1.14*** | (.06) | .36*** | (.03) |
| | Brazil | .53*** | (.03) | .54*** | (.01) |
| | Chile | -.11*** | (.02) | -.24*** | (.02) |
| | Colombia | .27*** | (.03) | .09*** | (.01) |
| | Guatemala | -.80*** | (.06) | .08*** | (.02) |
| | Mexico | -.58*** | (.02) | -.48*** | (.02) |
| | Peru | -.45*** | (.03) | -.35*** | (.01) |
| | Constant | -1.13*** | (.08) | .38*** | (.04) |
| | N | 9125 | | | |
| | N cluster | 7 | | | |
| ll ₀ | -8701.68 | | | | |
| ll _{max} | -8428.054 | | | | |
| R _p ² | 0.031 | | | | |

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

explanations of wealth. Note, however, that people with the lowest level of education (viz., less than elementary) are not the most inclined to hold individualistic views.

As for the effect of demographic characteristics, the findings show that females are generally more likely to have individualistic views about wealth, while an increase in age is connected with a proportional decrease in the odds of having individualistic views about the origins of wealth. Because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is not possible to attribute this association to an age effect or to a birth-cohort effect. A surprising result, yet consistent with the evidence found for Latin American countries, is that no differences are observed across perceived racial groups. Some scholars attribute these results to the effect of the historical narrative of mestizaje, which may have blurred the salience of race-based social disparities (Telles & Bailey, 2013).

Finally, a salient finding of this model is that differences of beliefs between countries are robust, consistent, and significant, even after controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals. This suggests that not only individual characteristics but also country-level factors drive beliefs about the causes of wealth in these societies.

4.2.2. A model of beliefs about poverty

Table 4 reports results from a multinomial logit model of beliefs about the causes of poverty.

The model for poverty entails the same set of covariates included in the model for wealth, where coefficients corresponds to log-odd ratios of structuralist or mixed beliefs, as opposed to individualistic beliefs. In the case of poverty, the intercept reveals that the (cross-national) average person in the sample has an estimated probability of 0.12 of holding structuralist views and 0.36 of holding individualistic views about poverty. The difference between these probabilities is statistically significant.¹⁵ These results are the basis for understanding the effect of the explanatory variables in the model.

As in the case of wealth, perceived socioeconomic status increases the likelihood of holding individualistic beliefs about poverty. In general, the higher a person considers their own economic status, the more likely they are to believe that laziness or

¹⁵ The corresponding 95% confidence intervals are [.10,.13] and [.34,.38].

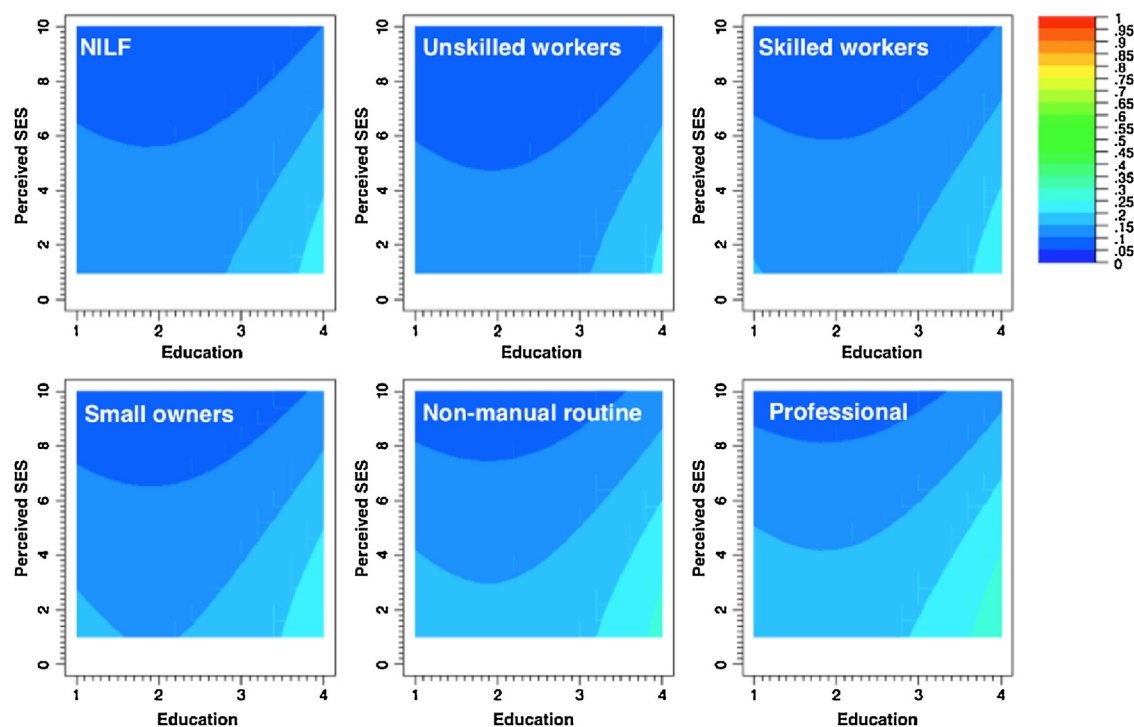


Fig. 1. Predicted probability of structuralist (vs. individualistic) beliefs about wealth for combinations of SES, education and class. Colors closer to red indicate a higher predicted probability of holding Structuralist views. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

moral deviation are the main reasons for living in poverty. This result is consistent with H_1 . The other variables that measure social position show the opposite pattern: in general, being immediately above the most disadvantaged raises the likelihood of having individualistic views about poverty. Regarding education, and as predicted by the “enlightenment hypothesis” (H_3), people with elementary or high school degrees appear to favor individualistic explanations of poverty, while people with either post-secondary or less than elementary education are more likely to maintain structuralist views about poverty. The effect of occupational class is clearer in this respect: members of the professional class generally hold structuralist beliefs, while all other classes are more inclined to explain poverty in individualistic terms. This is especially true for skilled workers and small owners, who are significantly more likely to maintain individualistic views about poverty, even though their material distance from the poor is not substantial. In the Latin American context, as in most developing countries, being a small owner or a manual worker is no guarantee against poverty – in fact, this condition is usually associated with social vulnerability (Fields, 2012; Jefferson, 2012; Portes & Hoffman, 2003). Finally, people who are not in the labor force appear to favor structuralist beliefs about poverty, similar to the professional class. These results are in stark opposition to our original hypothesis regarding the effect of class (H_2).

In contrast with wealth, perceptions of social mobility have no impact on what people believe to be the main causes of poverty. That is, people who experience downward social mobility do not generally blame society for social disadvantages, and those who experience upward mobility do not generally punish others less fortunate, thus contradicting what we expected by H_4 . Regarding demographic characteristics, gender and age do not produce any differences, while perceived race leads to a significant effect. As we expected by H_5 , people who perceive themselves as whites or mestizos are less likely to maintain structuralist beliefs about poverty. Arguably, due to their own experience, whites and mestizos might underestimate the extent to which racial discrimination

abates socioeconomic outcomes and opportunities. Finally, as in the case of wealth, differences between countries remain robust, consistent and significant after controlling by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals. Again, these findings indicate that not only individual characteristics but also country-level factors influence beliefs about the causes of poverty in a given society.

In order to compare the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty, Figs. 1 and 2 depict the predicted probabilities of holding structuralist beliefs about wealth and poverty (instead of individualistic ones) for different combinations of three of the main individual-level variables in our models: perceived socioeconomic status, education and social class.¹⁶ Overall, we find that individual-level characteristics show highly similar patterns in determining beliefs about wealth and poverty. Perceived socioeconomic status has a similar effect on beliefs about both: the lower an individual's socioeconomic status, the more likely they are to maintain structuralist views about the origins of wealth and poverty. Similarly, the higher an individual's socioeconomic status, the more likely they are to attribute social advantages and disadvantages to personal merit or blame. The effect of education is similarly consistent for both wealth and poverty: having a very high level of education (or a very low one) is associated with being more likely to hold structuralist views. A relatively similar pattern is observed for occupational class. Professionals appear to be the most inclined toward structuralist views of wealth and poverty, while unskilled workers and small owners are more prone to individualistic beliefs. As for predictors with a differential effect, we find that perceptions of social mobility influence beliefs about wealth, but not about poverty, while being white or mestizo is associated while a higher

¹⁶ All other variables are set at their mean values for the computation of predicted probabilities. For graphical purposes education is entered as a continuous variable, including an squared term to reflect the non-linear effects reported in our regression models.

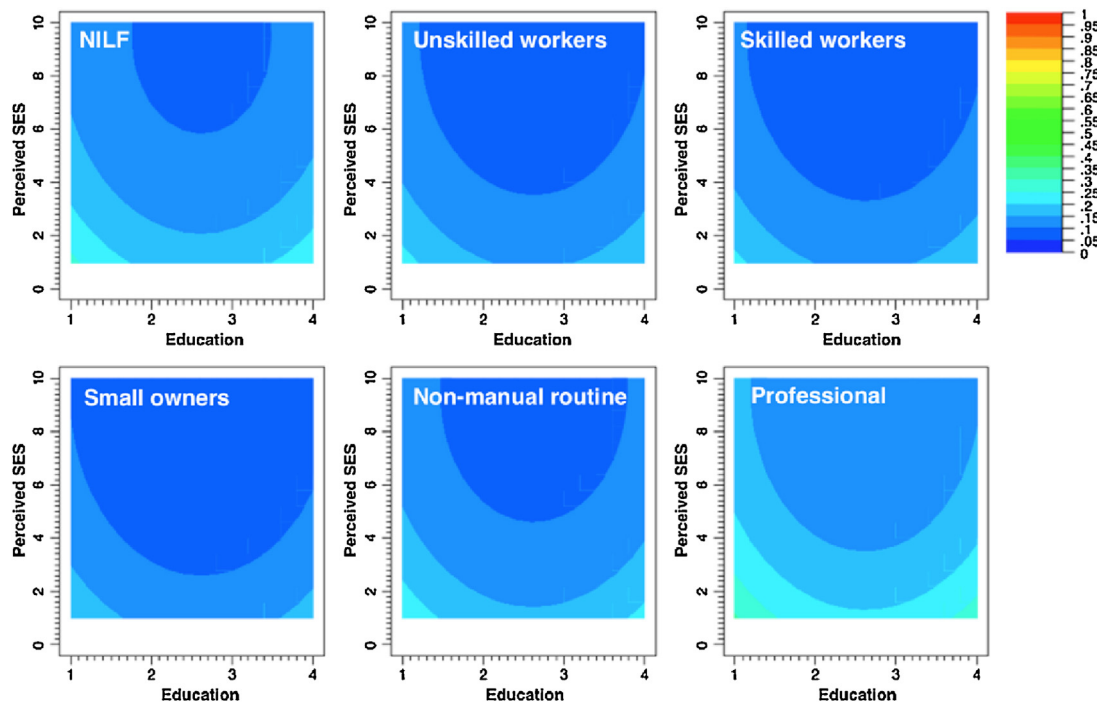


Fig. 2. Predicted probability of structuralist (vs. individualistic) beliefs about poverty for combinations of SES, education and class. (Other variables in the model are set to their means. Colors closer to blue indicate a higher predicted probability of holding Individualistic views. Colors closer to red indicate a higher predicted probability of holding Structuralist views.) (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

propensity to maintain individualistic views about poverty, but has no effect on belief about wealth.

Finally, for both wealth and poverty, country-specific differences remain robust after controlling for individual characteristics, which indicates that beliefs about wealth and poverty also depend on country-level characteristics. Although these factors are unobserved in these models, previous literature on this issue suggests that characteristics of the social structure, such as inequality and social mobility levels, as well as the type of welfare institutions in each country play a consequential role in shaping beliefs about stratification (Feagin, 1975; Jaeger, 2009; Kluegel et al., 1995; Larsen, 2008; Sachweh & Olafsdottir, 2010). Tentatively, fixed effects for both wealth and poverty may provide preliminary evidence against the hypothesis that people's beliefs reflect actual inequalities in society (H_6). Argentina, the country most oriented toward structuralist views about wealth and poverty, is less unequal, more mobile and less poor than Guatemala or Peru, the two countries most inclined toward individualistic explanations of wealth and poverty (De Ferranti, 2004). On the other hand, what Argentina, Brazil and Chile have in common is a relatively operational (what analysts have called a “potential”) welfare state, while social security systems are just emerging in Peru and Guatemala, where individualistic beliefs are prevalent (Marcel & Rivera, 2008). This result provides preliminary support for the hypothesis of a normative feedback between welfare institutions and beliefs about inequality (H_7).

All the results reported in this section are robust to the IIA assumption, as Small-Hsiao Tests do not reject null hypothesis of independence of alternatives and Multinomial Probit yields very similar results. Additionally, the model for predicting responses to the statement “In this country, life achievements depend mainly on wealth and family prestige”, which presumably captures the same type of views measured in the typology of beliefs about wealth, yields similar findings to those reported above (see Appendix: Tables A.6–A.8). These results should be interpreted with caution,

however, given that the survey is only representative of large cities in each country.

4.3. Explaining cross-country differences in the distribution of beliefs about wealth and poverty

The analysis of the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty sheds light on the factors that influence these variables at the individual level, providing an explanation as to why a person is more likely to maintain a certain type of beliefs about inequality. On their own, however, these results do not explain why these Latin American countries differ in the extent to which individualistic and structuralist explanations of wealth poverty are actually held. To address this question, the present section aims to explain these cross-country differences, by using counterfactual scenarios to isolate the relative impact of the explanatory factors on the distribution of beliefs in each country (as alluded to in Section 3.3). These scenarios simulate the expected distribution of beliefs about wealth and poverty in each country, under the assumption these distributions are uniquely determined by one predictor x_k out of the set of predictors included in the explanatory model. As such, they shed light on the degree to which the country-specific distribution of each predictor (expressed as deviations from the cross-national sample mean), in combination with the correspondent effect (β_{kj}), contributes to produce the observed cross-country differences in the distribution of beliefs about wealth and poverty.

Fig. 3 depicts the results of these simulations for wealth and poverty.¹⁷ The difference in the expected percentage of people holding individualistic vs structuralist explanations in each country under each scenario is reported. In interpreting the results we must remember that the estimated baseline probability of holding individualistic beliefs about wealth is .35 and the baseline

¹⁷ See Appendix Tables A.9, A.10 and Fig. A.1 for further details.

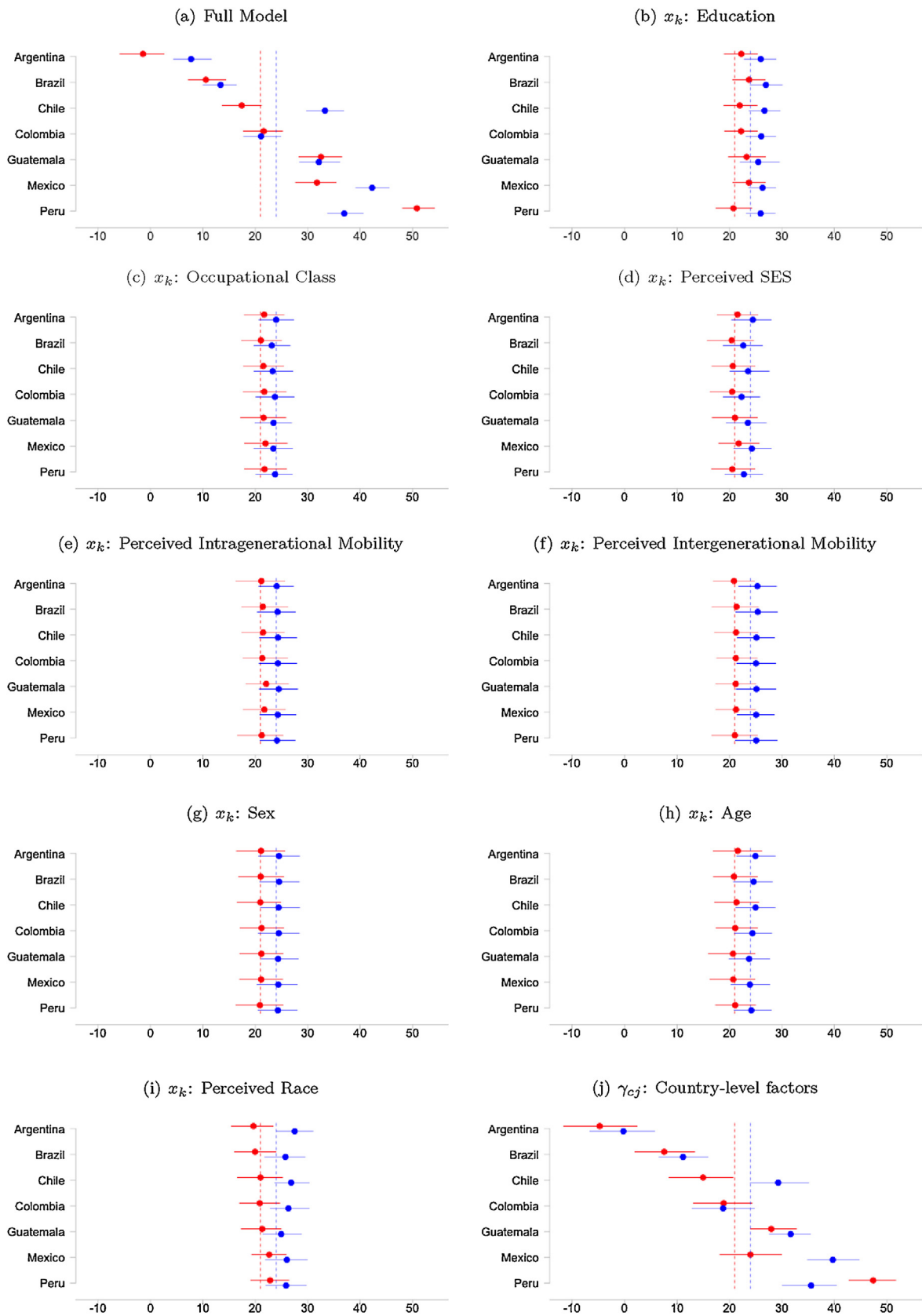


Fig. 3. Simulated difference in the percentage of people holding individualist versus structuralist beliefs in each country. Simulated 95% confidence intervals through Bootstrap Monte Carlo simulation. ● Wealth. ● Poverty. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

probability of holding structuralist ones is.14. This implies that, for a given counterfactual scenario in a given country, a difference of about 21 percentage points between the proportion of the two types of beliefs will be obtained if the effect of the corresponding predictor is virtually zero, or if the distribution of the predictor in the country does not differ from its distribution in the cross-country sample. Regarding poverty, the estimated baseline probability of holding individualistic and structuralist views are.36 and.12 respectively. Therefore, a difference of 24 percentage points between the proportion of the two will obtain in the simulations if the conditions described above are met. Departures from these baselines inform us about the impact of each predictor in shaping the distribution of beliefs in each country.

Regarding the distribution of beliefs about the causes of wealth, simulations involving individual-level predictors do not produce any significant departure from the baseline. This result is valid for all countries. This means that the predicted distribution of beliefs under these scenarios does not present a substantial deviation from a situation in which all individuals' beliefs are identical to those of the average person in the cross-national sample. The reason for these results is two-fold: on the one hand, some of the variables that significantly effect beliefs about wealth do not vary enough across countries to produce cross-country differences in the distribution of beliefs. Such is the case for SES, perceived intra-generational mobility and sex. On the other hand, variables that do vary across countries – such as education, social class and perceived race – exhibit offsetting effects or small effect sizes. For example, Guatemala has both a higher share of people with less than elementary school and people whose highest degree is elementary school. Because the former are more inclined toward structuralist explanations of wealth, while the latter are more prone to individualistic accounts, this produces an offsetting effect. In sharp contrast, the scenario in which country-level factors are assumed as the only predictors produces substantial cross-country differences in the distribution of beliefs about wealth. Although these country-level factors are not observed in the data, they are captured by the fixed effect of each country. Compared to the baseline probabilities, this scenario yields a substantially higher incidence of structuralist beliefs about wealth in Argentina and Brazil, as well as a significantly higher incidence of individualistic views in Peru and Guatemala.

Regarding the distribution of views about poverty across countries, the simulation results present a pattern similar to that observed for the case of wealth. Although factors such as perceived SES, education and social class prove to be relevant for explaining variability in beliefs among individuals, these results show that they do not explain differences in the distribution of beliefs about poverty across countries. In most scenarios the predicted difference between the percentage of people holding individualistic and structuralist beliefs about poverty is not significantly different from 20 percentage points (in either direction), which is simply the baseline. As in the case of wealth, cross-country differences in the distribution of views about poverty occur only when country-level factors are assumed to be the only predictor. Under this scenario, Brazil, and especially Argentina, present a much lower proportion of people holding individualistic beliefs about poverty, when compared to the baseline. On the other hand, Mexico and Guatemala present a significantly higher proportion of people holding individualistic beliefs. Overall, results from these simulations show that all the countries analyzed present an unexplained higher incidence of individualistic explanations about both wealth and poverty. This propensity, however, is weakened by unobserved country-level characteristics in the case of Argentina and Mexico (regarding poverty and wealth, respectively).

Altogether, findings from the simulation show that observed differences between countries are only explained by country-level

factors. These results also highlight that those factors that help explain beliefs about wealth and poverty at the individual-level are not necessarily consequential in shaping the distribution of these beliefs at the country-level.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Latin American countries present high levels of income inequality combined with limited levels of social mobility (De Ferranti, 2004; Fields, 2009; Torche, 2009, 2014). This article shows that, surprisingly, the notion of individual responsibility as the main determinant of economic status tends to prevail in public opinion, while the impact of structural factors is often under-reported. The empirical puzzle that motivated this research is then: why, in countries where success or failure are strongly related to social origins, individuals tend to think of inequality as the result of people's own merits or faults, rather than as a consequence of structural constraints in their societies? In order to better understand these phenomena, this article investigated the factors that drive an individual's beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty in seven Latin American countries. Several hypotheses regarding the influence of individual-level variables (such as education, social class, mobility experiences and race) were tested. In addition, the effect of country-level characteristics was also addressed. Moreover, this research examined the role that these various factors play in producing cross-national heterogeneity in the distribution of beliefs about wealth and poverty.

Regarding individual-level factors, results provide partial support for theories maintaining that the more advantaged the social position of an individual, the more likely they will be to hold beliefs that stress the importance of merit. We show that perceived higher socioeconomic status and upward intergenerational mobility are indeed associated with a higher likelihood of holding individualistic beliefs about wealth and poverty. Similarly for the effect of race, whites and mestizos are more likely to have individualistic beliefs about poverty. As for the effect of education, our findings are consistent with the "enlightenment hypothesis" (Kane & Kyro, 2001; Robinson & Bell, 1978), which argues that education increases sensitivity to social constraints. Results show that having a bachelor degree (or less than elementary schooling) is associated with a higher likelihood of having structuralist beliefs, while lower educational levels are associated with a higher tendency to hold individualistic views. This finding is especially clear for explanations of wealth.

This set of results demonstrate that the effect of individual characteristic on people's beliefs about inequality is highly comparable across different national and cultural contexts. The patterns we report here for the case of Latin American countries show important resemblance with those found by researchers studying the US, Canada and European countries (Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Kreidl, 2000; Newman et al., 2015; Niemela, 2008; Smith & Mateju, 2012). The exception is the effect of social class, which runs in opposite direction of what this literature reports. We find that people in more advantaged social classes are more likely to hold structuralist views about wealth and poverty. Specifically, non-manual routine workers and professionals are the most likely to have structuralist beliefs about the origins of wealth, while skilled workers and small owners are the most likely to blame the poor for their condition. Meanwhile, the professional class favors structuralist views of poverty and, particularly, wealth. A possible explanation for this finding has to do with the pattern of social mobility that is specific to Latin American countries. Past research has indeed showed that social mobility in Latin American countries is characterized by high levels of social fluidity between middle and lower class positions, along with extreme rigidities at the top of the class distribution (Torche, 2005, 2014). It is thus possible

that the more individualistic views of the lower and middle classes reflect their experience of high (although bounded) social fluidity, while the more structuralist views of the upper classes might describe these high rigidities of the elite.

A major finding of this research is that country-level factors are the most powerful predictors of people's beliefs about wealth and poverty. Moreover, we found that country-level factors are the only source of cross-country variation in the distribution of beliefs, thus ruling out a compositional explanation for country-level heterogeneity. In other words, we found that cross-country variation is not due to country differences in the distribution of individual attributes correlated with beliefs, but rather to societal characteristics. These results highlight the importance of taking into account macro-social characteristics in order to understand the ways individuals explain the causes of economic differences in their societies.

Although these factors are unobserved in the present analysis, we interpret the fixed effects for belief about wealth and poverty as preliminary evidence against the hypothesis that people's views tend to reflect actual sources of inequalities in a given society (the "reflection hypothesis"). This finding is highly consistent with recent research regarding people's preferences for income inequality in different countries (Curtis & Andersen, 2015). In particular, we showed that Argentina, the most structurally oriented country, is more mobile and less unequal than Guatemala or Peru, the two countries with a higher prevalence of individualistic explanations for poverty and wealth (De Ferranti, 2004). On the other hand, our results are aligned with theories emphasizing a positive normative feedback between national welfare institutions and people's beliefs about inequality (Jaeger, 2009; Larsen, 2008; Mau, 2004; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Sachweh & Olafsdottir, 2010; Svallfors, 2006). In this regard, Argentina, Brazil and Chile – the most structurally oriented countries – all feature a "potential" welfare state, while social security systems are just emerging in Peru and Guatemala, the most individualistic countries (Marcel & Rivera, 2008).

Our results regarding the influence of country-level factors suggest that future research on popular beliefs about the sources of inequality should focus attention on the importance of macro-level characteristics, particularly the institutional landscape in place in each society. The similarities between the patterns we report for Latin America and results from other contexts such as Europe and North America indicate that a cross-regional, comparative research might be a fruitful avenue for future work. In particular, research on beliefs about wealth and poverty would benefit from extending the analysis to a larger, more heterogeneous set of countries using nationally representative data enabling to properly identify the various channels of influence operating at the macro level.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2016.02.005>.

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