

## **The Influence of Perceived Deservingness on Policy Decisions Regarding Aid to the Poor**

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*In the current climate of welfare reform, it is important to understand how perceptions of the poor affect policy decisions. This paper examines how people distinguish between the undeserving poor and the deserving poor, and how this differentiation affects policy decisions. Survey respondents rated each policy in a set of hypothetical policies on a liberal-conservative continuum. Analyses were then conducted to explore differences in the respondents' likelihood of recommending the most liberal and the most conservative of these policies. Study 1 demonstrated that liberal policies were more likely to be recommended and conservative policies were less likely to be recommended when the target group was perceived to be deserving rather than undeserving. Study 2 replicated this effect of perceived deservingness and demonstrated an effect of attribution of responsibility. That is, liberal policies were more likely to be recommended and conservative policies were less likely to be recommended when the responsibility for the target's poverty was attributed to society rather than to the individual.*

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Despite the attempts to extinguish poverty that began with the "war on poverty" in the 1960s, there is still persistent poverty in the United States today. This phenomenon is referred to as the poverty paradox (Peterson, 1991). One explanation for the poverty paradox is that the welfare state is inadequate, that is, the government is not providing enough support for the poor. Other explanations refer to the culture of poverty (there is something about the style of life of persistently poor people that prevents them from improving their standard of living; Lewis, 1969; Peterson, 1991), incentives provided by welfare assistance (the programs set in place to relieve severe poverty are seen as actually serving to perpetuate it; Murray, 1984; Peterson, 1991), or the effects of a changing economy

on the inner city (the loss of manufacturing jobs has resulted in high levels of unemployment in the inner cities; Peterson, 1991; Wilson, 1987).

In the work described below, I sought to test the hypothesis that people distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor in making policy decisions. This research also examined the hypothesis that the underclass is commonly defined using three characteristics: race (nonwhite), a lack of adherence to mainstream norms, and an internal attribution of the responsibility for the cause of poverty. In addition, the ways in which various demographic and individual difference measures moderate these two hypotheses were investigated.

Two studies were conducted concurrently. Study 1 investigated the concept of deservingness and its relationship to policy decisions. That is, Study 1 asked whether people actually make a distinction between different groups of poor people and view some poor people as more deserving of aid than others. Study 1 predicted that respondents would be more likely to recommend liberal policies when the target group was perceived to be a deserving poor group rather than an undeserving poor group. Similarly, participants were expected to be more likely to recommend policies judged to be conservative when the target group was perceived to be an undeserving poor group rather than a deserving poor group.

Study 2 looked at the specific factors that determine who is perceived as deserving. Hence, Study 2 examined the individual effects of a target's race, whether or not a target followed mainstream norms, and the attribution of responsibility for a target's poverty on recommendations of aid to the poor, as well as how the interaction of these factors affected policy recommendations. This study predicted that policies judged to be liberal would be most likely to be recommended when the target was white and followed mainstream norms, and when society was viewed as responsible for his or her poverty. Conversely, policies judged to be conservative were predicted to be most likely to be recommended when the target was African American, broke mainstream norms, and was viewed as individually responsible for his or her poverty.

The recent debate about welfare reform in the United States culminated with the signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in August 1996. This bill eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF is a block grant to the states that removes the federal guarantee of cash assistance to needy families (thus ending cash assistance as an entitlement), establishes a lifetime time limit of 5 years for receiving aid, and penalizes states that do not force a large proportion of their adult recipients off the welfare rolls and into work programs. This bill also reduces Food Stamp benefits and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) (Albelda, 1996).

What has precipitated this push for more restrictive programs of aid for the poor? Wilson (1996) cited surveys showing "that whereas a substantial majority of Americans felt that too little was being spent to help the poor, only slightly more than 20 percent in any given year felt that too little was being spent to help those

on welfare” (p. 162). Additional surveys show more negative and less generous responses to the term “welfare” than to the term “poor” (Smith, 1987). The studies reported below examine the role that this distinction between “the poor” (for whom not enough money is being spent) and “welfare recipients” (for whom too much money is being spent) plays in people’s attitudes toward social policy to alleviate poverty. The hypothesis examined here is that the distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor or underclass affects the types of policies people are likely to recommend.

### *Social Policy and Poverty*

Cook and Barrett (1992) conducted extensive research examining support among the public and members of Congress for the various social policies that constitute the “American welfare state.” They asserted that whether a recipient deserves to receive aid depends on five criteria: whether the recipient needs the aid, has any other resources that could provide the benefit, is responsible for the need to be met, wants to be self-sufficient, and is fiscally responsible (i.e., uses the aid wisely rather than frivolously). Cook and Barrett found that more than half, and in some cases as many as 89% (e.g., 89% thought that social security recipients needed the aid), of the people surveyed from the public sample thought that AFDC recipients, Medicaid recipients, and Social Security recipients all needed the benefit, had no other way of getting this help, were not responsible for needing the benefit, and wanted to be self-sufficient. However, the results for fiscal responsibility were a little different. A majority of the public sample felt that Medicaid and Social Security recipients used their benefits wisely, whereas only 42% of this sample thought that AFDC recipients were prudent with the aid they received.

Nonetheless, 60% of this sample attributed at least three of these five criteria of deservingness to AFDC recipients. Although not important for the prediction of public support of social security, Cook and Barrett (1992) found that these criteria of deservingness were important factors in predicting public support for AFDC and Medicaid. They concluded that “social welfare in America is firmly rooted” (p. 215). Perhaps so, but the nature of social welfare benefits in the United States has changed considerably since the Cook and Barrett study.

### *The Underclass or Undeserving Poor*

The term “underclass” was originally used as an economic term to describe persistent and extreme poverty. However, in his book *The War Against the Poor*, Gans (1995) stated that the current usage of the term follows a behavioral definition that

denominates poor people who drop out of school, do not work, and, if they are young women, have babies without benefit of marriage and go on

welfare . . . also includes the homeless, beggars and panhandlers, poor addicts to alcohol or drugs, and street criminals . . . [and also includes] poor people who live in “the projects,” illegal immigrants, and teenage gang members. (p. 2)

Members of the underclass generally lack the skills and training needed to obtain viable employment. This leads to an inability to get out of poverty and off of welfare dependency (Harris, 1992). The underclass has become a synonym for the undeserving poor (Jencks, 1991). The deserving poor are entitled to the economic, social, and political redistribution of resources that would bring them out of poverty and into mainstream, “affluent” society. The undeserving poor, on the other hand, are not entitled to these resources or admittance into affluent society until they prove that they are actually deserving (Gans, 1969).

The underclass has also been defined as people whose poverty is a result of the violation of one or more social norms (Jencks, 1991). Members of the underclass threaten mainstream values (Smith, 1992). Indeed, the undeserving poor have been described as indifferent to middle-class values. In addition, the members of the underclass lack education and are largely nonwhite (Jencks, 1991). Another factor of undeservingness is a causal attribution of responsibility for one’s poverty (Jencks, 1992). In sum, the undeserving poor are defined as people with a low income who violate mainstream norms, are nonwhites, and are individually responsible for their poverty.

### *Race*

From the beginning of the popular use of the term underclass, it was assumed that the underclass is African American (Gans, 1995). Being a member of an undeserving poor group is often equated with living in an underclass neighborhood. These areas tend to be thought of as urban ghetto areas, largely populated by African Americans. Thus, the underclass is generally perceived to be nonwhite (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991; Jencks, 1991, 1992). Gans (1995) even went so far as to propose that underclass may be used as a racial or ethnic code word. According to Gans, using such labels as underclass or undeserving poor may serve as a device for masking anti-black feelings. Thus, the studies reported here examine race as one component of the definition of the undeserving poor.

### *Norms*

Prior research indicates that members of the perceived underclass do not behave according to the rules set by mainstream America. These poor people believe in and practice bad values, violate social norms, and do not abide by middle-class values. Accordingly, it is believed that the immoral values of female

members of the underclass lead them to become sexually active at a young age and have babies as adolescents (Gans, 1995; Jencks, 1991, 1992).

Gans (1995) argued that because the members of the underclass possess values that diverge from the mainstream, mainstream society will try to force them to alter their ways. One way that mainstream society may attempt to achieve this goal is through the enactment of social policies such as ending welfare payments. To this effect, Skitka and Tetlock (1993a) found that, at least for conservatives, withholding assistance from people responsible for their situation appeared to stem from a desire to punish people who violate norms.

Hence, whether or not individuals follow mainstream norms was another piece of the definition of the deserving poor that was investigated in the current research. Mainstream norms were operationalized as finishing high school or receiving the General Equivalency Diploma, not having an addiction to alcohol, and not choosing to have a child out of wedlock.

### *Attribution of Responsibility*

Attribution theory refers to the study of the perceived causes of behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Although there are many theories of attributions for causation, all of them begin with the idea that “people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining reactions to the behavior” (Kelley & Michela, 1980, p. 458).

The moral model of attribution for the responsibility for a problem and the responsibility for its solution is the model most relevant to a discussion of the undeserving poor. The moral model posits that people are responsible for both the problem and its solution. That is, the problem is both internally caused and unstable or changeable. Thus, others are neither obligated nor able to help. An inability to change one’s situation is assumed to be due to a lack of effort (Brickman et al., 1982).

“When people say that someone deserves help, they may mean only that this individual is not to be blamed for their problems” (Brickman et al., 1982, p. 376). Schmidt and Weiner (1988) stated that when we encounter a person in need, we first attempt to find a cause for that need. Individuals are more likely to attribute the cause of a need to some dispositional characteristic of the person in need if they believe that this person has acted freely than if they believe that the person’s behaviors are a result of personal incapacities or external constraints (Steiner, 1970).

Authors studying attribution find that when a flaw—whether a physical ailment, a mental ailment, or lack of income—is attributed to an internal cause, the result is anger rather than pity, leading to a lack of desire to engage in helping behavior. When a flawed person is seen as responsible for his or her problem, others are less likely to offer help (Reisenzein, 1986; Schmidt & Weiner, 1988; Weiner, 1980a, 1980b).

To this effect, studies by Feather (1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996) have examined whether people are considered deserving of the outcomes they receive. In a line of research on “tall poppies” (i.e., conspicuously high achievers), Feather found that the success or failure of the “tall poppy” was considered deserved if that success or failure could be attributed to causes within the control of the individual, and if the valence of the outcome matched the valence of the action taken to achieve the outcome. When a positive action resulted in a success, that success was considered deserved; when a positive action resulted in a failure, that failure was considered undeserved. Along these same lines, and of particular relevance for the current research, is more recent work by Feather and Dawson (1998) on deservingness of achieving employment or remaining unemployed. The authors found that when targets were considered responsible for their employment status, they were judged to be more deserving of that status than when they were not considered responsible.

Following from attribution theory and the research by Feather (and Feather and Dawson), we can draw parallels to social policy for the poor. Poor people are often judged to be blameworthy for their situation. They are viewed as not implementing the choice to attain wealth (Karniol, 1985). As research by Feigen-son, Park, and Salovey (1997) shows, people should recommend less generous policies when it is possible to attribute responsibility to the recipient of the aid.

The current research predicts that if people are considered responsible for their poverty and thus deserving of their condition, they will be judged not deserving of aid. Several studies support this hypothesis. Feather and Dawson (1998) showed that financial assistance was supported more when the unemployed recipient of that assistance had exerted high effort in an attempt to find a job than when the recipient had not made much of an effort. Skitka and Tetlock (1992, 1993a, 1993b) found that under conditions of scarcity, participants were more likely to provide aid to people who are not responsible for their need than to those who are responsible. Cook (1979) demonstrated that when people were perceived to have caused their own need for aid, they received less support than when some outside condition was perceived to be the cause of that need.

### *Moderating Variables*

In addition, the studies reported here examined the effects of participant household income, whether the participant ever received means-tested public assistance (welfare cash benefits, food stamps, subsidized housing, or Medicaid), whether the participant knew anyone who ever received means-tested public assistance (hereafter called assistance), political ideology, and participants' race, sex, and age on the likelihood of recommending social policies intended to aid the poor. Participants' race, sex, and age were included in the analyses as control variables.

Looking at beliefs of the middle-class about welfare recipients, Goodwin (1973) found that middle-class respondents thought that welfare recipients have a low work ethic. Singh (1989) found that people from higher income groups attributed the cause of poverty to more internal or individual factors, whereas the poor attributed the cause of poverty to external or societal factors such as government and the societal system. As is noted above in the discussion of the literature on attribution of responsibility, when the cause for a problem is attributed to the individual rather than to some external source, the person is viewed more negatively and others are less likely to help that individual.

Thus, it was predicted that participants with a low household income would be more likely than those with a high household income to recommend liberal policies and less likely to recommend conservative policies. Similarly, participants who had received assistance and those who knew someone who received assistance were predicted to be more likely to recommend liberal policies and less likely to recommend conservative policies than those participants who never received assistance or knew anyone who received assistance, respectively.

Skitka and Tetlock (1993a, 1993b) found that conservatives attributed poverty to individual factors such as self-indulgence, low moral standards, and low intelligence. On the other hand, liberals attributed poverty to external factors such as unjust social practices and structures. Concurring with this finding, Griffin and Oheneba-Sakyi (1993) found that politically conservative students attributed poverty to individual causes more than did other students. Other authors have also found that politically conservative people attribute poverty or socioeconomic success to individual factors and regard the poor more negatively than do politically liberal people (Free & Cantril, 1967; Furnham, 1982; Wagstaff, 1983). Again, the literature on attribution of responsibility indicates that when the cause for a problem is attributed to the individual, others are less likely to help the person in need.

More direct evidence for the effect of political ideology is provided by Zucker and Weiner (1993). These authors found a negative relationship between conservatism and the degree to which respondents felt poor people deserve government assistance. Hence, a main effect of political ideology was expected, such that self-identified conservatives should support conservative policies more than self-identified liberals, and self-identified liberals should support liberal policies more than self-identified conservatives. This prediction simply served as a validation of the political ideology construct.

This paper predicts that the differentiation of the undeserving poor from the deserving poor affects people's views of appropriate social policy. Prior research argues that the undeserving poor are distinguished from the deserving poor through three characteristics: race, whether mainstream norms were followed, and the attribution of responsibility for the cause of poverty. The work presented here attempts to examine this distinction empirically.

## STUDY 1

### Goals and Predictions

The goal of Study 1 was to show that individuals make distinctions between groups of poor people perceived to be deserving and undeserving, and that these distinctions affect the recommendation of particular social policy options.

A pilot study was conducted with 140 participants (77 men and 63 women) from the same sample as Studies 1 and 2.<sup>1</sup> This study established that two of the 13 hypothetical policies constituting the dependent variables in Studies 1 and 2 (“cash benefits and non-cash benefits with no time limits” and “full medical coverage with no time limits”) were considered to be significantly more liberal than the others, and the policy “no benefits” was considered to be significantly more conservative than all of the other policies. Responses indicating the likelihood of recommending the two most liberal policies were pooled. For both Studies 1 and 2, only recommendations of the pooled liberal policies and the conservative no-benefits policy were analyzed.

It was predicted in Study 1 that people would be more likely to recommend the liberal hypothetical policies when the target group was perceived to be a deserving poor group as opposed to an undeserving poor group, and that they would be more likely to recommend the conservative hypothetical policy (no benefits) when the target group was perceived to be an undeserving poor group as opposed to a deserving poor group. In addition, it was predicted that the liberal policies would be more likely to be recommended when the participants judged themselves to be politically liberal, had a low household income, received assistance, and knew someone who received assistance. The no-benefits policy was expected to be more likely to be recommended when the participants judged themselves to be politically conservative, had a high household income, never received assistance, and did not know anyone who received assistance. Exploratory analyses of the effects of participants’ race, sex, and age were also conducted.

### Method

#### *Participants*

The participants were 240 individuals (135 men and 100 women; 5 did not indicate their sex) who responded to surveys distributed at three Connecticut shopping malls (in both urban and suburban areas), on a commuter train that runs between New Haven and New York City, in New Haven and New York City train stations, at the Hamden (CT) Department of Motor Vehicles, and at two

<sup>1</sup> All three studies, the Pilot Study, Study 1, and Study 2, were conducted simultaneously. Respondents were randomly assigned to each study, and to a condition within each study.

Connecticut airports. These locations were chosen to ensure a diverse sample.<sup>2</sup> Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72, with a median age of 37. Sixty-four percent of the respondents were white and 33% were nonwhite (3% of the participants did not indicate their race). Thirty-six percent of the participants reported an annual income below \$42,000; 58% reported an annual income of \$42,000 or above (6% did not indicate their income level). One percent of the participants indicated that they were currently receiving some form of (means-tested public) assistance. Thirteen percent of respondents reported that they had received assistance at some point, and 57% reported that they knew someone who received assistance. One percent of the respondents completed some high school; 9% finished high school; 28% completed some sort of vocational training, 2-year associate's degree, or some college; 26% had a 4-year college degree; and 35% attended graduate or professional school (1% did not indicate educational level).

Overall, 69% of the people approached agreed to respond to the surveys. Of the people who refused, 53% were men and 47% were women. Because the studies were run concurrently, it was only possible to determine an approximate response rate for each study. Around 72% of the people asked to participate in Study 1 agreed to complete the survey. A  $\chi^2$  analysis indicates that the approximate proportion of men and women who refused to complete the survey was not significantly different from the proportion of men and women who agreed to answer the survey [ $\chi^2(1) = .261, p < .61$ ].

### *Procedure*

There was one white female experimenter in her late 20s and one Latino male experimenter in his early 20s. The experimenters approached participants, explained that they were students at Yale University, and asked if the participants would mind completing a survey as part of a study on attitudes toward the poor and welfare reform. There were six different versions of the survey. In any given location, as many people as possible were approached and asked to complete the survey. There were no demographic differences between the people responding to the various versions of the survey. Respondents were thanked for their participation and the experimenters answered any questions that participants had after completion of the survey, but respondents were not compensated for their participation. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete.

<sup>2</sup> All samples were drawn from a pool that included residents of 42 states and the District of Columbia. The median age in the Study 1 sample was similar to the national median age of 35, but a larger proportion of the sample was nonwhite compared to the national distribution: 73% of the nation's population is white (not Hispanic) and 27% is nonwhite (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). The Study 1 sample was skewed toward a higher household income level than the national average; in 1996, 40% of the U.S. population had an annual household income greater than \$42,000 using 1995 cut-offs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The Study 1 sample also overrepresented men relative to the national population: The sample included 56% men and 42% women, whereas the national population is 49% male and 51% female (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997).

### *Measures*

Participants were provided with one of six categories of poor people. They were then instructed to pretend that they were members of Congress and to indicate the likelihood, on a scale from 1 (definitely would not recommend) to 5 (definitely would recommend), that they would recommend each of the 13 hypothetical policy options for the specific group of poor people they were asked to consider.

On the basis of the literature reviewed above, three of the categories (widows with children, physically handicapped, and physically ill) were identified by the researcher as deserving poor groups, three of the categories (teen mothers, single mothers, and able-bodied men) were considered to be undeserving poor groups, and a dichotomous “deservingness” variable was created. Support for this division of poor groups is provided in the literature. In particular, widows, the severely sick, and the disabled are not viewed as members of any underclass, because these groups do not typically engage in any activities characteristic of the undeserving poor, such as being lazy, unreliable, or abusing drugs or alcohol (Peterson, 1991).

In contrast, groups labeled as the underclass include single-parent families; unemployed men; poor, unmarried, teenage mothers; and female welfare recipients, particularly welfare mothers (Auletta, 1982; Gans, 1995; Peterson, 1991). Ricketts and Sawhill (1988) argued that the undeserving poor consist of high school dropouts, men who are regularly unemployed, welfare recipients, and female heads of households. Jencks (1991) noted that the undeserving poor do not work regularly and that they have children without being married.

Participants also responded to a number of demographic and individual difference measures, including household income, political ideology, sex, age, race, and whether they had ever received or knew anyone who had ever received public assistance. The small number of participants who were currently receiving assistance ( $n = 2$ ) precluded meaningful analysis of this construct. Participants' household income level was divided into six categories based on quintiles of household income and the top 5% of household income in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996). Political ideology was assessed on a 7-point scale where 1 indicated very liberal and 7 indicated very conservative. Because of the limited number of people indicating that they were members of each of the various categories of nonwhite participants, race was collapsed across groups, thus creating a dichotomous variable with the categories white and nonwhite.

## **Results**

### *Manipulation Check*

A follow-up study was conducted as a manipulation check of the deservingness variable. For the manipulation check, 114 additional surveys were distributed in the same locations as in Study 1. The procedure for the manipulation check was

the same as for Study 1. Respondents were instructed to think about one of the six categories of poor people used in Study 1 and to indicate, on a scale from 1 (not at all deserving) to 6 (extremely deserving), how deserving of aid they thought that particular poor group was. The rest of the survey was identical to the instrument used in Study 1.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences between the groups on deservingness [ $F(5, 108) = 13.10, p < .0001$ ]. As shown by post hoc Tukey tests, able-bodied men were judged to be significantly less deserving of aid than all other poor groups, and physically handicapped people were judged to be significantly more deserving of aid than teen mothers, single mothers, and able-bodied men. In addition, teen mothers and single mothers were rated as less deserving of aid than physically ill people and widows with children, although these differences were not significant.

*Effects on Hypothetical Policies*

For each of the six poor groups, 40 participants indicated the likelihood that they would recommend the hypothetical policies on a scale from 1 (definitely would not recommend) to 5 (definitely would recommend). Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were conducted to examine the effects of the various predictors on the likelihood of recommending the pooled liberal policies and the conservative no-benefits policy (Table I). Attributed deservingness of the target was significantly related to the likelihood of recommending liberal policies. Respondents were more likely to recommend liberal policies when the target group was perceived to be a deserving group than when the target group was perceived to be an undeserving group. Political ideology and participant’s sex also predicted

**Table I.** Effects of Deservingness, Ideology, and Demographic Variables on Likelihood of Recommending Liberal Policies and No-Benefits Policy: OLS Regressions

Predictor variable	Model 1: Likelihood of recommending liberal policies	Model 2: Likelihood of recommending no benefits
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)
Deservingness	.678** (.155)	-.227 (.127)
Ideology	-.221** (.059)	.024 (.050)
Household income	-.046 (.057)	-.090† (.047)
Sex	-.371* (.158)	-.025 (.129)
Age	-.007 (.007)	.007 (.006)
Respondent race	-.158 (.180)	-.118 (.148)
Know someone who has received assistance	.128 (.170)	-.338* (.141)
Model statistics (summary statistics)	$R^2 = .184$ $F(7, 184) = 7.17^{**}$	$R^2 = .036$ $F(7, 181) = 1.20^{\dagger}$

Note. Values reported for  $R^2$  are adjusted  $R^2$ .

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .0005$ , † $p = .06$ .

likelihood of recommending liberal policies. Regardless of the attributed deservingness of the target group, liberals were more likely to recommend liberal policies than conservatives, and men were more likely to recommend liberal policies than women.

There was no effect of the attributed deservingness of the target on the likelihood of recommending the conservative no-benefits policy. However, knowing someone who received assistance was related to the likelihood of recommending the no-benefits policy. Respondents who knew someone who had received assistance were less likely to recommend the no-benefits policy than were participants who did not know anyone who had received assistance. In addition, there was a marginally significant effect of household income. Contrary to expectations, people with a higher household income were slightly less likely to recommend the no-benefits policy than were those with a lower household income.

Looking at each poor group separately, an ANOVA [ $F(5, 234) = 9.39, p < .0001$ ] revealed that respondents' likelihood of recommending liberal policies differed significantly, depending on which poor group the participants were judging. A post hoc Tukey follow-up shows that participants were significantly less likely to recommend liberal policies when the target group was able-bodied men than when the target group was widows with children, physically handicapped people, or physically ill people. In addition, respondents were significantly more likely to recommend liberal policies when the target group was physically handicapped people than when the target group was able-bodied men, teen mothers, or single mothers (Table II). Thus, it is possible that the effects of perceived deservingness were driven largely by two groups, physically handicapped people and able-bodied men.

There was no effect, however, of deservingness of the poor group on the likelihood of recommending the no-benefits policy. This may be due to a floor effect, as participants were not likely to recommend this policy regardless of which poor group they were considering (Table II).

**Table II.** Likelihood of Recommending Liberal Policies or "No Benefits," by Poor Group

Group	Likelihood of recommending liberal policies	Likelihood of recommending no benefits
	Mean	Mean
Physically handicapped people	3.45 <sup>a</sup>	1.47 <sup>a</sup>
Physically ill people	2.99 <sup>ab</sup>	1.57 <sup>a</sup>
Widows with children	2.95 <sup>ab</sup>	1.51 <sup>a</sup>
Teen mothers	2.58 <sup>bc</sup>	1.80 <sup>a</sup>
Single mothers	2.57 <sup>bc</sup>	1.78 <sup>a</sup>
Able-bodied men	2.03 <sup>c</sup>	1.75 <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* Scores range from 1 (definitely would not recommend) to 5 (definitely would recommend). Means that do not share superscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.

## Discussion

As predicted, there was a significant effect of perceived deservingness on the likelihood of recommending liberal policies to aid the poor. Respondents were more likely to recommend liberal assistance policies when presented with a poor group considered to be deserving than when presented with a poor group perceived to be undeserving. This effect may have been in part accounted for by two of the six poor groups presented. As is shown in Table II, respondents were significantly more likely to recommend liberal policies when the group presented was physically handicapped people than when it was able-bodied men.

Attributions of responsibility for one's poverty may be clearest for these two groups. It is likely that physically handicapped people were judged as not responsible for their poverty. Respondents may have assumed that the physical handicap itself prevented the individual from finding employment. On the other hand, it is likely that able-bodied men were thought of as unwilling to seek employment. The effect of attribution of responsibility for one's poverty is explored in Study 2.

There were also effects of sex and political ideology. Specifically, men and liberals were more likely than women and conservatives to recommend liberal policies. The effect of political ideology suggests that people are defining "liberal" and "conservative" in a consistent manner.

Contrary to expectations, there were no effects of perceived deservingness on the likelihood of recommending the conservative no-benefits policy. This may be due to the extreme nature of the policy. This policy was ranked most conservative (5.5 out of a possible 6) and thus was probably not likely to be recommended irrespective of which group the participants were thinking about. As expected, participants who knew someone who received benefits were less likely to recommend the no-benefits policy than were those who did not know anyone who received benefits. This finding supports the idea that contact with people in need of aid will result in increased positive feelings about poor people requiring support.

Finally, there was a marginal effect of household income that presented in the opposite direction than predicted. Participants with lower incomes were more likely to recommend the no-benefits policy than were those with higher incomes. It is possible that people with low incomes feel that if they can survive without aid, then others should be able to provide for themselves as well.

## STUDY 2

### Goals and Predictions

Building on Study 1, this study examined the effects of factors involved in the distinction between the undeserving poor and the deserving poor. These factors are race, whether mainstream norms are followed, and responsibility for poverty.

As in Study 1, it was predicted that respondents would be more likely to recommend liberal policies when the target was from a so-called deserving poor group, and that they would be more likely to recommend conservative policies when the target was from a so-called undeserving poor group. This study also examined whether respondents were more likely to recommend liberal policies when society was responsible for the poverty of the target of the aid, when recipients of the aid followed mainstream norms, and when they were described as white; and whether they were more likely to recommend conservative policies when the targets of those policies were individually responsible for their poverty, did not follow mainstream norms, and were African American.

As in Study 1, these results were expected to be affected by political ideology, household income level of the participant, whether the participant ever received assistance, and whether the participant knew anyone who had ever received assistance. Liberalism, lower household income, receiving aid, and knowing someone who received assistance were expected to be positively related to the likelihood of recommending liberal policies and negatively associated with the likelihood of recommending the no-benefits policy. In addition, participants' race, sex, and age were included as control variables.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in Study 2 were 960 individuals (534 men and 409 women; 17 participants did not indicate their sex) who were drawn from the same sample as the participants in Study 1. An ANOVA was conducted looking for the effects of the source of data distribution (i.e., airport, train station, Department of Motor Vehicles, etc.). A significant effect of source was found, but was accounted for by the effects of household income and political ideology. That is, there were no specific effects of source above and beyond the expected differences in household income and political ideology.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 91, with a median age of 37. Seventy-five percent were white and 22% were nonwhite (3% did not indicate race). Twenty-eight percent of the participants reported an annual income below \$42,000, and 65% reported an annual income of \$42,000 or above (7% did not indicate income level).<sup>3</sup> Two percent of the participants indicated that they were currently receiving some form of assistance. Eight percent of respondents reported that they had received assistance at some point, and 58% reported that they knew someone who received assistance. Two percent of the respondents completed some high school;

<sup>3</sup> Relative to the national population, the participants in Study 2 were wealthier than those in Study 1; the Study 2 sample also was closer to the national race distribution (see footnote 1 for U.S. population statistics). This sample included 56% men and 43% women.

7% finished high school; 25% completed some sort of vocational training, 2-year associate's degree, or some college; 29% had a 4-year college degree; and 34% attended graduate or professional school (3% did not indicate educational level).

The overall response rate was 69%. However, the approximate percentage of people who agreed to complete Study 2 was 65%. A  $\chi^2$  analysis indicated that the approximate proportion of men and women who refused to complete the survey was not significantly different from the proportion of men and women who agreed to answer the survey [ $\chi^2(1) = .364, p < .55$ ].

### *Procedure*

The procedure for Study 2 was the same as for Study 1, except that the survey for Study 2 took about 20 to 25 minutes to complete.

### *Measures*

Participants read three vignettes presented in the format of a "case file" about three different particular poor people (Mary, Karen, and John) who were members of so-called undeserving or deserving poor groups. As in Study 1, the undeserving groups were teen mothers, single mothers, and able-bodied men, and the deserving poor groups were widows with children, physically handicapped, and physically ill (see the Appendix for sample case files).

The case files offered one of three agents of responsibility for the target's poverty: The target was individually responsible for his or her poverty (e.g., the target was offered a job, but decided not to take it); society was responsible for his or her poverty (e.g., the target was fired because of budget cutbacks) (see Furnham, 1982); or a sociocultural explanation was offered (e.g., the target had no role models and as a result never learned the appropriate behavior to keep a job, for instance, arriving at work on time) (see Nelson & Clawson, 1996).<sup>4</sup> The case files also varied by whether or not the target followed mainstream norms (e.g., the target had a child out of wedlock or finished high school), as well as by race. Because of the

<sup>4</sup> Sociocultural attributions of responsibility include forces that are neither strictly under the individual's control nor strictly an effect of societal factors. Sociocultural attributions for poverty are based on the idea that socializing forces, such as families and neighborhoods, affect poor people's values, norms, and behaviors and thus their ability to attain employment and economic success (Nelson & Clawson, 1996). In the present research, a linear relationship was expected for the three attributions of responsibility, such that sociocultural attributions of responsibility for one's poverty would result in policy recommendations between those for targets for whom individual attributions of responsibility were made and targets for whom societal attributions of responsibility were made. However, no such relationship was found. When there were significant effects for sociocultural attributions of responsibility, they mirrored the effects of individual attributions of responsibility. Indeed, when asked how likable targets were, respondents found no significant differences in likability for targets whose poverty was caused by sociocultural factors and those whose poverty was a result of individual causes.

complexity of the design, only two categories of race, white and African American, were used to describe the target.

Although the group to which the poor person belongs varied among the three case files that participants read, all three cases were in the same condition. Thus, if “Mary” was described as a member of an undeserving poor group who was individually responsible for her plight, who did not follow mainstream norms, and who was white, then “Karen” and “John” were presented with the same attributes. For example, if Mary was a single mother who was offered a job but simply decided not to take it, did not finish high school, and was white, then Karen might be a teen mother who quit her job simply because she did not like it, did not know who the father of her child was, and was white, and John might be an able-bodied man who was unemployed but not actively looking for a job, did not finish high school, and was white. Participants were given three case files in this manner so as to increase generalizability.

After reading each case file, participants were asked to pretend that they were members of Congress and to indicate the likelihood that they would recommend each of the 13 hypothetical policies when considering only the person described in the case file they just read, on a scale from 1 (definitely would not recommend) to 5 (definitely would recommend). Participants also responded to a number of demographic and individual difference measures, including household income, political ideology, sex, age, race, and whether they had ever received or knew anyone who had ever received public assistance. Again, the small number of participants who were currently receiving assistance ( $n = 15$ ) precluded meaningful analysis of this construct. Participants’ household income level was divided into six categories based on quintiles of household income and the top 5% of household income in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996). Political ideology was assessed on a 7-point scale where 1 indicated very liberal and 7 indicated very conservative. Because of the limited number of people indicating that they were members of each of the various categories of nonwhite participants, race was collapsed across groups, thus creating a dichotomous variable with the categories white and nonwhite.

## Results

### *Manipulation Checks*

Manipulation checks were conducted on the three independent variables used in the vignettes. After indicating how likely they would be to recommend the hypothetical policies, participants were asked how likable they thought each target person was. Targets from deserving poor groups were considered more likable than targets from undeserving poor groups [ $t(680) = -2.69, p < .01$ ]; targets for whom society was responsible for their poverty were found to be more likable than targets who were individually responsible for their poverty [ $t(452) = 7.99, p < .0001$ ];

targets who followed norms were judged to be more likable than those who did not [ $t(676) = -2.97, p < .005$ ]; and white targets were rated as more likable than African American targets [ $t(678) = 2.64, p < .01$ ]. Thus, participants were attending to the characteristics of the target manipulated by the vignettes.

*Effects on Hypothetical Policies*

OLS regression analyses were conducted to examine the effects of the various predictors on the likelihood of recommending liberal policies and the conservative no-benefits policy (Table III). Scores indicating the likelihood of recommending policies were determined by taking the mean of participants' responses for each target, Mary, Karen, and John, on a given policy.

Perceived deservingness of the target and attribution of responsibility for the target's poverty predicted the likelihood that liberal policies would be recommended. Whether or not the target followed mainstream norms did not have a significant effect on participants' likelihood of recommending liberal policies, nor did the race of the target. Thus, when the target was from a deserving poor group, respondents were more likely to recommend liberal aid policies than when the target was from an undeserving poor group. In addition, respondents were more

**Table III.** Effects of Deservingness, Attribution of Responsibility, Norms, Target Race, Ideology, and Demographic Variables on Likelihood of Recommending Liberal Policies and No-Benefits Policy: OLS Regressions

Predictor variable	Model 1: Likelihood of recommending liberal policies	Model 2: Likelihood of recommending no benefits
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)
Deservingness	.438*** (.062)	-.258*** (.058)
Attribution of responsibility		
Societal fault	.253** (.076)	-.450*** (.070)
Individual fault	-.012 (.077)	-.018 (.071)
Sociocultural fault	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Norms	.085 (.062)	.028 (.058)
Target race	.038 (.062)	.060 (.058)
Ideology	-.205*** (.023)	.134*** (.022)
Household income	-.110*** (.022)	-.017 (.021)
Sex	.030 (.065)	.035 (.060)
Age	.004† (.002)	-.005* (.002)
Respondent race	-.376*** (.081)	.140† (.075)
Know someone who has received assistance	.101 (.065)	-.058 (.060)
Model statistics (summary statistics)	$R^2 = .230$	$R^2 = .122$
	$F(11, 797) = 22.89***$	$F(11, 776) = 10.98***$

Note. Values reported for  $R^2$  are adjusted  $R^2$ .

<sup>a</sup>This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ , \*\*\* $p < .0001$ , † $p = .06$ .

likely to recommend liberal policies when the responsibility for the target's poverty was attributed to society than when it was attributed to the individual.

Political ideology and participants' household income level predicted the likelihood of recommending liberal policies, such that liberal participants and participants with lower household incomes were more likely to recommend liberal policies than were conservative respondents and those respondents with higher household incomes. In addition, participant race was also significantly related to the likelihood of recommending liberal policies. That is, nonwhite respondents were more likely to recommend liberal policies than were white respondents. There was a marginal effect of participant age, such that as people got older they were more likely to recommend liberal policies.

There were several interesting effects for the conservative no-benefits policy. Attributed target deservingness and attribution of responsibility for the target's poverty significantly predicted the no-benefits policy. That is, participants were more likely to recommend no benefits when the target was perceived to be a member of an undeserving poor group as opposed to a deserving poor group. In addition, the no-benefits policy was more likely to be recommended when responsibility for the target's poverty was attributed to the individual than when it was attributed to society.

Ideology significantly predicted the likelihood of recommending the no-benefits policy. Thus, conservatives were more likely than liberals to recommend this policy. Age and participant race also predicted the likelihood of recommending the no-benefits policy. That is, younger participants and white participants were more likely than older respondents and nonwhite respondents to recommend "no-benefits."

## Discussion

The likelihood of recommending policies intended to aid the poor was predicted to be subject to effects of whether the target was described as a member of a deserving or undeserving poor group, whether the target followed mainstream norms, the target's race, and the source of the responsibility for the target's poverty. Effects were found for perceived deservingness and attribution of responsibility for poverty, but not for target race and whether the target followed norms.

*Perceived deservingness.* As evidenced by the likelihood of recommending liberal policies, people were more willing to distribute resources to the poor when the target was from a group perceived to be deserving. Conversely, respondents were more likely to recommend the conservative no-benefits policy when the target was from a group designated as undeserving. As with Study 1, this finding supports a distinction between the perceived deserving and undeserving poor that affects policy decisions.

*Attribution of responsibility.* There were significant effects of providing societal attributions for poverty instead of individual attributions. That is, liberal

policies were more likely to be recommended when the responsibility for the target's poverty was attributed to societal causes, and the conservative no-benefits policy was more likely to be recommended when the individual was blamed for his or her poverty.

*Norms and race.* No significant effects were found for whether the target followed mainstream norms or for the race of the target. The basis for using norms and race as part of the definition of the underclass was a theoretical one. These factors are discussed frequently in the sociological literature on the underclass, but there is a lack of empirical data supporting the relevance of these concepts. Further study is needed to determine whether the nonsignificant results here are meaningful to the definition of the undeserving poor and to policy decisions regarding aid to the poor in general.

*Political ideology and income.* Liberals were more likely to recommend liberal policies, and conservatives were more likely to recommend the no-benefits policy. Again, this effect of political ideology provides support for the notion that people are defining "liberal" and "conservative" in a consistent manner. The finding that lower household incomes were associated with the likelihood of recommending liberal policies supports research by Goodwin (1973) and Singh (1989). They found, respectively, that middle-class respondents judged welfare recipients as having a low work ethic and that higher income respondents thought that the cause of poverty was internal. As stated earlier, people are less likely to be helped when individual attributions of responsibility for their problems are made (Reisenzein, 1986; Schmidt & Weiner, 1988; Weiner, 1980a, 1980b).

*Hypothetical policies.* One goal of this study was to show that poor groups are separated into deserving groups and undeserving groups. This was demonstrated by the differential policy recommendations for targets from perceived deserving and undeserving groups. A second goal was to ascertain which factors determine deservingness. An effect of attribution of responsibility for the target's poverty was found that clearly affected the distribution of aid to poor groups. Societal attributions of responsibility led to greater distribution of aid than did individual attributions of responsibility. However, it is unclear how perceived deservingness and attribution of responsibility may be related.

### **Conclusions: Social Policy Implications**

In both studies reported here, less support was given for liberal social policies when participants were considering "undeserving" groups of poor people. This suggests that the recent welfare reform in the United States may have come out of a focus on undeserving groups as the beneficiaries of public assistance. The poor, however, are a diverse group of people, all of whom are affected by actual policy decisions.

The determination of fault for poverty may play an important role in discussions around welfare policies. When the recipients of aid are seen as not responsible

for their poverty, more generous aid policies may be recommended and widely accepted. On the other hand, if the recipients of aid are judged to be responsible for their poverty, then more restrictive policies that offer less direct aid and require poor people to find a way to lift themselves out of poverty may be considered appropriate.

This policy implication is particularly interesting in light of the work of Cook and Barrett (1992). In their survey, 61% of the public sample either somewhat disagreed or completely disagreed with the idea that most AFDC recipients were responsible for their need of aid. At that time, it seemed that AFDC benefits and the notion of social welfare as an entitlement were fairly stable. The current research would suggest that with the implementation of TANF, with its establishment of work requirements and time limits, the public may be more likely today to judge TANF recipients as responsible for their plight than they were in the mid-1980s to judge AFDC recipients similarly.

In addition, of the 58 members of Congress interviewed in the Cook and Barrett (1992) study, only six mentioned responsibility for one's situation in connection to deservingness of aid. Of these six, only one thought that AFDC recipients were at fault for their poverty. Given the present findings and recent developments in welfare reform, it is likely that if members of Congress were interviewed today, responsibility would play a larger role in determinations of deservingness, and more members of Congress would indicate that aid recipients are responsible for their impoverished situation.

The present results indicate two mechanisms that may increase support for more generous anti-poverty policies. First, the focus of discourse on aid to the poor should encompass deserving poor groups as well as undeserving poor groups. However, simply changing the focus of discourse to the deserving poor will not alter views about the undeserving poor. Therefore, a second mechanism of increasing support for more generous anti-poverty policies is to break down the stereotypes of the undeserving poor, thus broadening the category of the deserving poor. Perhaps a discussion of aid to the poor that dispels misconceptions of welfare recipients can combat the stereotypes about the members of so-called undeserving poor groups. These mechanisms are in keeping with Wilson's (1987) idea that policies that apply to a broad, rather than a narrow, group of disadvantaged people will be more widely supported.

Wilson (1987) suggested that programs of support should aid a broad group of disadvantaged people. He stated that policies benefiting a wide variety of groups will elicit greater support than those that seem to benefit only certain groups. Thus, Wilson proposed that policies that correct family background disadvantages through the principle of "equality of life chances" will garner more support than current programs that work under the principle of "equality of individual opportunity." This is because the former policies are available to anyone who is classified as disadvantaged in terms of economic-class background, whereas

the latter policies target disadvantaged individuals who may be affected by past discrimination.

Thus, in addition to getting people off welfare and into jobs, as TANF already does, Wilson (1987, 1996) suggested the need to create programs that prepare the labor force for changing economic opportunities. He argued that complementing the means-tested programs already available with a comprehensive program involving universal coverage for both employment and social welfare benefits is desirable. The studies reported here suggest that because such a program would benefit the entire nation and could be portrayed as not targeted at the undeserving poor, it would garner wide support.

### APPENDIX: Study 2 Case Files

#### Case File 002010

*Name:* Mary

*Age:* 40

*Race:* White

*Marital status:* Divorced

*Number of children:* Three

*Ages of children:* 3 Years, 5 Years, and 8 Years

*Education:* High School Diploma

*Recent employment history:* Worked the last three years in the defense industry, but was laid off because of defense spending cutbacks. Currently unemployed.

*Notes:* There is a history of abuse by Mary's ex-husband. There is a restraining order against him.

#### Case File 002050

*Name:* Karen

*Age:* 18

*Race:* White

*Marital status:* Single (Never Married)

*Number of children:* One

*Ages of children:* 1 Year

*Education:* General Equivalency Diploma

*Recent employment history:* Worked last six months at hotel, but was fired when the hotel declared bankruptcy. Currently unemployed.

*Notes:* Pregnancy was the result of a rape.

**Case File 002110**

Name: John

Age: 29

Race: White

Marital status: Single (Never Married)

Number of children: None

Ages of children: N/A

Education: High School Diploma

Recent employment history: Two years as a postal worker. Dismissed because of federal budget cutbacks. Currently unemployed.

Notes:

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