

## **POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY IN DUTCH SOCIETY**

Loek Halman & Wim van Oorschot

Tilburg University  
PO Box 90153  
5000 LE TILBURG  
tel. + 31 13 466 20 15  
fax. +31 13 466 30 02  
e-mail: [loek.halman@kub.nl](mailto:loek.halman@kub.nl)

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### Abstract

*Studies on poverty are mainly engaged with the definition and measurement of poverty, while the issue of what people consider reasons for living in need is often neglected. In this article we explore four types of poverty explanations based on a) the distinction between poverty as a matter of fate or not, and b) the question whether poverty is due to individual or collective factors. The four types of poverty explanations are: the individual is to blame (laziness), it is the individual's fate (unluck), society is to blame (injustice), and society's fate (inevitable part of progress).*

*It is investigated if these different types of explanations can be attributed to social-demographic characteristics, perceptions like self-interest and of welfare recipients, as well as to religious and political attitudes and values. Although the analyzes yield some evidence that such characteristics are related with such explanations, the evidence must not be exaggerated. Poverty is a social issue and therefore it is not so strange that social-political orientations, like welfare state attitudes, appear more important attributes than religious orientations. The analyzes seem to substantiate ideas forwarded by theories of secularization stating that religious values have lost their dominance in contemporary Western society. The importance of postmaterialism for both dimensions seems to confirm Inglehart's suggestion that postmaterialism has taken over religion's position. Further, subjective factors appear more important for poverty explanations than objective factors.*

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## 1. Introduction

In his essay *Der Arme (The Poor)* Simmel relates the degree and legitimacy of needy people's rights to social protection to popular perceptions of the degree to which they can be held responsible themselves for their deplorable situation. He points, in other words, at the impact that popular beliefs on the causes of poverty may have on welfare and poor relief programs. Similar views still exist today and are held for instance by Kluegel et al. (1995) and Jordan (1996). Both suggest a relation between the more selective and less generous character of the British, and especially, American welfare state, and the liberal tradition in these countries. In this tradition the main cause of poverty is seen in the individual and his objectionable morality and behavior. The more universal and generous character of the Northern European welfare states is explained from a 'patriarchal' (Kluegel) or 'continental' (Jordan) tradition, in which societal explanations of poverty, external to the individual, are prevailing. It seems then that popular explanations of poverty are important for understanding the design of welfare states, and that changes in perceptions might have consequences for the legitimacy of existing welfare programs, sometimes urging them to change as well.

Although the development and restructuring of welfare states has attained large attention throughout the last decades, and a large body of research is engaged in the definition and measurement of poverty as such, surprisingly little attention has been paid thus far to popular explanations of poverty. In this article we focus on the prevalence of types of explanations among the Dutch public. The existing body of research is limited and restricted to Anglo-Saxon countries, like the USA (e.g., Alston & Dean, 1972; Feagin, 1972; Nilson, 1981; Hochchild, 1981; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), and Australia (Feather, 1974), while in Great Britain popular explanations of unemployment have been studied (e.g. Furnham, 1982; Furnham & Lewis, 1986). This restriction might have produced a possible bias towards emphasising the prevalence of individualistic explanations of poverty, i.e., towards blaming the individual, versus structural or societal explanations. A first aim here is to develop a typology of poverty explanations, which includes not only the individualistic vs. societal dimension, but also the distinction as to whether poverty is seen as the result of impersonal and uncontrollable processes of the outcome of actions of specific social actors. This distinction between 'fate or blame' type of explanations has remained mostly implicit thus far.

Furthermore, although most of the studies mentioned, but also Feather (1974), Eurobarometer (1977), Della Fave (1980), and Kluegel et al. (1995), have noticed that individualistic explanations of poverty (blaming the victim) are related to broader anti-welfare sentiments regarding equality, social spending and government intervention, very little is yet known about the determinants of such explanations. An observation that applies to other aspects of welfare opinions as well (e.g., Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Therefore, a second aim of this article is to explore if and how poverty perceptions are linked to social-demographic characteristics of individuals and their attitudes and values. As for the latter, we will particularly focus on the relationship with anti-welfare sentiment, but also with religion

and postmaterialism. Each religion expresses concern with the poor. E.g., Wuthnow (1991: 51) notes that religion ‘figures prominently in the accounts people give of their motives to being compassionate’, and it has been found empirically that religion does matter when it comes to donating money to relief the needs of the poor (Regnerus, Smith & Sikkink, 1998). The other value explored here, (post-)materialism, is suggested by Inglehart (1997) to be a core value in contemporary postmodern society. In an early Eurobarometer (1977) study on Europeans perceptions of poverty (post-)materialism differentiated most strongly between those that perceived poor people as lazy individuals versus as victims of social processes: materialists were inclined to the first view, post-materialists to the latter.

## **2. Popular explanations of poverty: a typology**

The debate on the causes of poverty has long been dominated by two opposite views. On the one hand there is the view that poverty is merely a result of an individual’s deficiencies, while on the other hand, there is the idea that poverty can be attributed to economic, political and/or cultural factors that operate at the supra-individual, or societal level. Proponents of the ‘culture of poverty’ theory suggest that poverty is mainly the result of the poor having bad behaviors, deviant values and morals which distinguishes them from the dominant society and culture (e.g., Lewis, 1966; Banfield, 1970; Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984). These bad behaviors, deviant values and morals are believed to be transmitted inter-generationally through socialization, and as such they can be regarded main determinants of poverty. The poor themselves are to be blamed for their predicament. The opposite view is the ‘situational or structural perspective’. Proponents of this perspective recognize that poor people might display unique patterns of behavior, values and morals, but they argue that these do not derive internally, generated by a culture of poverty, but rather, externally, as the inevitable outcome of the unfavorable structural place of the poor in society (e.g., Merton 1968, Persell 1977, Wilson 1987). In other words, the unfavorable predicament of the poor is due to the social structure of society: the poor are the ‘victims’ of external, societal factors.

Waxman (1983), among others, has argued that such perspectives leave unanswered the questions of why the poor would have a specific subculture and why they are in an unfavorable structural position. They seem to take either the culture or the structure for granted, as social facts which are not influenced by the (inter)actions of any clear social actor(s). The ‘relational perspective’ on poverty offers a combined answer to such a question. According to Waxman’s, the core issue is that poverty is a real stigma in Goffman’s terms, i.e., a negative trait that dominates the way in which members of mainstream society see and evaluate people possessing the specific trait (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatic character of the poor gives rise to a vicious circle in which the negative evaluation of the poor limits their opportunities in society, as a reaction to which the poor adopt strategies in order to cope with that, which in turn reinforces the negative image, the limiting of opportunities, etc. According to this relational perspective, then, a culture of poverty and the limitation of opportunities develop and persist along with the stigmatization of poverty. Poverty, in other words, is a social construction, brought about by agency of specific social groups.

According to Jordan (1996), the debate on poverty and anti-poverty policies has been

dominated by the logic of liberalism in which poverty is seen as the impersonal and inescapable operation of anonymous market forces. As a result, he argues, the debate and research on poverty have mainly been directed towards measuring and categorizing it along 'objective poverty lines: social minimum lines, demographic, and socio-economic categories, meanwhile neglecting the societal processes and actions that produce it. Recently, however, such processes and actions are gaining recognition in the concept of social exclusion (see also Room 1990), which stresses that poverty is not just an impersonal and unavoidable fact, but the outcome of processes induced by and consisting of concrete social action. According to Jordan, it is the outcome of '...collective action by groups pursuing their common interests...' (Jordan, 1996: 222). Like Waxman, Jordan perceives poverty mainly as a result of certain actions of certain groups in society who can be held responsible or be blamed for it. One can think of groups such as major companies, unions, political parties, interest groups and mainstream households, who act in such a way (intended or unintended) that the weakest in society are excluded. In other words, society has to be blamed for poverty.

So, apart from the individual-societal distinction, poverty can be regarded the result of uncontrollable, impersonal and inescapable factors that operate beyond the agency of any type of social actor, or it can be seen as the (intended or unintended) outcome of actions and behavior of individuals or groups. The first view is fatalistic, nothing can be done against poverty or prevent it, the latter view implies that some social actor(s) can be held responsible for poverty, or can be blamed for it. If we combine the two dimensions of individual-social and fate-blame four types of possible explanations for poverty result.

Ideal-typically the *individual blame* type indicates that poverty is the result of personal behavior and shortcomings of the poor themselves, like because they are lazy, lack thrift, have loose morals etc. The *individual fate* type holds that poverty is exceptional, and happens to individuals as a matter of just bad luck, 'God's will', personal misfortune etc. According to Kluegel and Smith (1986) both types of explanations, which deny the possible influence of societal or structural factors, prevail among Americans (even among the poor themselves). The first more than the latter, implying that Americans tend to blame, rather than to pity the poor. Kluegel and Smith see this as a manifestation of a combination of the basic American ideology of individual achievement and equal opportunity, and the effects of a fundamental psychological 'attribution error' (Ross, 1977), through which there is a tendency to see individuals as causes of their own outcomes. Seen from the *social blame* type, poverty is the outcome of processes of social exclusion that are induced and controlled by actions of certain groups and parties in society, who therefore could be blamed for it. The poor are seen as victims of a fundamental injustice that exists in the way in which groups in society operate and interact towards each other. In Jordan's view, this injustice lies in the fact that the more powerful groups exclude the weaker groups in their striving towards maximizing their common interests, in Waxman's view the injustice lies in the stigmatization of the poor by main stream society. In the *social fate* view societal factors and processes are held responsible for the existence of poverty, but they are regarded as beyond any (collective) actors' effective control, that is, as impersonal, objective and unavoidable. In this type the poor are seen as victims of the outcomes of economic market forces, inflation and recession, automation or other technological developments, in short, as victims of broad societal and global

developments.

Being ideal-types the four analytically distinguished views do not have to preclude one another in reality. That is, individual people may have views somewhere in between them, tend to regard one of the two dimensions more important than the other, explain poverty from more than one of the four types of reason, etc.

Although not the central focus of our analysis, it is worth noting that each type of explanation might function as a central value basis for different types of anti-poverty policy. In the individual blame view the poor are easily seen as undeserving of support by society, implying a minimalistic welfare policy with low benefit levels, harsh means-tests and work fare schemes. In the individual fate view the poor are seen as deserving, with policies aimed at individual relief and compensation through charitable types of measure, i.e. based on feelings of pity and solidarity, but with a relatively weak formal and national juridical legislation and organization. In the social fate view the poor are also seen as deserving, but one might expect here that, because systematic (be it uncontrollable) social mechanisms are held responsible for poverty, there is a stronger justification felt for national legislation and organization, higher benefit levels and easier access. In the social blame view the poor are seen as mostly deserving. Ideal-typically policies will focus here on changing the operation and outcomes of processes and collective behavior that are believed to result in poverty. Anti-poverty policy is rather broad, encompassing not only poor relief but a wide variety of policies such as social security, education, housing and health, and it will basically aim at actively establishing equality of chances, and even of outcomes, in society.

### **3. Determinants of perceptions of poverty: some expectations**

The four types of perceptions of poverty will be explored into more details. After describing Dutch adherence to these four views on poverty we will focus on the question what kind of people display distinctive views on poverty. The literature and empirical studies have not been very rich in providing clues as to what determines people's views with regard to the causes of people living in need. A large body of literature deals with 'the motives for giving and volunteering' (Wuthnow, 1991), but little is known about what people guides in their views on the causes poverty. Here we will explore the possible influences of religion, (post-)materialism, (anti-)welfare sentiment, political affiliation and a number of social-demographic characteristics.

#### *Religion*

Despite the fact that churches have always spoken out on poverty issues 'there is no commensurate body of literature in sociology concerning perceptions of the poor, giving to the poor, and the role of religion in prompting for the poor' (Regnerus, Smith & Sikkink, 1998: 462). But giving to relief poverty does not necessarily provide clues to understand people's views on why there are people living in need in their society. For instance, it has been demonstrated that Catholics and Protestants differ in generosity towards the poor, highly religious conservative Protestants being less generous toward the poor compared with religious liberal Protestants, Catholics and 'religionless' people (Will & Cochran, 1995: 336),

but what does this reveal of the views on the reasons for poverty among Catholics and Protestants? Does it mean that conservative Protestants are more convinced that poor people have to solve their own problems? The question remains whether Protestants and Catholics differ in their perceptions of the poor, and if so, why would that be?

One could argue that differences in popular explanations of poverty between Catholics and Protestants exist because there are important theological differences between the two religious traditions. 'In contrast to Catholics, Protestants are personally responsible before God in religious matters, and the church has a lesser role as mediator between the believer and God. The Catholic church, with its extensive, dogmatic, collective creed imposes a more collective identity upon its faithful' (Jagodzinski & Dobbelaere, 1995: 81). According to some, such differences continue to exist and play a role in contemporary society (Therborn, 1995). Inglehart has found empirical evidence that both traditions have 'shaped enduring *national* cultures that persist today' (Inglehart, 1995: 393).

If such observations are correct we may assume that present day Catholics and Protestants will display different views on poverty: Protestants are likely to blame the individual for his poverty, while Catholics can be assumed to be more inclined to support the idea that the collectivity is to be blamed for it. However, in America it has been demonstrated that liberal Protestants and highly religious Catholics show similar views on the alleviation of poverty. This is attributed to resemblances in Protestant and Catholic thought. Key elements in both traditions, are 'values of charity and common humanity reinforced by a communal responsibility for the common good' (Regnerus, Smith & Sikkink, 1998: 484). Another distinction might be relevant, one according to the level of devoutness, given Wuthnow's observation that the 'major distinction is now between religious conservatives and religious liberals' (Wuthnow 1991). Although both groups are religious, they differ in overall value structures and in the 'values and motives that underlie their involvement in charitable behavior. Both claim to be religious, but conservatives' faith is much more central to the way they understand their lives than are the religious convictions of liberals' (Wuthnow, 1991: 133). It might thus not be so much a difference between Catholics and Protestants, but between devout Catholics and Protestants and more liberal Catholics and Protestants that counts.

In the Netherlands, such a distinction is likely to be relevant. As Peters and Schreuder (1987) have demonstrated, the main religious distinction in Dutch society is not between Catholics and Protestants, but between Catholics and Dutch Reformed on the one hand, and Re-reformed on the other. Re-reformed people in the Netherlands are most conservative, most traditional in their faith and thus most puritan. Since puritanism stresses individual responsibility, it might be that Re-reformed Dutch people are most in favor of attributing poverty to personal blame factors. However, an important characteristic of Dutch society is the large proportion of people who does not feel attracted to one of the mainline denominations. Half of Dutch population appears unchurched, while among church members, a further distinction can be made between conservative and liberal church members. Only the most strong believers attend religious services regularly, while more secular Catholics and Dutch Reformed will go to church less frequent or never. A common distinction is between core-, modal- and marginal church members. Among the core members a difference between Catholic and Reformed Protestants might still be expected. Following Wuthnow's remark that

religious conservatives stick to the traditional faith and doctrine (Wuthnow, 1991: 133), one might expect Dutch Reformed core members to adhere to individualistic blame factors more than Catholic core members. Finally, being unchurched is a manifestation of being secular and likely it also implies that religion is irrelevant in providing guidelines for behaviors, values and attitudes. Therefore, it might be expected that the impact of secular factors on perceptions of poverty is stronger among unchurched people in particular and marginal church members than among devout church members.

### *Postmaterialism*

The transition from materialistic values towards post-materialistic orientations is recognized as one of the most important cultural shifts in advanced industrial society (Inglehart, 1990; 1995; 1997). Due to increasing levels of security, produced by the establishment and further development of modern welfare states and the growth of material wealth, a gradual shift has taken place from materialism towards postmaterialism. It has been argued that this shift is 'accompanied by declining emphasis on traditional political, religious, moral and social norms' (Inglehart, 1990: 66), and further declining levels of 'confidence in religious, political, and even scientific authority' (Inglehart, 1997: 327). In contemporary advanced, postindustrial societies, postmaterialism is assumed to play a crucial role in people's orientations. In pre-modern societies religion has played this role, but it seems as if postmaterialism has become a most significant orientation in modern settings. As such it can be assumed that people's orientations towards poverty and the poor will be closely connected with their 'level of postmaterialism'. The evidence seems clear. In the 1976 Eurobarometer study on *The Perception of Poverty in Europe* it appeared that postmaterialists stress the image that society is responsible for poverty, while materialists are more prone to blame the individual. Laziness was mentioned as the prime reason for poverty by 27% of the materialists compared with 9% of the Postmaterialists, while 19% of the materialists mentioned injustice as reason for poverty compared to 30% of the postmaterialists (Eurobarometer, 1977). We have no arguments to assume that the relationship will have changed since 1976. The number of postmaterialists has increased, and in general postmaterialists are, as in 1976, the younger, higher educated, urban living, left oriented part of Dutch society. As it was in 1976 (Eurobarometer 1977), we expect that this group of people will be most in favor of blaming society for poverty.

### *(Anti-)welfare sentiment*

It has been argued that because the postmaterialist generation grew up in a situation that their basic material needs were satisfied, this generation is 'more likely to abandon the welfare state' (Pettersen, 1994: 63-64). In other words, the postmaterialist generation is expected to be least supportive of current social policies and are likely to display an anti-welfare sentiment. Such ideas of anti-welfare sentiment have been subject of empirical studies which yielded evidence for the reverse, namely that in case poverty is attributed to individualistic reasons, welfare policies receive little support (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). The expectation that postmaterialists will display anti-welfare state sentiment is thus not corroborated, which can perhaps be understood from theories of self-interest, for welfare states have retrenched social spending and job security has diminished. It has been demonstrated that people 'who are



socioeconomically vulnerable and thus more likely to benefit from the welfare state tend to be more supportive of it' (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989: 1041). People who are more likely to get unemployed or otherwise dependent upon one of the security benefits in the (near) future, will be more inclined to regard poverty a result of bad policies, while people who are less pessimistic about getting dependent upon one of the social security benefits are likely to blame the poor themselves.

A number of studies yielded evidence for the suggestion that views on poverty are influenced by attitudes towards social equality. For instance, Feldman (1983), and Kluegel and Smith (1983) have demonstrated that welfare state provisions were more strongly supported by people who had a favorable attitude towards social equality. Thus it can be expected that those people who support social equality will be more eager to blame society for people living in need. However, views on poverty will not only be connected to popular beliefs about social inequality and the role of the state, but also to the perceptions they have of benefit claimants. These perceptions can be either positive, seeing the poor as deserving, or negative, in which case the poor are seen as undeserving of support from society. There are studies suggesting that the classification of the poor as a deserving or undeserving group in society is dependent upon five broad criteria: 1) the degree of control the poor are supposed to have over their neediness; 2) the level of their need; 3) the degree to which one identifies with the group of poor; 4) the attitudes of the poor towards their supporters; 5) the degree to which the poor can reciprocate or have earned support. The lesser the control, the greater the need, the closer to 'us', the more compliant and the more reciprocation, the more the poor are seen as deserving (van Oorschot, 1997: 4). Thus, the positive or negative evaluation of the actual situation and the behavior and attitudes of the poor, will be an important attribute in people's perceptions of poverty. The more deserving, the more likely it is that people feel that these poor should have access to benefits and should receive help and support. Consequently, we might expect that the more positive people's view on welfare beneficiaries, the more society will be blamed for poverty. In case of negative views on beneficiaries, people are expected to attribute poverty more to individual blame factors.

#### *Social-demographic characteristics*

We expect relationships between popular perceptions of poverty and religion, postmaterialism, general welfare state attitudes, perceptions of beneficiaries and self interest. Apart from these attitudes the perceptions of poverty might be linked with social-demographic characteristics, such as age, education, and gender. In their survey on the determinants of public attitudes towards the welfare state, Hasenfeld and Rafferty concluded that age and income had a direct effect on welfare support, while gender and education did not. Education appeared to have an indirect effect, namely via the respondent's judgement of the responsibilities of government to intervene in the economy to achieve greater equality (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989: 1037). These conclusions refuted the results from the Eurobarometer study on *The Perception of Poverty in Europe* which showed that predictors as age, education, gender, household income appeared 'of little or no statistical significance' (Eurobarometer, 1977: 91). In his study on deservingness criteria, Van Oorschot noted that Dutch people's judgments on the poor were dependent upon age, level of education and income. Further, his analyzes yielded evidence that adherents to different political parties had

different views about the poor. The analyses demonstrated that 1) older people are more conditional with regard to supporting the poor; 2) less well educated people are more conditional with their support; 3) higher income groups tend to be less conditional; 4) left wing voters are less conditional (Van Oorschot, 1997: 11). So, earlier studies suggest that perceptions of poverty will be influenced, or at least associated, with social demographic characteristics, but as yet they have not revealed clear and consistent patterns. It is therefore difficult to formulate any hypotheses here.

### *Political parties*

The Eurobarometer survey on *The Perception of Poverty in Europe* did not yield much support for the suggestion that social-demographics are important attributes to people's perceptions of poverty, but the study revealed the importance of 'political color'. It appeared that 'left wingers are very much more inclined to put poverty down to social rather than individual causes' (Eurobarometer 1977). The ideology of the left has always been concerned with the poor, a more just distribution of income and wealth and state intervention to achieve these goals. Left-wing political parties stress greater equality, whereas right wing is considered to be supportive of 'a more or less hierarchical social order, and opposing change toward greater equality' (Lipset et al., 1954; 1135). Right stresses a class society and the principles of a free market economy and independent individuals, and thus strongly favours 'the lessening of state control' (Van Schuur, 1984: 212). Left is regarded to take the sides of the poor, the disadvantaged, the deprived and minority groups and in moral issues left represents the liberal stances. Right on the other hand is commonly viewed as the suppressor, nationalistic and sometimes even racist (Lipschits, 1969: 17), and commonly associated with the conservative and traditional standpoints. They are the strongest proponents of authority, order, maintaining the status quo, and a restrictive moral society (Halman & Heinen, 1996: 37).

Dutch politics has three main ideological streams: social democrats (PVDA), conservative liberals (VVD) and Christian democrats (CDA) (see also Knutsen, 1996: 320-321). Social democrats traditionally emphasize equality and according to them social inequality should be reduced by welfare policies. Liberals on the other hand, are much more inclined to stress individual responsibility, free market and entrepreneurship. Christian democrats are concerned about the negative effects of individualization and the decline of citizenship which is regarded a negative consequence of a too liberal system of welfare provisions (Houtman, 1994: 34).

## **4. Data, measures, method**

### **Data**

Data were derived from a national survey on religious and secular attitudes in 1995 in the Netherlands. This project on *Social and Cultural Developments in the Netherlands 1995* (SOCON95) is a cross-sectional survey among 2,019 respondents covering a large variety of religious beliefs and practices, fundamental values, political views, and orientations towards family, marriage, and work. It is a replication and extension of three previous surveys. In order to limit the length of the interviews, two partly overlapping questionnaires were

developed which were submitted to two different subsamples. The questions we are interested in were part of a questionnaire which included not only questions on the welfare state and social security, but also questions on themes like value systems, religion, conservatism, politics, labor, intimate relationships. The number of respondents that participated in this part of the survey was 1,010. The fieldwork took place between September 1995 and February 1996 (for more information, see Eisinga et al., 1999).

## Measures

### *Dependent variables*

The four types of explanations for poverty of Individual-Blame (IB), Individual-Fate (IF), Social-Blame (SB) and Social-Fate (SF), are reflected in peoples' answers to the question to what degree they considered a number of specified factors as reasons for people living in need. (see Eisinga et al., 1999: 272-275). The reasons presented were:

1. because they are not active and ambitious enough (IB)
2. because of injustice in our society (SB)
3. it's an inevitable part of modern times (SF)
4. the governmental policy is wrong (SF)
5. because they lack the required capacities (IF)
6. because they are just unlucky (IF).

In this paper we confine the analyzes to four items only: (1) not active, (2) injustice, (3) modern times, and (6) unluck. These items were included in the Eurobarometer study in 1976 and they were also part of the 1990 surveys of the European Values Studies. As has been argued in a paper based on these two European surveys (Van Oorschot & Halman, 1998; 1999), these items reflect the two dimensions blame versus fate and individual versus social adequately.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows that social injustice is most frequently mentioned as the reason why people live in need. According to 35% poverty is the result of societal injustice, which is almost twice as much as there are people who consider it a result of individuals being unlucky. The individualistic blame factor is popular among 28% of Dutch populace, which is almost twice as much as the proportion of Dutch people who consider being less well-off a result of modern times (15%). So, the 'blame' reasons receive much approval, while Dutch people are far less inclined to accept poverty as a result of fate. In fact, majorities are opposed to attribute poverty to uncontrollable factors, not only at the individual level, but also at societal level.<sup>1</sup>

The four items have been factor analyzed and yielded two factors. 'Injustice' and 'not active' appear in one dimension, emphasizing the social and individualistic 'blame' reasons. Within this *blame* dimension 'individualistic' and 'social' reasons have opposite loadings: those attributing poverty to an individual's laziness are less inclined to see social blame reasons as important, and vice versa.

Table 2 about here

The items ‘modern progress’ and ‘unluck’ appear in a second dimension but, as can be seen in the positive loadings on both items, a distinction in ‘individualistic’ and ‘social’ reasons is not made here. In other words, *fate* is the common issue of both items, independently if it is an attribute of the individual or society.

We have calculated factor scores indicating a respondent’s position on each dimension. As far as the ‘blame’ component is concerned, a high score refers to the social view, a low score to the individual who is to be blamed for being less well-off. The ‘fate’ dimension does not make this distinction in individualistic or social reasons. A high score indicates non-acceptance of fate as a reason for living in need, independently if it is individually or societal.

### *Independent variables*

#### *Social-demographic characteristics*

The social-demographic characteristics which we have included in the analyses are gender, age, education, and household income. *Age* is indicated by ‘year of birth’; *education* has 7 categories: elementary school; lower vocational school; lower secondary school; secondary vocational school; O levels; A levels, College, University; and *household income* refers to monthly income after taxes: less than (in NLG) 1.100; from 1.100 to 1.600; from 1.600 to 1.800; from 1.800 to 2.100; from 2.100 to 2.500; from 2.500 to 3.250; from 3.250 to 4.500; from 4.500 to 6.000; more than 6.000.

Church adherence is measured by two indicators: membership and church attendance. *Membership* is measured by the question if one belongs to one of the churches, and if yes, which one. As said before, Dutch religion can be divided in the three main blocks, Roman Catholics, Dutch Reformed and Re-reformed, plus a category of ‘other’ religions. These denominational groups can be distinguished from people who do not belong to either of the churches, which counts for half of Dutch population (see Halman & de Moor, 1994). *Church attendance* is measured by the question: ‘Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?’. The answer possibilities are: ‘about once a week’, ‘about once a month’, ‘once or twice a year’, ‘hardly ever/never’.

Apart from such social-demographic variables, we have investigated the impact of *attitudes or value orientations* like postmaterialism, left right orientation, welfare sentiment and people’s attitudes towards beneficiaries.

#### *Attitudes*

The *materialism-postmaterialism* measurement included in SOCON95 is the short four items battery developed by Inglehart (1977). Two of the items tap materialistic priorities; two postmaterialistic priorities. The two materialistic items were: ‘maintaining order in the nation’ and ‘fighting rising prices’. The two items tapping postmaterialist priorities were: ‘giving people more say in important government decisions’ and ‘protecting freedom of speech’. Individual scores are calculated as follows: two materialistic preferences indicate pure

materialists; pure postmaterialists prefer both postmaterialistic views; while those who have a mixed answer pattern are called mixed.

We distinguished between two types of welfare sentiment: welfare attitudes and attitudes towards welfare recipients. *Welfare attitudes* covers indices or scales (factor scores) that are commonly used in studies on political cultures (Barnes, Kaase et al., 1979; Van Deth & Jennings, 1989; Van Deth & Scarbrough, 1995; Halman & Nevitte, 1996). We have included scales tapping ‘opposition to income and status equalization’, ‘opposition to government intervention’, and ‘social criticism’ (see Felling, Peters & Schreuder, 1983; Eisinga et al., 1996). ‘Opposition to income and status equalization’ is a Mokken scale including the following items: ‘workers still have to struggle for an equal position in society’, ‘differences between classes ought to be smaller than they are at present’, and ‘income differences should become smaller’. ‘Opposition to government intervention is measured by a single item: ‘are you in favor or against drastic government intervention to reduce income differences’. Social criticism is a factor score including four items which also deal with equality and income distribution. The respondent has been asked to indicate the importance of: ‘contributing to the reduction of income differences’; ‘promoting greater equality in society’; ‘breaking through the existing relations of power’; ‘active commitment to a society in which every one has a voice’. By applying factor analysis on these three scales we made a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) indicating the degree to which the welfare state is supported. A high score on this dimension reflects a rejection of welfare, a low score a pro-welfare attitude.

A positive or negative *attitude towards beneficiaries* appears from what people regard rights and duties of these beneficiaries. This is indicated by the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements like beneficiaries have more rights than duties; beneficiaries need to be verified whether they are really looking for jobs; beneficiaries shirk from their duties; information by beneficiaries needs to be verified; most beneficiaries are honest; most unemployed people are actively searching for jobs. Again these items can be included in a scale ( $\alpha = .76$ ) which is denoted as negative attitude towards beneficiaries.

#### *Left-right*

Although a frequently applied instrument to measure a person’s *left or right orientation* is a scale from left to right which is presented to the respondents who are then asked to indicate their position on this scale, we have not included this straightforward and rather simple measure in our analyses. It has been demonstrated that left and right cannot be regarded the extreme poles of a dimension underlying people’s political views and opinions (Halman & Heinen, 1994; 1996). We therefore have created a scale from left to right based on people’s political party preference. These political parties can be classified in such terms as follows: Socialist Party, Green Left, PvdA, D66, CDA, VVD, Christian parties, Centrum Democrats, where Socialist Party is most left and Centrum Democrats are extreme right.

#### *Perceptions*

Finally, the impact of two perceptions can be further explored, perceived self interest and the perception of beneficiaries. *Self interest* is indicated by the perceived likelihood that in the near future the respondent will receive benefits from at least one of the following programs:

unemployment benefit, disablement benefit, sickness benefit and social assistance. The answer categories ranged from 'very big' (1) to 'very small' (5). Large majorities consider it highly unlikely that they have to appeal on one of these benefits, particularly with respect to social assistance. 78% of the respondents says that the likelihood that he/she needs social assistance within two years from now is very small. Because of the very skewed distributions we counted the numbers of benefits for which people thought the likelihood that they have to appeal on was 'very big', 'big', or 'neither big nor small'. Even counted in this way the self-interest scale appeared rather skewed. 66% of the respondents thinks it unlikely that he/she will receive benefits from one of these programs.

The negative or positive *perception of beneficiaries* appears from the respondent's answers to the question how often they think it occurs that social security measures are misused, such as that employees stay at home sick too easily; that people are judged disabled but who in fact are not; that people hide cohabitation in order to get higher benefits, and that beneficiaries are moonlighting. These items can be included in a scale that appears reliable ( $\alpha = .76$ ), and which we denoted: perceived misuse of provisions.

## **Method**

One of the aims of this paper is to define a causal model explaining people's score on the two dimensions underlying perceptions of poverty among the Dutch. As in most sociological studies we attempt to define a parsimonious model: in other words, we try to explain the two dimensions of poverty with only the most significant variables. In order to determine the effects of the social-demographic characteristics and people's perceptions and attitudes a number of bi- and multivariate analyses have been performed. First, the impact of social-demographic variables, the attitudes and perceptions have been analyzed separately. These analyses reveal which variables in the three sets have the strongest impact.

Next, the two dimensions of poverty have been regressed on the combination of those social-demographics, attitudes and perceptions which appeared to have a significant effect in the separate analyses. The results of these analyses make clear which of these variables contribute directly to poverty perceptions. These regression analyses have been succeeded by a series of regression analyses in which we have regressed those attitudes and perceptions that directly affected the perceptions on those social-demographics, attitudes and perceptions that did not affect the perceptions directly, but which did have a significant effect in the separate analyses of the first step. In this way we investigate the indirect effect of these variables. The results of the analyses enabled us to develop a causal model of direct and indirect effects which finally was tested in a LISREL analysis (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989).

## **5. Results**

To explore the relationships between the perceptions of poverty from SOCON 1995, indicated by respondents factorscores on the two dimensions of 'blame' and 'fate' on the one hand and people's socio-demographic characteristics, their attitudes and perceptions on the other hand, a number of bi-variate analyses have been performed, followed by a number of regression analyses.

### *Bi-variate analyses*

The correlations between social demographic variables and the two factor dimensions of poverty perception are in Table 3. The associations are not very strong. Age, level of education, and income are positively related with (non) fate, meaning that younger people, better educated persons, and people from higher income categories are less inclined to consider poverty a matter of fate. Being male or female does not matter much. However, females are more inclined to regard poverty as something society has to be blamed for, while men appear more in favor of the individual blame explanation. The higher the income, the more people are of the opinion that the individual is to be blamed.

Table 3 about here

When it comes to religious denomination, the differences are negligible small. In Table 4 the results are presented of the comparisons of the mean scores on both poverty dimensions for the various *religious denominations*. Catholics, Dutch-Reformed and Re-reformed people do not differ much in their views on poverty. When compared with other religious groups, the differences appeared significant, but this group of other religions is so divers that it is impossible to draw firm conclusions from this result. The differences between the three main denominations appear negligible, even when a further distinction is made in devout and less devout people within each of the three main religious denominational groups: the differences between the regular and irregular church attenders within each denominational group appeared not significant. Catholics apparently do not have a perception of poverty which distinguishes them from Protestants and unchurched. To recall, it has been argued that Catholics would be more collectivistic compared with more individualistic oriented Protestants, and most individualistic Re-reformed Protestants. Clearly, the analyses do not support this. Neither is the idea supported that Catholics, Reformed and Re-reformed would differ in their perception of why there are people living in need from unchurched people in Dutch society.

Table 4 about here

The ideological differences between the adherents of the main *political parties* in Dutch society are assumed to be reflected in their perceptions of poverty as well. As is demonstrated in Table 4, where the mean scores on both poverty dimensions for the adherents of the political parties are presented, the results of our analyses do confirm the idea that the electorate of the different political streams in the Netherlands have distinctive views on poverty, particularly with regard to blaming the individual or society. The adherents of social democratic PVDA are more in favor of blaming society in stead of the individual. Adherents of conservative liberal VVD ideology, however, are much more inclined to favour the individual blame factor. This reason is also most frequent among Christen Democrats. However, the adherents of CDA differ from the liberals in their slightly greater acceptance of the idea of fate. VVD voters emphasize that poverty is not a fate. In this view they are even surpassed by the social democratic PVDA voters.

Among the voters on smaller political parties we see that Green Lefters blame society even

more than social democratic voters, while people voting on small Christian parties show views opposite those of Christian democratic voters.

Blaming society is clearly more popular among left voters, while fate is an explanation only found relatively strongly among Christian democratic voters.

### *Multi-variate analyses*

Multiple regression analyses have been applied to determine which of the attitudes, perceptions and social-demographics have a *significant* effect on people's perceptions of poverty. First, we focus on social-demographic characteristics, followed by people's attitudes and perceptions.

### *Direct effects*

As far as *social-demographic* variables are concerned, we have regressed both poverty dimensions to age, level of education, income, gender, and church involvement. Apart from church attendance we have included dummy variables for Catholics, Dutch Protestants, Reformed and Unchurched people. The analysis yielded that such characteristics do indeed contribute to the explanation of people's perceptions of poverty, but the extent to which such features are able to explain them is rather limited. Fate-explanations are less favored by younger people, those with a higher education and with higher incomes. The latter also blame individuals more, and the same is true for men. However, the proportions of explained variance are rather low: resp for (non)fate  $r^2 = .08$ ; for blame  $r^2 = .02$ . In Table 5 the effects are displayed.

Table 5 about here

The results of the regression analysis in which we included as independent variables people's *attitudes*, reveal that anti-welfare sentiment, as well as a negative attitude towards beneficiaries and a right wing political orientation put the blame on the individual, while a negative attitude towards beneficiaries and being materialistic appear conducive to the idea that poverty is regarded a fate, independently if it is individually or societal.

As far as perceived misuse of social security provisions and perception of beneficiaries is concerned, the analyses revealed that the more one is of the opinion that social security is misused, the more one is inclined to regard poverty as something the individual has to be blamed for, but at the same time the more one regards poverty a matter of fate. Furthermore, in case one expects to make use of one or more of the social security provisions in the near future, the more one is inclined to regard poverty as a collective blame.

Table 6 about here

### *Indirect effects*

The results of the analyses in which we regressed the significant effects of the previous analyses are presented in table 7. When controlled for the impact of the other variables, blame is affected mainly by two attitudes, welfare state attitude and negative attitude towards



beneficiaries. The other attitudes, perceptions and social-demographic features appeared to not add significantly to the explanation of the blame dimension. The fate component is affected only by postmaterialism, age and income. The other variables appeared unimportant for this perception of poverty.

However, although the other variables do not appear to have a strong direct effect, they may have an indirect effect via the attitudes that have a direct effect. We therefore have regressed welfare attitudes, negative attitude towards beneficiaries, and postmaterialism, which appeared to affect directly perceptions of poverty, on those variables that appeared to have a significant effect in the separate analyses. This implies that welfare attitude is regressed on negative attitude towards beneficiaries, left right, perceived misuse, perceived self interest, income and gender; negative attitude on beneficiaries is regressed on the same set of variables<sup>2</sup>; postmaterialism is regressed on negative attitude on beneficiaries, perceived misuse, age, education and income.

Anti-welfare sentiments appear to depend upon a respondent's gender, his/her political orientation and his/her income; negative attitude towards beneficiaries is affected by left-right and perceived misuse; while postmaterialism can be attributed to a negative attitude towards beneficiaries, age, education and income. The impact of 'negative attitude towards beneficiaries' on the degree of postmaterialism may be understood from Inglehart's suggestion that 'an individual's priorities reflect the socioeconomic environment' (Inglehart, 1997: 132). A negative attitude towards beneficiaries can be attributed to perceived misuse of social security provisions and this negative view creates materialistic priorities.

Table 7 about here

#### *Towards a causal model?*

The results of these regression analyses enable us to define and test a causal model in which blame resp. (non) fate are the dependent variables. From the regression analyses it is clear that the fate dimension can be explained directly from three variables: postmaterialism, age and income. Post-materialists tend not to see poverty as the result of uncontrollable factors of fate, nor do people with higher incomes and younger people. The total effects of age and income are enhanced due to the fact that people with higher incomes and younger people have a higher chance of having a post-materialist attitude. The belief that poverty is the result of fate is also less strong among those with a higher education and those with a less negative perception of welfare recipients, because these groups tend to be more post-materialistic.<sup>3</sup>

Figures 1 and 2 about here

The regression analyses in which the individual versus collective blame was the dependent variable yielded that this dimension was directly affected by welfare attitude and negative attitude towards beneficiaries. People with a more negative view on welfare and on welfare recipients blame individuals more for their poverty. The same is true for men, people with higher incomes and those with a rightist political preference, because they have more negative

views on welfare. Those on the political right are even more strongly blaming the poor, because they also have a more negative view on welfare recipients, as do those who perceive high misuse.<sup>4</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we have explored people's views on the explanation of poverty. The literature and empirical research on poverty is more engaged with the definition and measurement of poverty, meanwhile neglecting the issue of what people consider as main reasons for living in need. As we have argued, there seem to be two dimensions involved in popular explanations of poverty. One relates to the question whether poverty is just matter of fate or not, the other to whether factors leading to poverty are to be found at the individual or the collective level. Both dimensions combined enables a distinction in four types of explanations: the individual is to blame (laziness), it is the individual's fate (unluck), society is to blame (injustice), and society's fate (inevitable part of progress).

Survey-data showed that among the Dutch in 1995 injustice is regarded as the most important reason for poverty: about one in three respondents agreed that society is to blame for the existence of poverty.

The existing literature on the explanations of such perceptions of poverty is not very rich, but generally suggests that such perceptions are linked to social-demographic characteristics, certain perceptions like perceived self-interest and perceptions of welfare recipients, as well as to attitudes and values. Applying regression analyzes we have found some support for these suggestions, but the evidence must not be exaggerated. The extent to which we have been able to explain what people consider reasons for poverty is rather modest. Large proportions of the variances on both dimensions of poverty remains unexplained.

Although religion has always been engaged in social issues like poverty, church attendance and religious traditions are apparently not very important attributes of people's ideas on poverty. There certainly are differences between Catholics and Protestants but these differences only partly corroborate the speculations that Catholics will be more in favor of putting the blame on the collectivity (society) and Protestants more on individuals. The latter result contradicts the expectations. Poverty is a social issue and as such it is not so strange that social-political orientations, like welfare state attitudes, are more important attributes than religious orientations. As such the analyzes seem to substantiate ideas forwarded by theories of secularization stating that religious values have lost their dominance in contemporary Western society. The importance of postmaterialism for both dimensions seems to confirm Inglehart's suggestion that postmaterialism has taken over religion's position.

Blaming society or the individual for living in need appears to depend, not only upon, welfare state attitudes, but also on the perceptions of beneficiaries. As expected a more positive view is found among people who blame society, while a negative view is linked with blaming people for living in need. Perceptions of self-interest, i.e. people's expectation that they will have to apply for welfare benefits in the near future, does not have a strong impact on their views of poverty.

The 1976 Eurobarometer study on *Perceptions of Poverty in the Europe*, yielded evidence for the suggestion that people's value orientations, like postmaterialism, are more important

attributes to understand varieties in views on poverty than structural and social demographic variables. Given the importance of welfare state attitudes, postmaterialism, and the perception of beneficiaries the conclusions from the Eurobarometer that subjective factors appear to have a stronger impact on perceptions of poverty than objective factors seem still valid in Dutch society. However, this may be true for understanding people's perception on who is to be blamed (society or the individual), but such factors appear rather unimportant to explain why some people regard poverty a fate while others consider it not a fate. Age and income appear to be most relevant for this choice.

Our efforts to explain individual differences in perceptions of poverty appeared successful to a very limited extent. Much is still unexplained and thus the question remains what determines people's perceptions of poverty.

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**Table 1. Responses to reasons for poverty in the Netherlands (in %)**

	agree entirely	agree	don't agree/ don't disagree	don't agree	don't agree at all
not active	4	24	42	27	3
injustice	5	30	33	28	4
modern	2	13	23	50	13
unlucky	2	13	27	42	16

**Table 2. Results factor analysis reasons for poverty**

	F1	F2
not active		0.79
injust		-0.71
modern	0.79	
unluck	0.78	
% Variance	35	28

**Table 3. Correlations (Pearson) between the two poverty perceptions and social-demographic characteristics**

	Blame (individual-social)	Fate (yes-no)
age (year of birth)	-0.024	.189***
education level	-0.041	.173***
income level	-.104**	.155***
gender1)	10.43**	0.063

1) F-between groups

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

**Table 4 Perceptions of poverty (means) in religious groups and among adherents to different political parties**

	Blame (individual-social)			Fate (yes-no)		
		regular	not regular		regular	not regular
<b>Catholics</b>	-0.06	-0.03	-0.08	-0.134	-0.203	-0.07
<b>Reformed</b>	-0.117	-0.189	-0.03	0.01	-0.04	0.065
<b>Re-reformed</b>	0.151	0.073	0.605	0.209	0.214	0.178
<b>other</b>	0.231			0.341		
<b>none</b>	0.008			0.003		
F between groups	1.18			2.393*		
eta	0.071			0.101		
<b>PVDA</b>	0.262			0.055		
<b>CDA</b>	-0.237			-0.061		
<b>VVD</b>	-0.423			0.026		
<b>D66</b>	-0.046			0.013		
<b>GL (Green left)</b>	0.419			0.005		
<b>small Christian parties</b>	0.18			0.319		
<b>other</b>	0.286			-0.103		
F-between groups	15.231***			1.057		
eta	0.088			0.007		

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



**Table 5. The impact of social-demographic variables on both poverty dimensions (beta coefficients)**

	<b>Blame (individual-social)</b>	<b>Fate (yes-no)</b>
<b>age</b>	-0.041	.204***
<b>education</b>	0.001	.093**
<b>income</b>	-.101**	.151***
<b>gender</b>	.100**	0.017
<b>Catholic</b>	-0.097	-0.1
<b>Dutch Reformed</b>	-0.082	-0.039
<b>Re reformed</b>	0.004	-0.002
<b>unchurched</b>	-0.058	-0.097
<b>church attendance</b>	-0.009	0.005
$r^2$	0.028	0.088

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

**Table 6. The impact (direct effects) of attitudes, political party preference, religious adherence and church attendance**

	<b>Blame (individual-social)</b>	<b>Fate (yes-no)</b>
<b>Attitudes</b>		
<b>postmaterialism</b>	0.023	.154***
<b>welfare</b>	-.287***	0.055
<b>neg. att. beneficiaries</b>	-.224***	-.096*
<b>left-right</b>	-.080*	0.009
<b>Perceptions</b>		
<b>perceived misuse</b>	-.172***	-.104**
<b>perceived self interest</b>	.066*	-0.02

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

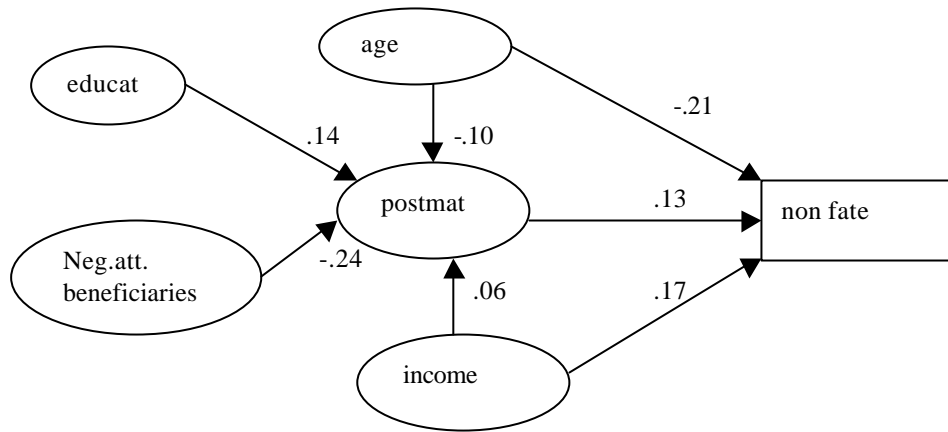
**Table 7. Effects of social-demographics, attitudes and perceptions on welfare attitude, which appeared to have a significant effect on blame and/or (non) fate**

	<b>Blame (individual-social)</b>	<b>Fate (yes-no)</b>
welfare	-.279***	
neg. att. beneficiaries	-.210***	-0.058
left-right	-0.058	
perceived misuse	-0.059	-0.033
perceived self interest	0.042	
income	-0.045	.163***
gender	0.04	
age		.220***
education		0.021
postmaterialism		.102**
r <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.10

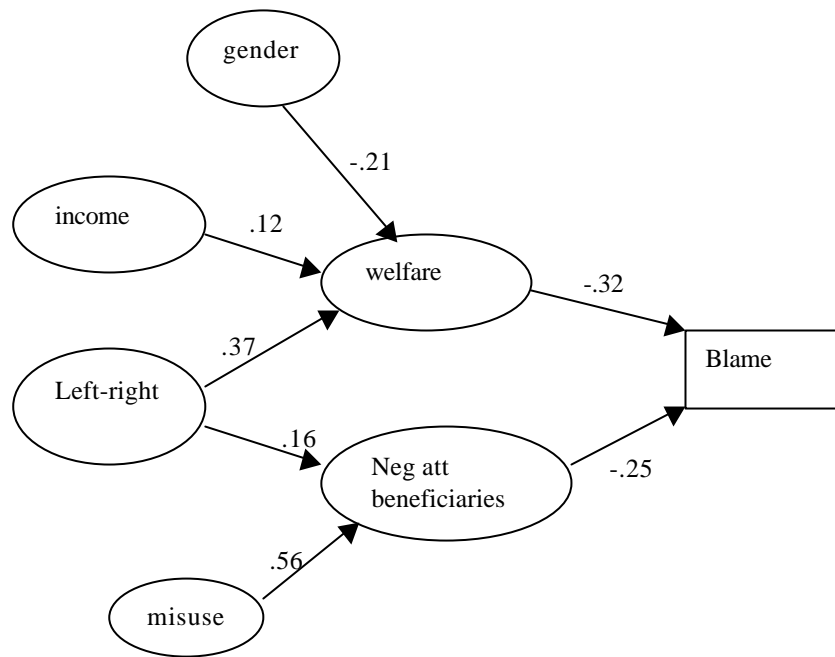
**Table 8. Effects of social-demographics on welfare attitudes, negative attitude towards beneficiaries and postmaterialism**

	<b>welfare</b>	<b>neg att ben</b>	<b>postmat</b>
neg att ben	0.03		-.242***
welfare		0.024	
left-right	.360***		
perceived misuse	-0.029	.550***	-0.012
perceived self-interest	-0.012	-0.027	
income	.118***	-0.056	.068*
gender	-.215***	0.036	
age			.103**
education			.134***
r <sup>2</sup>	0.21	0.37	0.13

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



**Figure 1. Causal model (non) fate dimension (Standardized regression coefficients )**



**Figure 2. Causal model blame dimension (Standardized regression coefficients)**

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> While in 1976 most Dutch people with an opinion were inclined to the individual fate explanation (Eurobarometer 1977), in 1990 the largest proportion of 36% of the Dutch had adopted the idea that poverty is due to social injustice in their society (Van Oorschot and Halman 1998). That poverty is due to bad luck was mentioned in 1990 by a quarter of the Dutch, making it the second most important reason. Five years later the SOCON data suggest that a change has taken place. Social injustice keeps its head position as the most prevailing reason among the Dutch, but the second place of individual bad luck is overtaken by the individual blame type of reason: that the poor are lazy, not active and ambitious enough. Clearly, a more negative view on the poor appeared on the scene, which coincides with a general drop in popular support for the welfare state and the rights of beneficiaries which was observed in the early 1990s in national surveys of the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP, 1996:259-264). Although it is difficult to link opinions directly to what takes place at the political and policy level (There is a general, but far from resolved debate, on the degree to which public opinion on welfare issues and broader values regarding e.g. equality and government intervention really influence welfare policy, or whether and to what degree it is policies that influence opinions (see e.g. Golding and Middleton 1982, Pierson 1991, Ringen 1987, SCP 1994, Taylor-Gooby 1995, Miller 1995, Burnstein 1998)). opinions on poverty and the poor might well have been influenced in that period by the much discussed outcomes of parliamentary enquiries on the (mal-)functioning of the Dutch social security and social assistance system, on the growing concern with the rising numbers of disabled workers expressed repeatedly by government and the subsequent measures that were taken to limit access to social benefits and to activate beneficiaries to take up a job (see e.g. Bosch, 1998). Moreover, individual responsibility became one of the central concepts of the restructured Dutch system of social protection (Van der Veen 1998, van Oorschot 1998). ]
- <sup>2</sup> Of course instead of attitude towards beneficiaries, now welfare attitude is included.
- <sup>3</sup> The results of the LISREL analyses show that the model does not explain very much of the variation on the fate dimension ( $r^2 = .12$ ), and also that the model does not fit the data very well ( $\chi^2 = 8.92$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .012$ ). The modification indices suggest to add an effect from the dependent variable to post materialism. Adding this effect improved the fit tremendously, but also demonstrates that the impact of postmaterialism on the dependent variable is stronger than the other way around. This is also what was predicted theoretically. Postmaterialism is a basic attitude or value influencing other orientations.
- <sup>4</sup> The fit of this model is  $\chi^2 = 15.11$ ;  $df = 8$ ;  $p = .057$ ;  $r^2 = .37$ .