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Vázquez, J. J., Panadero, S., & Zúñiga, C. (2018). Attributions about homelessness in homeless and domiciled people in Madrid, Spain: “Why are they homeless people?”. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 88(2), 236–247,

which has been published in final form at:

<https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000246>

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Accepted version of the article:

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**ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS IN HOMELESS AND DOMICILED PEOPLE IN MADRID, SPAIN: « WHY ARE THEY HOMELESS PEOPLE? »**

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**Funding statement:** This research was supported by the “Dirección General de Investigación Científica y Técnica” of the “Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad” of Spain, in the “VI Plan Nacional de Investigación Científica Desarrollo e Innovación Tecnológica” (Ref. FEM2012-35053).

## **Abstract**

Causal attributions of homelessness (to societal or structural causes, individualistic causes, or fatalistic causes) may affect both the design and acceptance of public policies aimed at improving the situation of homeless people, and the strategies that homeless people themselves decide to adopt in order to cope with their situation. This article analyses the differences in causal attributions of homelessness based on gender, age, nationality, educational background, perceived social class, evolution of personal economic situation and future expectations between the members of two groups: a) the “homeless group”, consisting of a representative sample of homeless people in Madrid, Spain (n=188); and b) the “domiciled group”, consisting of a sample of people in Madrid at no risk of homelessness (n=180), matched for sex, age and nationality. The results show that among the domiciled population, women, older people, those without university education, those considering themselves to belong to lower-income social classes, those who considered their economic situation to have worsened and those who expressed negative expectations for the future attributed homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent. Meanwhile, among the homeless group, younger people, those without university education, those considering themselves to belong to higher social classes, those who perceived their economic situation as having improved in recent years and those who expressed positive expectations for the future generally attributed homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent. Among both domiciled population and homeless people there are differences in the causal attributions of homelessness (to societal or structural causes, individualistic causes, or fatalistic causes) depending on several characteristics: Gender, age, education, social class, economic situation, future expectations, etc. Causal attributions of homelessness may affect both the design and acceptance of public policies aimed at improving the situation of homeless people, and the strategies that homeless people themselves decide to adopt in order to cope with their situation.

**Keywords:** homeless, causal attributions, social cognitions, social exclusion, poverty.

## Introduction

The attribution of causality essentially consists of making inferences about the causes of the behaviour of others and one's own behaviour. These causes are not the "real" causes of behaviour, but instead people's belief that it provides the basis for a specific type of behaviour (Vázquez, Panadero, & Zúñiga, 2016). Determining the causal attributions of poverty and/or social exclusion is an important issue, as these attributions may reflect attitudes that address both individual behaviours and public policies aimed at the most disadvantaged sectors of the population (Bullock, 1999; Lott, 2002; Vázquez et al., 2016).

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

The relationship between causal attributions of poverty and a willingness to help the poor appears to be mediated by the affective responses elicited by attribution. Zucker and Weiner (1993) found that attributions of poverty to structural causes tend to evoke pity for the poor, while attributions to individualistic causes indirectly evoke anger due to the belief that the poor are responsible for their situation. In this respect, pity (positively) and anger (negatively) are correlated with a willingness to help the poor. In general, those tending to attribute poverty to individualistic causes are less favourable to the development of the welfare state and implementation of social policies than people who tend to attribute poverty to societal causes (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Shirazi & Biel, 2005). Attributions of the causes of poverty may therefore affect the design and implementation of policies to combat social exclusion and the support that these policies receive (Bullock et al., 2003; Reutter, Harrison, & Neufeld, 2002). Among the homeless, a tendency to attribute their situation to individualistic causes, with the consequent attribution to individuals of responsibility for their situation, may adversely affect the general perception of this group and the belief that they do not deserve particular aid (Vázquez et al., 2016). For example, the problem of "deserving help" plays a particularly important role in the "Housing First" intervention programmes (Tsemberis, 2010). This intervention model, initially for homeless people with mental health and addiction problems, emerges as an alternative to the traditionally accepted model, i.e. providing housing first and then combining supportive and treatment services versus traditional supportive housing programs (linear residential treatment) (Tsemberis, 2010). Since the effectiveness of "Housing First" programmes has been demonstrated with homeless people with mental health and addiction problems, and their economic profitability compared to other similar intervention programmes has been confirmed (Gilmer, Stefanic, Ettner, Manning, & Tsemberis, 2010; Groton, 2013; Waagemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012), one of the major barriers to their implementation is the general perception of whether homeless people "deserve" to be beneficiaries of these programmes. This is an issue in which attributions of the causes of homelessness play a crucial role.

Meanwhile, attributions of the causes of poverty and social exclusion may influence the interactions of the population with homeless people (Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Similarly, the cognitive and emotional consequences of the causal attribution for previous results obtained appear to be the basis of achievement motivation (Weiner, 1986; Weiner & Graham, 1989), meaning that the characteristics of causal attribution and the psychological consequences experienced influence the individual's motivational state and may determine their future conduct. This effect may have significant implications for processes of social inclusion, since the strategies considered most appropriate for trying to alleviate or reverse the situation will differ according to causal attributions for the specific situation of exclusion (Vázquez, 2013, 2016; Vázquez et al., 2016).

Attributions of the causes of poverty and social exclusion can be modulated by the different circumstances of the person responsible for them, such as their socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, origin, educational level, social class, etc.), whether they suffer from poverty and/or exclusion, and their expectations as regards their own situation (their perception of developments in their own situation, expectations for the future, etc.) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2008; Vázquez, Panadero, & Pascual, 2010). Several authors have noted that in general, people with higher status tend to attribute poverty to individualistic causes to a greater extent, while people with lower status tend to express greater agreement with structural or societal explanations for it (Campbell, Carr, & MacLachlan, 2001; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Mickelson & Hazlett, 2014; Shirazi & Biel, 2005; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009). Differences in causal attributions of poverty based on income have also been observed, so that individuals with a better financial situation tend to give explanations for poverty that are more closely associated with individualistic causes (Bullock, 1999; Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Davids & Gouws, 2013; Feagin, 1972; ), while those with more financial problems and those who consider themselves poor tend to use societal or structural causal attributions of it (Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009). Nevertheless, Nasser and Abouchédid (2001) found that groups with the highest income levels were structural in their attributions of poverty to a greater extent than individuals belonging to groups with low incomes. Meanwhile, people in the dominant ethnic and racial groups have been observed to attribute poverty to individualistic causes (Feagin, 1975; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) to a greater extent than those who belong to minority groups (Hastie, 2010; Morcol, 1997; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlain, 2002).

The relationship between age and attributions of the causes of poverty is unclear, so that while some authors have highlighted the fact that older people tend to attribute poverty to individualistic causes to a greater extent (Feagin, 1975; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), other studies have found that older people attribute poverty more to societal or structural causes (Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Hastie, 2010; Niemela, 2008;). The role of education in attributions of the causes of poverty is also complex. While some authors have suggested a non-linear relationship for the effects of education (Bullock, 1995; Guimond & Palmer, 1996), several studies have shown that people with higher levels of education tend to use individualist and fatalistic explanations for poverty to a greater extent (Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Nasser, Singhal, & Abouchédid, 2005; Niemela, 2008).

As for differences in causal attributions of poverty based on gender, although there is still a limited empirical basis (Nasser et al., 2005; Shirazi & Biel, 2005), some studies have found that males tend to attribute poverty to factors associated with individualistic causes to a greater extent, while women tend more often to attribute poverty to structural or societal causes (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Hunt, 1996; Reutter et al., 2006). Finally, there is a lack of studies which have addressed the relationship between

causal attributions of poverty and future expectations (Panadero, Guillén, & Vázquez, 2015) and the perception of the respondent's own economic situation.

One of the main criticisms of the mainstream of research on causal attributions of poverty is that it has been almost exclusively related to poverty in a generic sense (Lepianka et al., 2009; Wilson, 1996). However, as Niemela (2011) points out, attributions of generic poverty may be different and less complex than attributions of specific situations of poverty. This effect may be especially pronounced when poverty is linked to social exclusion (Vázquez, 2016), as is the case with homeless people. It may be the case that by focusing attention on a particular group (e.g. the homeless), the attributions of the causes of their situation are different, and the variations therein depending on the attributer's characteristics are accentuated.

In Spain, 27.3% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EUROSTAT, 2014), and homeless people are those suffering from one of the most difficult social situations. It is estimated that there are around 30,000 homeless people in Spain. In Madrid, the capital of Spain, the City Council estimates the number of homeless people at 1,905 in 2014. 1,141 were sleeping in the network of municipal shelters or other care centres and 764 spent the night in the street or unsuitable places (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016).

The results of the few studies conducted on the causes of homelessness show that when trying to explain their own situation, homeless people assign a particularly important role to events related to economic problems, interpersonal conflicts and the breakdown of relations, as well as to physical and mental health problems and alcohol and drug abuse (Ji, 2006; Muñoz et al., 1999; Peressini, 2007; Panadero, Vázquez, & Martín, 2016; Tessler, Rosenheck, & Gamache, 2001; ). Vázquez et al. (2016) note that in Madrid (Spain), there are significant overlaps between homeless people and the general population in terms of their attributions of the causes that usually lead people to become homeless, which refer mainly to individualistic causes and fatalistic causes, and few attributions of societal or structural causes. These same authors found that homeless respondents attributed homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent than the general population.

The need for empirical data with a non-generic approach to the causal attributions of social exclusion, the limited research on causal attributions of homelessness and the relevant implications of the subject on personal motivation to overcome homelessness and for the implementation of public policies (e.g. the implementation of "Housing First" programmes) have led to this study. This paper therefore aims to study in depth the differences in the causal attributions of homelessness between the domiciled population and homeless people in Madrid according to basic socio-demographic variables (sex, age and nationality), educational background, perceived social class, the evolution of their personal economic situation and their future expectations.

## Method

This study has been carried out based on the data provided by individuals belonging to two different groups:

- *the Homeless Group (HG)* (n=188): a group consisting of a representative sample of homeless people in Madrid (84.0% men, 16.0% women), who were all adults, (M age = 47.57 years, SD = 12.172), who had spent the night before the interview in a shelter or other facility for homeless people, on the street or in other places not initially designed for sleeping: abandoned buildings, basements, metro stations, etc. 71.8% were Spaniards and 28.2% were foreign. The sample size of the HG was determined from the available data on the total number of homeless people in Madrid. We designed a strategy for random

sampling in the street and in all shelter resources for homeless people in Madrid. We selected a specific number of participants proportionately and randomly in each service, according to their capacity. The sample selection in the street was carried out randomly and proportionally, based on the number of homeless people sleeping on the streets of Madrid.

- *the Domiciled Group* (DG) (n=180): this group consisted of a sample of people who had housing, were not using services designed for the homeless, and were not at risk of becoming homeless. The sample was gathered in Madrid using a quota sampling strategy, and its alignment with the HG as regards sex (83.8% men, 16.2% women), age (M age = 45.36 years, SD = 14.037) and nationality (76.7% Spanish and 23.3% foreign) was checked.

A structured interview instrument was used to collect information from the HG. The members of the DG completed a self-administered questionnaire, designed in order to enable comparison with the data obtained in the HG. The instrument designed to gather information on causal attributions of homelessness consisted of the initial instruction *"Now, we would like your opinion on the causes that usually lead homeless people into that situation. I'm going to give various reasons and I'd like to know whether or not you agree with each one"* which was followed by a list of 53 statements (See appendix 1) with alternative dichotomous responses: *"agree"* or *"disagree"* (Vazquez et al., 2016). The differences among the members of the HG and among the members of the DG were examined for the level of agreement with 53 statements about the causes of homelessness according to basic socio-demographic variables (sex, age and nationality), educational background, perceived social class, evolution of the respondent's personal situation and future expectations. When making comparisons, the "Chi square" ( $\chi^2$ ) statistic was used for nominal variables, and the "Student t" test for independent samples was used for continuous variables.

## Results

Of the 53 possible causes of homelessness about which the interviewees were asked, in the DG a higher percentage of women agreed with four statements, three of which were related to individualistic causes -*"Because of having been in an institution (prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc.)"* (Women 78.6% (22) vs. Men 59.0% (85);  $\chi^2=3.089$ ;  $p<.05$ ); *"Because they don't know how to apply for social welfare support"* (Women 55.2% (16) vs. Men 35.9% (52);  $\chi^2=3.785$ ;  $p<.05$ ); *"Because of a lack of training and advice about getting a job"* (Women 62.1% (18) vs. Men 42.8% (62);  $\chi^2=3.628$ ;  $p<.05$ ) - and one statement related to a societal cause: *"Because of not having access to social welfare support"* (Women 71.4% (20) vs. Men 40.6% (58);  $\chi^2=8.994$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Meanwhile, no statistically significant differences by gender were observed for any of the suggested causes of homelessness among the members of the HG.

Depending on age, statistically significant differences were observed among the members of the DG for seven possible causes of homelessness, while statistically significant differences were observed in eight of the causal attributions of homelessness proposed among the respondents in the HG. The results are summarised in Table 1:

*Table 1.* Mean age of agreement and disagreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness among the domiciled group (DG) and the homeless group (HG).

<b>Causes of homelessness</b>	<b>Agree (yes)</b> Mean –years- (SD)	<b>Disagree (no)</b> Mean –years- (SD)	<b>t</b>
<b>Domiciled Group (DG)</b>			
Because of suffering from illness and physical problems	48.03 (23.433)	42.56 (14.381)	2.611**
Because of fate or bad luck	46.83 (13.900)	42.53 (14.250)	1.976*
Because of excessive alcohol consumption	46.41 (13.894)	36.86 (12.893)	3.979*
Because of excessive drug use	46.03 (13.604)	39.43 (16.366)	2.083*
Because of being born and raised in poor families	40.41 (14.037)	48.76 (13.092)	4.072***
Because of the lack of access to quality health care	49.09 (10.601)	43.96 (14.523)	2.355*
Because of problems with their partners	48.01 (12.501)	42.28 (14.503)	2.781**
<b>Homeless Group (HG)</b>			
Because of a lack of self-confidence	46.22 (12.145)	49.89 (10.565)	1.929*
Because of having been in an institution (prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc.)	45.43 (10.846)	50.04 (12.937)	2.522*
Because of the economic crisis	46.39 (12.113)	50.12 (10.603)	1.910*
Because of social rebellion, not accepting the rules	46.20 (12.050)	50.20 (11.750)	2.085*
Because of an unwillingness to change their inappropriate habits and ways	45.39 (12.218)	51.48 (11.227)	3.166**
Because they don't know how to live with other people	45.32 (12.756)	49.78 (10.254)	2.399*
Because of being very lazy, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting other people to sort it out for them	45.97 (12.322)	50.46 (10.488)	2.451*
Because of being lazy and not making enough effort	45.68 (12.352)	50.78 (11.205)	2.640**

\*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

As shown in Table 1, the interviewees in the DG who agreed with four individualistic causes (illness or physical problems, excessive drinking, excessive drug use and marital problems), one fatalistic cause (fate or bad luck) and one societal or structural cause (lack of access to adequate health care) had a significantly higher mean age. Meanwhile, those who agreed with one societal cause (being born and raised in poor families) had a lower mean age than those who did not agree with this statement. Meanwhile, among the members of the HG, the mean age was lower for the interviewees who agreed with two societal or structural causes



(economic crisis and institutionalisation) and six individualistic causes (lack of confidence, social rebellion, unwillingness to change inappropriate habits and customs, the inability to live with other people, being lazy and unwilling to take responsibility for their situation and being lazy and not trying hard enough).

As for the nationality of the respondents (Spanish versus foreign), no statistically significant differences were observed between the members of the HG or members of the DG as regards the percentage agreeing with the various proposed causes of homelessness.

Among the members of the DG, 8.9% (16) of the respondents lacked education or had received only primary school education, while 91.1% (164) had received secondary or higher education. Meanwhile, among the members of HG, 36.5% (68) of the interviewees had received no education or primary education, compared with 63.5% (118) who had received secondary or higher education. No statistically significant differences were observed in either of the two groups in terms of the percentage agreeing with causal attributions of homelessness between interviewees who had received no education or primary education, and interviewees who had received secondary or higher education.

Among the members of the DG, 43.9% (79) had completed some type of university studies, while 56.1% (101) had no university education. Meanwhile, 11.8% (22) of the members of the HG had completed university studies compared to 88.2% (164) who had not. Some differences in attributions of the causes of homelessness were observed, and these are presented in Table 2:

*Table 2.* Agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness according to university education or otherwise among the domiciled group (DG) and homeless group (HG).

Causes of homelessness	No university education % (n)	University education % (n)	$\chi^2$
<b>Domiciled Group (DG)</b>			
Because of suffering from illness and physical problems	51.5% (50)	36.8% (28)	3.721*
Because of the government	57.9% (55)	43.2% (32)	3.575*
Because of a lack of self-confidence	68.8% (66)	44.7% (34)	10.050***
Because of having been thrown out of their home as a child or adolescent	60.6% (60)	46.8% (36)	3.352*
Because of having had problems with the family	72.7% (72)	54.5% (42)	6.275**
Because of living beyond their means	64.3% (63)	50.6% (39)	3.298*
Because of having got used to the situation of being homeless and doing nothing to overcome it	71.7% (71)	53.2% (41)	6.385**
Because of social rebellion, not accepting the rules	55.6% (55)	41.3% (31)	3.453*
Because of not being able to take responsibility	57.1% (56)	32.0% (24)	10.804**
Because of a lack of knowledge about how to overcome the situation	64.3% (63)	46.8% (36)	5.795*
Because of a lack of training and advice for getting a job	54.5% (54)	34.2% (26)	7.164**
Because of problems with their partners	51.0% (50)	33.8% (25)	5.094*

Because of being unable to control their basic impulses: aggression, sexual urges, etc.	36.5% (35)	23.7% (18)	3.247*
Because they don't want to work	42.7% (41)	25.3% (19)	5.581*
Because they don't know how to live with other people	38.8% (38)	21.3% (16)	6.020**
Because of being very lazy, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting other people to sort it out for them	34.0% (34)	18.7% (14)	5.021*
<b>Homeless Group (HG)</b>			
Because of suffering from illness and physical problems	60.1% (92)	36.4% (8)	4.437*
Because of excessive alcohol consumption	90.4% (142)	71.4% (15)	6.437*
Because of excessive drug use	84.8% (134)	59.1% (13)	8.532**
Because of having had problems with the family	78.7% (122)	57.1% (12)	4.735*
Because of the meaninglessness of their life (lack of goals, objectives, hopes, etc.)	75.5% (111)	50.0% (11)	6.203*
Because of coming from broken and troubled families	72.8% (110)	50.5% (10)	4.405*
Because of having mental health problems	80.4% (123)	45.5% (10)	12.872***
Because of problems with their partners	74.8% (110)	52.4% (11)	4.596*
Because the "homeless" life is the easiest solution to a lot of their problems	35.8% (53)	13.6% (3)	4.263*
Because of being unable to control their basic impulses: aggression, sexual urges, etc.	63.8% (95)	31.8% (7)	8.125**
Because they value freedom above all else	58.5% (83)	35.0% (7)	3.905*

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

Table 2 shows the significant differences in the attributions of homelessness depending on whether the respondent received a university education among both the domicile resident population and the homeless population. As a result, among the members of the DG, those who had not received a university education agreed to a greater extent with sixteen statements. Fourteen of these were related to individualistic causes (illnesses or physical problems, lack of confidence, problems with family, living beyond their means, doing nothing to overcome their situation, social rebellion, inability to take responsibility, ignorance of how to overcome their situation, lack of training and guidance on how to find work, relationship problems, poor impulse control, not wanting to work, being unable to live with other people or failure to take responsibility for their situation and expecting others to solve it) and two were related to societal or structural causes (the government, expulsion from home in childhood or adolescence).

Meanwhile, among the members of the HG, those who had not received a university education agreed to a greater extent with eleven statements, mainly relating to individualistic causes (illnesses or physical problems, alcohol and/or drug consumption, family problems, lack of meaning in their life, mental health problems, relationship problems, feeling that their situation is the easiest for their problems, failure to control their primal impulses or valuing freedom above everything else) and one societal or structural cause (coming from dysfunctional families).

As for their perceived social class, 71.1% (128) of the respondents who were members of the DG considered themselves "middle class, upper middle class or upper class" compared to 28.9% (52) who considered themselves to be class "medium-low or working class". Meanwhile,

among the members of the HG, 38.1% (64) of the respondents considered themselves to be "middle class, upper middle class or upper class" compared to 61.9% (104) who considered themselves to be "lower middle-class or working class". The differences in the two groups in terms of their agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness in terms of perceived social class are shown in Table 3:

*Table 3.* Agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness according to the perceived social class among the domiciled group (DG) and homeless group (HG).

Causes of homelessness	Middle, upper-middle or upper social class % (n)	Working or lower- middle social class % (n)	$\chi^2$
<b>Domiciled Group (DG)</b>			
Because of suffering from illness and physical problems	40.8% (51)	56.3% (27)	3.344*
Because of prejudice and discrimination in society	47.6% (59)	70.0% (35)	7.211**
Because of rejection and misunderstanding by society	47.2% (58)	67.3% (35)	5.961*
Because of being born and raised in poor families	37.0% (47)	52.9% (28)	3.803*
Because of having lost everything they had	83.1% (103)	96.1% (49)	5.361*
Because of having been thrown out of their home as a child or adolescent	47.6% (60)	72.0% (36)	8.582**
Because of having experienced a lot of traumatic situations	50.4% (62)	72.5% (37)	7.242**
Because of they did not have access to adequate education	32.5% (41)	49.0% (25)	4.217*
Because of government incompetence/inefficiency	42.7% (53)	64.7% (33)	6.975**
Because of low wages	40.5% (51)	60.0% (20)	5.493*
Because of not being able to take responsibility	40.2% (49)	60.8% (31)	6.152**
Because of being unable to control their basic impulses: aggression, sexual urges, etc.	26.6% (33)	41.7% (20)	3.678*
Because they don't know how to live with other people	26.8% (33)	42.0% (21)	3.811*
Because of being lazy and not making enough effort	20.3% (25)	40.0% (20)	7.150**
<b>Homeless Group (HG)</b>			
Because of a lack of knowledge about how to overcome the situation	78.0% (46)	61.2% (60)	4.706*
Because they want to be homeless	56.4% (31)	36.1% (35)	5.877*
Because of being very lazy, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting other people to sort it out for them	70.7% (41)	55.7% (54)	3.451*
Because they value freedom above all else	68.5% (37)	46.3% (44)	6.841**

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

As shown in Table 3, a higher percentage of the people in the DG who considered themselves to be "lower middle-class or working class" tended to agree with fourteen statements about the causes of homelessness. Eight of these were related to individualistic causes (illnesses or physical problems, having lost everything they had, having been expelled from their home in childhood or adolescence, having experienced many traumatic situations, the inability to take responsibilities, failure to control their primary impulses, being unable to live with others, being lazy and not trying hard enough) and six were related to societal or structural causes (prejudice and discrimination in society, rejection or misunderstanding by society, being born and raised in poor families, lack of access to quality education, government incompetence and inefficiency of administrations and low wages). Meanwhile, a lower percentage of the members of the HG who considered themselves to be "lower middle-class or working class" tended to agree with four statements about the causes of homelessness, all of which were related to individualistic causes: not knowing how to overcome their situation, wanting to be homeless voluntarily, being comfortable and not taking responsibility for their situation, and valuing freedom above all else.

When asked generically about their situation, 70.2% (99) of the members of the HG reported that it had worsened compared to their situation three years before the interview took place, while 29.8% (42) said that their situation had improved. Among the members of the DG, 55.5% (71) felt that their situation had worsened in comparison to three years before the interview, and 44.5% (57) said that it had improved. The differences within each group in terms of the level of agreement on the causes of homelessness among those who considered their situation had improved or worsened compared to three years before the interview are shown in Table 4:

*Table 4.* Agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness according to whether their situation has improved or worsened in the last three years among the domiciled group (DG) and homeless group (HG).

Causes of homelessness	Their situation has worsened in the last three years % (n)	Their situation has improved in the last three years % (n)	$\chi^2$
<b>Domiciled Group (DG)</b>			
Because of the government	56.1% (37)	34.5% (19)	5.586*
Because of having experienced a lot of traumatic situations	65.7% (46)	45.5% (25)	5.152*
Because of the meaninglessness of their life (lack of goals, objectives, hopes, etc.)	72.5% (50)	43.6% (24)	10.569***
Because of government incompetence/inefficiency	55.1% (38)	36.4% (20)	4.303*
Because of low wages	52.2% (36)	33.9% (19)	4.176*
Because of having mental health problems	76.1% (54)	56.4% (31)	5.475*
Because of problems with their partners	52.2% (35)	29.1% (16)	6.653**
Because they value freedom above all else	30.9% (21)	14.5% (8)	4.504*
<b>Homeless Group (HG)</b>			
Because of having had problems with the family	71.3% (67)	87.2% (34)	3.815*
Because of the lack of access to quality health care	20.7% (19)	38.9% (14)	4.497*

Because of being unable to control their basic impulses: aggression, sexual urges, etc.	56.5% (52)	74.4% (29)	3.693*
Because they want to be homeless	41.1% (37)	63.2% (24)	5.206*
Because of being lazy and not making enough effort	59.1% (52)	78.9% (30)	4.604*
Because they are not very intelligent	20.7% (18)	45.7% (16)	7.775**

\*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

As shown in Table 4, among the members of the DG, those who felt that their situation had improved over the previous three years agreed to a lesser extent than those who thought their situation had worsened with five statements related to individualistic causes of homelessness (having experienced traumatic situations, lack of meaning in their life, mental health problems, problems with their partner and valuing freedom above everything else) and three statements related to societal or structural causes (the government, ineffectiveness of administrations, low wages).

Meanwhile, among the members of the HG, a high percentage of those who thought their situation had improved over the previous three years agreed with five statements concerning individualistic causes than those who believed that their situation had worsened (having had problems with their family, failure to control their primary impulses, wanting to be homeless, being lazy and not trying hard enough and being unintelligent) and one statement on societal or structural causes (lack of access to quality healthcare services).

When the respondents were asked about their expectations for the future, 36.0% (64) of the members of the DG thought that they would be better off in the future than at the time of the interview, compared with 64.0% (114) who felt that they would be same or worse off in the future. Meanwhile, 63.7% (107) of the members of the HG thought that they would be better off in the future than at the time of the interview, compared to 36.3% (61) who felt that their situation in the future would be the same or worse. The differences in the percentage of agreement with the various statements about the causes of homelessness in both groups according to their expectations for the future are shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Agreement with various statements about the causes of homelessness according to the expectations for the future among the domiciled group (DG) and homeless group (HG).

Causes of homelessness	Future expectations better than the present % (n)	Expectations for the future the same or worse than at present % (n)	$\chi^2$
<b>Domiciled Group (DG)</b>			
Because of fate or bad luck	47.6% (30)	68.2% (75)	7.100**
Because of excessive alcohol consumption	80.6% (50)	91.8% (101)	4.618*
Because of prejudice and discrimination in society	42.2% (28)	60.0% (66)	3.523*
Because of having been in an institution (prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc.)	52.4% (33)	67.6% (73)	3.907*
Because of having had problems with the family	54.0% (34)	70.3% (78)	4.657*
Because of the lack of access to quality health care	11.1% (7)	24.8% (27)	4.697*

Because of social rebellion, not accepting the rules	35.5% (22)	56.4% (62)	6.918**
Because of not being able to take responsibility	37.1% (23)	51.4% (56)	3.242*
Because of problems with their partners	31.7% (20)	49.5% (53)	5.120*
Because they value freedom above all else	14.5% (9)	27.3% (30)	3.680*
<b>Homeless Group (HG)</b>			
Because of a lack of knowledge about how to overcome the situation	62.6% (62)	81.0% (47)	5.839*
Because of an unwillingness to change their inappropriate habits and ways	73.2% (71)	58.6% (34)	3.529*
Because they don't want to work	70.1% (68)	54.4% (31)	3.867*
Because it is God's will	10.0% (9)	28.6% (16)	8.390**

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

As seen in Table 5, a smaller percentage of the members of the DG who reported having positive expectations for the future agreed with ten statements about homelessness. Seven of these were related to individualistic causes (excessive alcohol consumption, having been in an institution, problems with family, rebellion and rejection of the rules, inability to take responsibilities, problems with their partner and/or value freedom above everything else), two related to societal or structural causes (prejudice and discrimination in society and lack of access to quality health care) and one was a fatalistic cause (fate or bad luck). Meanwhile, in the HG, a larger percentage of the respondents who reported having positive future expectations agreed with two individualistic causes (unwillingness to change inappropriate habits and customs and not wanting to work) and a smaller percentage agreed with one individualistic cause (lack of knowledge about how to overcome their situation) and one fatalistic cause (God's will).

### Discussion and conclusions

Homeless people and the population domiciled in Madrid present a significant degree of uniformity in their attributions of the causes of homelessness, despite the differences between the members of the two groups (Muñoz, Vázquez & Vázquez, 2004). In general, a high percentage of attributions of homelessness are related to individualistic causes and to a lesser extent, fatalistic causes, as relatively few respondents agreed with attributions of homelessness related to societal or structural causes. However, the attributions of homelessness to individualistic causes in both groups are not generally excessively judgemental, and tend to be indulgent (Vazquez et al., 2016). In other words, they are ambivalent, although the attributions to the negative characteristics of homeless people are made in a positive emotional tone, from a condescending perspective that considers homeless people to be victims of circumstances and sees them as affected by their situation

When the differences in causal attributions of homelessness are analysed within the two groups, it is apparent that in general, individuals with higher status are more likely to make attributions of homelessness related to individualistic causes, as reported by various authors (Campbell, et al., 2001; Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982; Mickelson & Hazlett, 2014; Shirazi & Biel, 2005; Vázquez & Panadero, 2009). However, this tendency is not systematic.

No statistically significant differences were observed among the respondents in the domiciled population in Madrid in terms of the level of agreement with the causes of homelessness between the interviewees of Spanish or immigrant origin. In contrast with the

findings of some studies, according to which dominant ethnic and racial groups differ from minority groups in terms of their attributions of poverty to individualistic causes (Feagin, 1975; Hastie, 2010; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Morcol, 1997; Skitka et al., 2002), in the case of the city of Madrid membership of the dominant ethnic group (Spanish) or minority groups (foreign) did not appear to affect the type of causal attributions of homelessness.

Among those interviewed in the domiciled population, women showed greater agreement with some possible causes of homelessness, and mainly individualistic causes. However, these are indulgent rather than judgemental causes, including difficulty in access to social services, lack of education and institutionalisation. In this respect, the data differ from the findings of various authors (Carr & MacLachlan, 1998; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Hunt, 1996; Reutter et al., 2006), according to which there is a greater tendency among men to attribute poverty to individualistic causes, while women tend to attribute poverty to structural or societal causes to a greater extent.

The older members of the domiciled population agreed to a greater extent with individualistic causes of homelessness (e.g. alcohol or drug consumption, illness and relationship problems, etc.), luck (fatalistic cause) and difficulties in accessing appropriate healthcare (societal causes). The younger interviewees agreed to a greater extent with the statement that one cause of homelessness was having been born and raised in a poor family (societal cause). These results seem to be consistent with those observed for generic poverty by various authors (Feagin, 1975; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). It may therefore be the case that the higher status of older people influenced their causal attributions of homelessness.

Meanwhile, the role of education in the causal attributions of homelessness by respondents in the domiciled population is complex, with a non-linear relationship of the effects of education, consistent with that reported by some authors (Bullock, 1995; Guimond & Palmer, 1996). No statistically significant differences were therefore observed in the attributions of causes of homelessness between respondents with no education or primary education, and respondents with secondary or higher education. However, significant differences were observed for attributions of homelessness according to whether the respondent had received university education, so that those without university education agreed to a greater extent with sixteen statements that were mostly related to individualistic causes. This contrasts with the observations by various authors on generic poverty, in which they found that people with higher education levels tended to use individualistic and fatalistic explanations for the causes of poverty to a greater extent (Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Nasser et al., 2005; Niemela, 2008). In this study, people with higher levels of education made fewer attributions of homelessness to individualistic causes.

A higher percentage of the lower middle class and working class respondents in the domiciled population tended to agree with fourteen statements about the causes of homelessness, eight of which were related to individualistic causes and six to societal or structural causes. This study did not observe the effect mentioned by various authors, according to which people in a better economic situation tend to a greater extent to give explanations for poverty that are more closely associated with individualistic causes (Bullock, 1999; Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Davids y Gouws, 2013; Feagin, 1972), while those with more financial problems and those who consider themselves poor tend to use more societal or structural explanations for it (Da Costa & Dias, 2015; Vázquez y Panadero, 2009). The data observed in Madrid regarding causal attributions of homelessness tend to match those provided by Nasser and Abouchédid (2001), who observed that groups with lower income levels attribute poverty to individualistic causes to a greater extent.

The respondents in the domiciled population who felt that their situation had worsened in recent years agreed to a greater extent with five relatively indulgent statements related to individualistic causes of homelessness, and three statements related to societal or structural causes, while a higher percentage of those who expressed expectations for the future equal or worse than the present agreed with ten statements about homelessness, seven of which were significantly judgemental and related to individualistic causes. In this regard, negative developments in the respondent's economic situation and negative expectations for the future seem to lead to a more judgemental perception of homeless people.

Among the domiciled population of Madrid, women and respondents who thought their situation had worsened in recent years therefore attributed homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent, although these attributions were relatively indulgent and not very judgemental. However, we found that older respondents, those without university education, those who considered themselves to be lower-middle class or working class, and those who said that their expectations for the future were the same or worse as at the time of the interview, to a large extent used significantly judgemental causal attributions of homelessness related to individualistic causes. As noted by various authors (Bullock et al., 2003; Shirazi & Biel, 2005), people who tend to explain poverty based on individualistic causes, especially if these causes are judgemental, are more likely to oppose the implementation of certain public policies benefiting disadvantaged groups. According to Zucker and Weiner (1993), blaming people for their situation can indirectly evoke anger, which would impact negatively on the willingness to help. As a result, the groups that attribute homelessness to judgemental individualistic causes to a greater extent are most reluctant to support intervention programmes such as "Housing First", and one of the main hindrances to its implementation is the perception of "non-deserving" attributed to its potential beneficiaries despite its proven effectiveness and profitability (Gilmer et al., 2010; Tsemberis, 2010). Blaming some groups for their situation may lead to them being considered undeserving of certain types of aid, especially in resource-poor environments where this aid could benefit groups that evoke pity due to them not being perceived as responsible for their situation (e.g. unprotected minors, women victims of intimate partner violence, disabled people, etc.). Given that according to Zucker and Weiner (1993), pity is positively and anger is negatively related to a willingness to help disadvantaged groups, it would be useful to promote new causal attributions of homelessness among the groups that make the most judgemental attributions: elderly people, those without university education, those with low incomes and those with poor expectations for the future.

Meanwhile, homeless people tend to attribute homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent than the domiciled population (Vazquez et al., 2016) and in trying to explain the causes of their own situation, they tend to assign a particularly important role to issues related to economic problems, interpersonal conflicts and the breakdown of relationships, as well as problems of physical and mental health and alcohol and drug abuse (Ji, 2006; Muñoz et al., 1999; Panadero et al., 2016; Peressini, 2007; Tessler et al., 2001; ).

As was the case with respondents in the domiciled population, no significant differences in attributions of the causes of homelessness were found between homeless people in Madrid with no education or primary education, and those who had received secondary or higher education. However, significant differences in causal attributions of homelessness were observed depending on having received university education, so that those who had not agreed to a greater extent with a series of especially judgemental statements related to individualistic causes. In this respect, there also seems to be a non-linear relationship of the effects of education (Bullock, 1995; Guimond & Palmer, 1996) on causal attributions of homelessness among the homeless, such that although having received primary and secondary education does not appear to substantially affect attributions of homelessness, having received a university education does



seem to make a significant difference. A university education seems to have a major influence among both the domiciled population and the homeless, as those who have completed university studies show a markedly reduced tendency to explain homelessness using judgemental individualistic causes.

No statistically significant differences in causal attributions of homelessness were observed among homeless people according to basic demographic characteristics such as the respondents' gender or Spanish or foreign nationality. With regard to age, younger homeless people were observed to attribute homelessness to individualistic causes to a greater extent, with significantly judgemental and not very indulgent attributions. Moreover, a larger percentage of homeless people who considered themselves middle class, upper middle class or upper class tended to agree with several individualistic causes for homelessness than those who said they were lower-middle class or working class. Unlike the domiciled population, homeless people who believe that they belonged to the higher social classes tended to use more causal attributions of homelessness related to individualistic causes. Likewise, homeless people who felt that their situation had improved and who reported having good expectations for the future were shown to agree to a greater extent with highly judgemental statements regarding individualistic causes of homelessness, in contrast to the respondents in the domiciled population.

The data obtained show that among homeless people, younger individuals, those who have not received university education, those who considered themselves to belong to the higher social classes, those who believe that their situation had improved in recent years and those who had positive future expectations agreed to a greater extent that the causes of homelessness lay in individualistic causes. A potential self-defensive bias (Vázquez & Panadero, 2009; Vázquez, Panadero & Zúñiga, 2017) could be occurring in the attributions by these respondents, as they feel that they do not share certain negative characteristics with most homeless people, and therefore appreciate less risk of remaining in that situation. On the other hand, although attributing homelessness to individualistic causes may have negative effects, by blaming people for their situation, the cognitive and emotional consequences of this type of attribution may increase achievement motivation (Weiner, 1986; Weiner & Graham, 1989), enhancing the implementation of coping strategies focusing on overcoming the situation itself. The strategies considered most appropriate to try to alleviate or reverse will differ depending on the causal attributions of the situation (Vázquez, 2013, 2016; Vázquez et al., 2016). In this regard, attributions of homelessness to individualistic causes could reduce the feeling of helplessness that could result from attributions to structural or fatalistic causes, which could be perceived as uncontrollable by those who are homeless (Vazquez et al., 2016).

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

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## Appendix 1.

List of causes that could lead homeless people into that situation

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### Causes

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Because of excessive alcohol consumption

Because of taking the wrong decisions

Because of having lost everything they had

Because of excessive drug use

Because of having got used to the situation of being homeless and doing nothing to overcome it

Because of being unable to keep their jobs

Because of living beyond their means

Because of having had problems with the family

Because of having mental health problems

Because of a lack of support from the immediate environment (family, friends, etc.)

Because of being uprooted (migration, abandonment, etc.)

Because of the meaninglessness of their life (lack of goals, objectives, hopes, etc.).

Because of problems with their partners

Because of having experienced a lot of traumatic situations

Because of gambling addiction

Because of poor distribution of wealth

Because of the economic crisis

Because of coming from broken and troubled families

Because of not being able to take responsibility

Because of a lack of knowledge about how to overcome the situation

Because of a lack of self-confidence

Because of a lack of an ability to adapt to changes

Because of an unwillingness to change their inappropriate habits and ways

Because of social rebellion, not accepting the rules

Because of low wages

Because they don't fit in with the labour market

Because of being lazy and not making enough effort

Because of the inequality of opportunity in society

Because they don't want to work

Because of fate or bad luck

Because of being very lazy, not taking responsibility for their situation and expecting other people to sort it out for them

Because of having been thrown out of their home as a child or adolescent

Because they don't know how to apply for social welfare support

Because of having been in an institution (prison, psychiatric hospital, orphanage, juvenile facility, etc.)

Because of not having access to social welfare support

Because of being unable to control their basic impulses (aggression, sexual urges, etc.)

Because they don't know how to live with other people

Because of a lack of training and advice for getting a job

Because of suffering from illness and physical problems

Because of rejection and misunderstanding by society

Because they value freedom above all else

Because of the government

Because of prejudice and discrimination in society

Because of government incompetence/inefficiency

Because they want to be homeless

Because of being born and raised in poor families

Because of they did not have access to adequate education

Because homelessness is an inevitable part of modern life

Because the "homeless" life is the easiest solution to a lot of their problems

Because of the lack of access to quality health care

Because they are not very intelligent

Because it is God's will

Because it is what they deserve

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