Attributions for Poverty: A Comparison of Middle-Class and Welfare Recipient Attitudes[1]

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This study compared how a nonrandom sample of 112 middle-class persons and 124 welfare recipients explained poverty and perceived the welfare system and welfare recipients. Analyses revealed that welfare recipients were more likely to make structural attributions for poverty and to reject restrictive welfare-reform policies. However, they were also more likely than middle-class respondents to regard welfare recipients as dishonest and idle. Both groups underestimated the percentage of European Americans receiving public assistance. Implications for intergroup relations and public policy are discussed.

Anti-welfare (i.e., AFDC [Aid to Families With Dependent Children]) attitudes are one of the most consistent facets of American public opinion. Although only about 1% of the federal budget and 2% of state budgets are spent on welfare programs (McLaughlin, 1997), the majority of Americans believe that too much money is spent on public assistance (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). Anti-welfare sentiment may be related, in part, to the endorsement of classist stereotypes (i.e., widely shared and socially sanctioned beliefs about the poor). Classism refers to the oppression of low-income people through a network of everyday practices, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and institutional rules (Bullock, 1995). Racism also appears to fuel negative attitudes toward the welfare system (Gilens, 1995; Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997; Quadagno, 1994).

Social psychological research concerning classism has focused primarily on classist stereotypes and attributions for poverty, rather than discriminatory behaviors (Bullock, 1995). Research indicates that beliefs about poor people and the welfare system are overwhelmingly negative. In the United States (Alston &

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Dean, 1972; Desmond, Price, & Eoff, 1989; Feagin, 1975; Morris & Williamson, 1982; Skafte, 1988) and Great Britain (Furnham, 1982a, 1983), poor people and welfare recipients are stereotyped as being dishonest, dependent, lazy, and disinterested in self-improvement. Despite evidence to the contrary (Corcoran, Duncan, & Hill, 1984; Ellwood & Summers, 1986; Shealy, 1995; Sidel, 1996; Wilcox, Robbennolt, O'Keeffe, & Pynchon, 1996; Wilson & Neckerman, 1986), women on welfare are frequently stereotyped as promiscuous, as devaluing two-parent families, as having additional children to increase their welfare benefits, and as being unfit mothers.

Stereotypes about the poor are imbedded in and reinforced by popular explanations for poverty. Previous studies have identified three primary types of attributions for poverty: individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Feagin, 1975; Furnham, 1982a). Individualistic explanations focus on how poor people themselves are responsible for their poverty, and emphasize factors such as lack of thrift, promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, and lack of effort/laziness (Furnham, 1982a). Structural explanations highlight the importance of economic and social conditions, such as low wages, inadequate schools, prejudice and discrimination, job scarcity, and weak unions (Furnham, 1982a). Fatalistic attributions emphasize factors related to illness and bad luck.

In one of the first studies examining attributions for poverty in the United States, Feagin (1975) found that individualistic explanations were rated as significantly more important than structural or fatalistic attributions. Individualistic causes were particularly likely to be endorsed by European American Protestants and Catholics, people over 50, the middle-income group, and the moderately educated. Structural attributions were primarily endorsed by African American Protestants, Jews, people under 30, the poor, and people without high-school diplomas.

Consistent with Feagin's (1975) findings, more recent analyses (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) underscore the importance Americans place on individualistic attributions for poverty. The popularity of individualistic explanations for poverty is also evident in the pervasive culture-of-poverty hypothesis, which proposes that poverty is caused by the intergenerational transmission of defective values, personality traits, and behaviors (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1989; Piven & Cloward, 1987). This explanation, with its emphasis on cultural forces and psychological flaws shares the same deterministic perspective as genetic and biologically based explanations for class structure (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). By arguing that it is impossible to escape the conditions into which one is born, both genetic and cultural explanations as well as other individualistic attributions for poverty downplay the usefulness of public aid and other environmentally based interventions.

Attributions for poverty have been found to be related to social class (Furnham, 1982a) educational attainment (Feagin, 1975; Guimond & Palmer,

1990), political affiliation/ideology (Feagin, 1975; Zucker & Weiner, 1993), belief in the Protestant work ethic (Feather, 1984; Furnham, 1984; Furnham, 1985a; Wagstaff, 1983), and belief in a just world (Furnham, 1985b; Harper, Wagstaff, Newton, & Harrison, 1990). Attributions for poverty have also been found to be correlated with beliefs about public assistance. Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that pro-welfare attitudes were positively associated with structural causes and negatively correlated with individualistic attributions for poverty. It appears that when poverty is attributed to individualistic causes, responsibility is seen as residing within the individual, and welfare spending is more likely to be opposed (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Conversely, when poverty is perceived as resulting primarily from structural factors, the poor are more likely to be regarded as deserving help, and welfare spending is more likely to be supported.

Of course, attributions for poverty are only one of the variables influencing social welfare policy. Some subgroups of the poor (e.g., single, teenage mothers) may be perceived as being particularly undeserving of public money, while other subgroups (e.g., elderly people, children) may be seen as especially deserving (Iyengar, 1990). Other target characteristics, such as employment status and family size may also affect perceived deservingness (Will, 1993). Nevertheless, with strong national interest in implementing initiatives to modify recipients' behavior (Detweiler & Boehm, 1992) and the enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-93), the relationship between attributions and welfare policy attitudes warrants investigation.

Overview of the Present Research

Previous investigations have focused primarily on middle-class attributions for poverty while neglecting how low-income people explain poverty or the extent to which they believe stereotypes about welfare recipients (Bullock, 1995). If individualistic attributions are made to explain poverty, and negative stereotypes are ascribed to welfare recipients, then poverty may become a potent label influencing how nonpoor persons react to the poor as well as how the poor think about themselves. The purpose of this study was to compare how middle-class persons and welfare recipients explain poverty and perceive the welfare system. Examining the effects of gender and voting behavior on attributions and attitudes toward welfare were also of interest. Assessing the relationship between attributions for poverty, beliefs about welfare recipients, and welfare reform policies was also a primary goal.

It was hypothesized that: (a) middle-class respondents would give more individualistic explanations for poverty and hold more negative attitudes toward welfare than poor participants, and poor respondents would make more structural attributions and hold more positive attitudes toward welfare; (b) women would make more structural attributions and hold more positive attitudes toward welfare

than men, and men would make more individualistic attributions and hold more negative attitudes toward welfare than women; (c) Republicans would make more individualistic attributions, whereas Democrats would make more structural attributions; and (d) individualistic attributions would be correlated with negative attitudes toward welfare and structural attributions would be correlated with positive attitudes toward welfare.

Method

Participants

Participants were 236 European American, Rhode Island residents (112 middle-class and 124 poor people). All data were collected during 1994 and 1995, prior to the enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-93). To examine the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism, only the responses of European American participants were analyzed.

Middle-class respondents (55 men, 57 women) were recruited from local social organizations (i.e., Rotary Club, American Association of University Women, and the Junior League). These groups were targeted because they typically attract the membership of local entrepreneurs and professionals. Respondents were defined as *middle class* if they had never received any form of public assistance (i.e., welfare), if their close relatives were not receiving welfare, and if they held college degrees. Educational attainment and occupation are widely accepted indicators of class status (Kerbo, 1996), therefore these indicators were used, rather than income. Data regarding annual income were solicited; however, the majority of middle-class participants did not respond to these items.

The poor respondents (79 women, 45 men) were recruited from social-service agencies, homeless shelters, and educational programs. Respondents were defined as poor if they were currently receiving one or more forms of public assistance (i.e., food stamps, AFDC, SSI [Supplemental Security Income], Medicaid, or housing assistance), if they were utilizing emergency shelters, or if they had recently lost their benefits (i.e., owing to the termination of General Public Assistance). Overall, 88% of poor women and 57% of poor men were receiving some form of assistance at the time of data collection; most of the others were homeless. The majority of poor respondents did not know the amount of "annual income" (i.e., welfare benefits) they were receiving.

The educational attainment, voting behavior, and relationship status of the two groups differed. Among poor participants, 6% reported completing college, 53% reported completing high school, and 41% reported not competing high school. Among the poor sample, 60% (compared to only 2% of the middle-class sample) reported that they did not vote in the 1992 presidential election. Middle-class

participants were more likely to report being married, whereas divorce, living with a partner, and being single were more common among poor respondents.

Independent Variables

Social class (middle class vs. poor) and gender (women vs. men) were used as independent variables. Because the majority of poor participants reported that they had not voted in the 1992 presidential election, only analyses involving the voting behavior (Republican vs. Democrat vs. Independent) of middle-class respondents were conducted.

Instruments

A revised version of Furnham's (1982a) Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire was used to assess explanations for poverty. Respondents used a 7-point Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with 16 statements identifying potential causes. In addition to the 15 items from Furnham (1982a), one item exploring the culture of poverty hypothesis was included.

Furnham's (1982a) factor analysis of this questionnaire revealed the emergence of at least four distinct factors, which together accounted for 55% of the variance. One factor containing individualistic items accounted for 13% of the variance, and one factor containing fatalistic items accounted for 8% of the variance. Two factors were found to contain structural explanations; the first accounted for 26% of the variance, and the second accounted for 11% of the variance.

A revised version of Furnham's (1985a) Attitudes to Social Security Questionnaire was used to assess attitudes toward the welfare system and welfare recipients. Respondents used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to rate their level of agreement with each statement. References to social security in Furnham's original scale were replaced with the term welfare, and subsequently, this scale will be referred to as the Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire. As an exploratory dimension, three additional questions concerning the culture of poverty or the intergenerational transmission of poverty were added to this scale. Also, two open-ended questions asking participants to estimate the percentage of White welfare recipients and the percentage of recipients who "cheat" were included on this questionnaire.

Furnham's (1985a) factor analysis of this scale revealed the emergence of four distinct factors which together accounted for 52% of the variance. The first factor, which accounted for 27% of the variance, refers to welfare recipients' dishonesty and idleness. The second factor, the difficulty experienced by welfare recipients, and the third factor, the stigma and shame/embarrassment associated with being on welfare, accounted for 12% and 7% of the variance, respectively.

The fourth factor, need for welfare benefits in the future, accounted for 6% of the variance.

The Welfare Reform Policies Questionnaire is a 10-item survey that was designed by the author to assess support for welfare-reform policies that were being considered at the time of data collection (e.g., family cap, workfare, state experimentation). Using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*do not support*) to 7 (*strongly support*), participants rated their level of agreement with each statement.

Procedure

In addition to the Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire, the Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire, and the Welfare Reform Policies Questionnaire, participants completed a demographic survey which included questions pertaining to educational attainment, family structure, occupation, political affiliation/voting behavior, and economic status. Surveys were distributed to middle-class participants at club meetings in self-addressed, stamped envelopes. Poor participants completed their surveys at recruitment sites. They were assured that their responses would not be reported to case workers and that participating would not affect their benefits.

Results

Scale Validation and Development of Component Scores

To validate previous analyses, factor analyses (oblique rotation) were conducted on the Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire (Furnham, 1982a) and the Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire (Furnham, 1985a). In addition to the 15 items from Furnham (1982a), one item exploring the culture of poverty was included in the analysis of the Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire. Three emergent factors were found to explain 84% of the total variance. The factors fit almost exactly the a priori categorization scheme, although the third factor, fatalism/structuralism, which was found to account for 12% of the variance, included a combination of items expected to load as structural and fatalistic. The first factor accounted for 41% of the variance and involved individualistic explanations for poverty, whereas the second factor, which accounted for 31% of the variance included exclusively structural attributions (Table 1). Items loading above .40 were used to create mean component scores.

The following six items were used to create participants' individualistic mean scores: lack of effort among the poor to improve themselves; lack of motivation and laziness; lack of intelligence; lack of ability and talent; inability to save, spend, and manage money wisely; and loose morals, drunkenness, and drug abuse among the poor. Structural mean scores were composed of the following

Table 1

Factor Analysis of Furnham's (1982a) Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire: Relationships Among Loadings and Variance of Three Obliquely Rotated Factors

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Poverty is caused by the inability to save, spend, and manage money wisely among the poor.	.50	.07	.08
Poverty is caused by the low wages that are paid by some businesses and industries.	-.03	.59	.09
Poverty is caused by sickness and handicaps among the poor.	.25	.11	.28
Poverty is caused by loose morals, drunkenness, and drug abuse among the poor.	.43	.13	-.02
Poverty is caused by the failure of our society to provide good schools.	-.01	.13	.48
Poverty is caused by bad luck.	.02	-.03	.44
Poverty is caused by prejudice and discrimination against minorities and poor people.	-.14	.06	.61
Poverty is caused by lack of motivation and laziness among the poor.	.70	-.22	-.08
Poverty is caused by being taken advantage of by the rich.	.17	.50	.09
Poverty is caused by lack of intelligence among poor people.	.62	.08	.06
Poverty is caused by the failure of our society to provide enough good jobs.	-.08	.59	.14
Poverty is caused by high taxes that take money away from the poor.	.05	.77	-.11
Poverty is caused by the lack of effort among the poor to improve themselves.	.79	-.11	.00
Poverty is caused by lack of ability and talent among poor people.	.54	.13	.06
Poverty is caused by weak trade unions which don't protect poor people.	.04	.64	-.01
Poverty is caused by poor people's background that leads to attitudes that keep them from improving their condition.	.34	-.22	.30
Proportion of variance	.41	.31	.12

Note. Italicized item is an addition to Furnham's (1982a) Attributions for Poverty Questionnaire.

five items: high taxes that take money away from the poor, weak trade unions, low wages, failure of society to provide enough good jobs, and being taken advantage of by the rich. The third mean score, a combination of fatalistic and structural explanations, included the following three items: prejudice and discrimination against minorities and poor people, the failure of society to provide enough good schools, and bad luck.

A factor analysis (oblique rotation) forcing four emergent factors was conducted to validate Furnham's (1985a) analysis of the Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire. However, several items loaded on more than one factor, and another factor analysis forcing three emergent factors was conducted. Overall, the three-factor solution explained 79% of the variance (Table 2). The first factor accounted for 43% of the variance and involved items concerning the difficulty associated with receiving welfare. This factor closely paralleled Furnham's (1985a) difficulty factor, but in this study was labeled social legitimacy. Renaming this factor seemed appropriate because some of the items which loaded on this measure (i.e., "Welfare is a right not a privilege," "A country's compassion and humanitarianism can be measured by its welfare payments," and "Welfare doesn't give people enough money to get along on") appear to pertain more to the legitimacy of welfare than to the difficulty associated with living on assistance. The second factor, which accounted for 25% of the variance, closely paralleled Furnham's dishonesty/idleness factor. The third emergent factor explained only 11% of the variance and partially replicated Furnham's (1985a) stigma/shame factor. However, only one item loaded above .40 on this factor. Items loading above .40 were used to create mean component scores.

Mean scores on the social legitimacy factor and the dishonesty/idleness component were calculated for each participant. Social legitimacy was comprised of the following six items: welfare doesn't give people enough money to get along on, too little money is spent on welfare, welfare is a right not a privilege, a country's compassion and humanitarianism is measured by its welfare payment, nobody can enjoy living on welfare, and fewer people would be on welfare if jobs were easier to find. The following seven items were included in the dishonesty/idleness score: too many people on welfare spend their money on drinking and drugs, many women have illegitimate children to increase their benefits, many people on welfare are dishonest about their needs, having a welfare system encourages people not to work, people are moving to this country for the welfare, too many people on welfare could be working, and there is no reason able-bodied people should receive assistance.

Analyses of Group Differences

The first hypothesis, that middle-class respondents would make more individualistic attributions for poverty and that poor respondents would make more

Table 2

Factor Analysis of Furnham's Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire (1985a): Relationships Among Loadings and Variance of Three Obliquely Rotated Factors

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
There are too many people receiving welfare who could be working.	-.28	.45	.25
Many people receiving welfare are dishonest about their needs.	-.13	.64	.08
Many women getting welfare are having illegitimate babies to increase the money they get.	-.06	.67	.08
Generally speaking, we are spending too little money on welfare programs in this country.	.74	.05	-.01
Most people on welfare who can work try to find jobs so they can support themselves.	.38	-.03	.16
One of the main troubles with welfare is that it doesn't give people enough money to get along on.	.78	.16	-.01
A lot of people are moving to the country from other countries just to get the welfare here.	.07	.49	-.02
Many of the people on welfare have very little talent, ability, and intelligence.	.14	.30	-.08
People are often ashamed of being on welfare.	.06	-.17	.76
Many people in this country who are entitled to welfare are too proud to claim it.	.06	-.05	.37
A country's compassion and humanitarianism can be measured by its welfare payments.	.54	-.01	.04
Nobody can possibly enjoy living on welfare for any period of time.	.48	-.06	.22
There would be fewer people on welfare if jobs were easier to find.	.48	-.06	.10
There is no reason why a person on welfare should be spied upon by the authorities.	.39	-.12	.04
Welfare is a right not a privilege.	.62	.10	.06
Too many people on welfare spend their money on drinking and drugs.	-.04	.67	.02

(*table continues*)

Table 2 (Continued)

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
There is no reason why a person who is able to work should receive welfare.	.00	.43	-.04
Having a welfare system only encourages people not to work.	-.06	.52	-.09
There will be a greater rather than a lesser need for a good welfare system in the future.	.06	.04	.14
All people on welfare should be expected to do various social duties to pay for their benefits.	-.45	.13	.23
Proportion of variance	.43	.25	.11

structural attributions for poverty was partially supported by the data. To assess whether attributions for poverty varied as a function of class and gender, three separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted for each of the three mean factor scores. Middle-class participants were not found to endorse individualistic explanations for poverty more strongly than poor respondents. However, the expectation that poor participants would make more structural attributions for poverty than would middle-class respondents was supported, $F(1, 231) = 108.94$, $p < .05$. Poor participants ($M = 4.57$) endorsed structural explanations to a greater extent than did middle-class participants ($M = 2.93$). An interaction between class and gender barely achieved significance and was disregarded, $F(1, 231) = 3.89$, $p < .05$. According to Keppel (1982), "If the interaction is significant but trivial, the outcome of the F test involving main effects can be interpreted without qualification" (p. 211). For this reason, the class effect for structuralism was given precedence over the interaction effect. No significant main effects or interactions were expected for the fatalism/structuralism component, and a two-way ANOVA of mean scores on this component did not yield any significant results.

A t test for dependent samples was conducted to examine whether the middle-class individualistic mean ($M = 3.53$) was significantly larger than the structural mean ($M = 2.93$). As predicted, middle-class participants endorsed individualism significantly more than structuralism, $t(111) = 3.92$, $p < .05$. A t test comparing poor respondents' mean structural and individualistic scores also reached significance, $t(122) = 7.64$, $p < .05$. Poor participants' mean structural scores ($M = 4.57$) were significantly larger than their individualistic scores ($M = 3.45$).

Middle-class participants were expected to hold more negative beliefs about welfare (i.e., have higher mean scores on the dishonesty/idleness factor) than poor participants, whereas poor participants were expected to hold more positive beliefs about welfare than middle-class participants (i.e., have higher

mean scores on the social legitimacy factor). To test these hypotheses, two separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted on dishonesty/idleness scores and social legitimacy scores. Unexpectedly, a main effect for class, $F(1, 231) = 4.50$, $p < .05$, indicated that poor participants ($M = 4.82$) endorsed items concerning the dishonesty/idleness of welfare recipients more strongly than middle-class participants ($M = 4.53$). However, poor participants were found to perceive welfare as more socially legitimate than did middle-class participants. A significant main effect for social class, $F(1, 232) = 75.23$, $p < .05$, revealed that poor participants ($M = 4.63$) endorsed items concerning social legitimacy more strongly than did middle-class participants ($M = 3.22$).

Negative attitudes toward welfare were expressed through middle-class support for restrictive welfare policies. To assess whether the endorsement of welfare-reform policies varied as a function of social class and participant gender, separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted on 9 of the 10 items on the Welfare Reform Polices Questionnaire. One item, which concerned refusal to participate in training programs, was unclearly worded and was not analyzed.

Significant main effects for participant class were found for eight of the items analyzed. Middle-class participants were found to be more likely than poor participants to believe the following: that people should be limited to 2 years of AFDC assistance, $F(1, 230) = 21.88$, $p < .05$; that states should have the right to experiment with the welfare system, $F(1, 230) = 59.38$, $p < .05$; that AFDC benefits should not be increased if women have additional children while receiving assistance, $F(1, 230) = 32.48$, $p < .05$; that AFDC should not be available to single, teenage mothers, $F(1, 232) = 20.05$, $p < .05$; that AFDC should be completely eliminated, $F(1, 232) = 8.21$, $p < .05$; that family benefits should be reduced if children in AFDC families do not attend school regularly, $F(1, 231) = 10.04$, $p < .05$; that AFDC benefits should not be adjusted each year to keep up with increases in the cost of living, $F(1, 231) = 28.47$, $p < .05$; and that after 2 years on AFDC, recipients who cannot find jobs should work for the government to get their benefits, $F(1, 232) = 4.75$, $p < .05$ (see Table 3 for a summary of class means). No significant interactions or main effects were found regarding the use of fingerprinting to reduce fraud. Middle-class participants ($M = 4.39$) were not significantly more apt to endorse this reform than poor participants ($M = 4.37$).

Middle-class respondents were expected to express more negative beliefs about welfare than were poor participants, and further support for this hypothesis was obtained through analyses of culture-of-poverty items. To determine whether responses to the three questions exploring the culture-of-poverty hypothesis varied as a function of participant gender and class, separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted. Main effects for participant class were found for the belief in the permanency of welfare dependency, $F(1, 228) = 7.60$, $p < .05$, and for the belief that welfare recipients are caught in a "cycle of poverty," $F(1, 231) = 8.76$, $p < .05$. The middle-class group ($M = 3.36$) was more likely than was the poor group

Table 3

Summary Table of Class-Effect Means for the Welfare Reform Questionnaire

Items	Middle class	Welfare recipients
People should only be allowed to receive AFDC for 2 years.	4.52	3.28
States should have the right to experiment with the welfare system.	5.59	3.69
Women who have babies while on AFDC should get an increase in their welfare benefits.	5.04	3.41
AFDC should not be available to single, teenage mothers.	3.50	2.35
AFDC should be completely eliminated.	2.16	1.64
If children in AFDC families do not attend school regularly, the families' welfare benefits should be reduced.	4.98	4.09
AFDC benefits should be adjusted each year to keep up with increases in the cost of living.	4.52	5.74
After being on AFDC for 2 years, recipients who cannot find jobs should work for the government to get their welfare checks.	5.12	4.56

Note. All mean differences are significant at the .05 level. Scores range from 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 7 (*strong agreement*).

($M = 2.69$) to believe that welfare dependency is permanent. They ($M = 5.43$) were also more likely than the poor group ($M = 4.73$) to believe that most welfare recipients are caught in a cycle of poverty which perpetuates poor work habits, laziness, and low self-esteem. Examining the belief that children who grow up in welfare families are more likely to be on welfare as adults, a significant interaction between participant class and participant gender was found, $F(1, 231) = 5.35$, $p < .05$, revealing that middle-class women ($M = 5.60$) were significantly more likely to endorse this belief than were poor women ($M = 3.53$). Similarly, middle-class men ($M = 5.64$) were significantly more likely than were poor men ($M = 4.67$) to believe that children growing up in welfare families rely on assistance as adults.

Women were expected to make more structural attributions for poverty and to hold more positive beliefs about welfare recipients than were men; men were expected to make more individualistic attributions and to hold more negative

beliefs about welfare recipients than were women. This hypothesis was strongly supported by the data. Although women were not found to endorse structural explanations significantly more strongly than were men, women ($M = 4.28$) were found to have significantly higher social legitimacy scores than were men ($M = 3.54$), $F(1, 232) = 13.64$, $p < .05$.

Furthermore, a 2 × 2 ANOVA conducted on the single item which loaded on the stigma/shame factor yielded a significant main effect for participant gender, $F(1, 232) = 8.81$, $p < .05$. Women ($M = 5.46$) believed that people are ashamed of being on welfare more than do men ($M = 4.78$). A significant main effect for participant gender, $F(1, 231) = 7.41$, $p < .05$, revealed that men ($M = 3.75$) endorsed individualistic explanations for poverty more strongly than did women ($M = 3.29$). Men ($M = 4.86$) also had significantly higher dishonesty/idleness scores than did women ($M = 4.55$), $F(1, 231) = 5.06$, $p < .05$. With regard to welfare-reform policies, two significant main effects for participant gender were found. Men ($M = 4.25$) were more likely than were women ($M = 4.25$) to believe that people should only be allowed to receive AFDC benefits for 2 years, $F(1, 230) = 6.91$, $p < .05$. Men ($M = 5.14$) were significantly more likely than were women ($M = 5.14$) to believe that AFDC recipients should work for the government after 2 years of assistance, $F(1, 232) = 5.32$, $p < .05$. A significant main effect for participant gender, $F(1, 228) = 5.56$, $p < .05$, revealed that men ($M = 3.31$) were significantly more likely than were women ($M = 2.75$) to perceive welfare dependency as permanent.

To evaluate the percentage of welfare recipients believed to be European American and the perceived percentage of recipients "cheating" the system, two open-ended questions were analyzed. To assess whether participant estimates varied as a function of class and gender, separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted, and significant interactions were found for both items. Analysis of the perceived percentage of European American welfare recipients revealed a significant interaction between participant class and gender, $F(1, 198) = 17.57$, $p < .05$, indicating that middle-class men ($M = 47.78$), middle-class women ($M = 45.92$), and poor women ($M = 46.06$) believed that a significantly higher percentage of welfare recipients are European American than did poor men ($M = 28.50$).

Participants were also asked to give an estimate of the percentage of welfare recipients they believe are "cheating the system." A significant interaction between participant class and gender, $F(1, 203) = 5.22$, $p < .05$, indicated that poor women ($M = 44.86$) believed that a significantly higher percentage of welfare recipients are cheating than did middle-class women ($M = 30.28$). The mean estimates of middle-class men ($M = 36.79$) and poor men ($M = 36.14$) were almost identical.

The third hypothesis, that Republicans would make more individualistic attributions than would Democrats could only be tested for the middle-class group because the majority of the poor group did not vote in the 1992 presidential

election. Two separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether individualistic and structural attributions varied as a function of vote in the 1992 presidential elections (Republican vs. Democrat vs. Independent). Political affiliation significantly influenced both individualism, $F(2, 107) = 5.43$, $p < .05$, and structuralism, $F(2, 107) = 3.19$, $p < .05$. Independents had the highest individualistic scores ($M = 3.94$), followed by Republicans ($M = 3.72$), and Democrats ($M = 3.12$). Democrats had the highest structural scores ($M = 2.98$), followed by Independents ($M = 2.84$) and Republicans ($M = 2.36$).

Correlational Analyses

Correlational analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between component scores. Strong positive correlations were found between structuralism and legitimacy ($r = .41$), and between individualism and dishonesty/idleness ($r = .56$). Social legitimacy was found to be negatively correlated with both individualism ($r = -.18$) and dishonesty/idleness ($r = .18$). Structuralism was found to be weakly correlated with both individualism ($r = .13$) and dishonesty ($r = .11$). Correlations between the component scores and the nine welfare-reform items were also calculated (Table 4).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that social class is related to how poverty is explained and understood, particularly in relation to structural attributions. Based on previous research (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), poor participants were expected to endorse structural attributions more strongly than were middle-class respondents, and this hypothesis was strongly confirmed. This pattern is also consistent with Furnham's (1982b) study in which unemployed people were found to favor structural over individualistic attributions for unemployment. Perhaps, as the result of their own economic hardships, low-income participants in this study were more likely than were middle-class respondents to endorse structural attributions for poverty.

Surprisingly, middle-class participants did not endorse individualistic explanations more strongly than did poor participants. In fact, poor and middle-class respondents had almost identical, although relatively low, mean scores for individualism. However, the examination of within-group means did reveal that the middle-class group favored individualistic explanations over structural attributions, and that the poor group favored structural explanations over individualistic attributions. This finding lends support to the well-known fundamental attribution error; while actors tend to explain their own behavior in terms of situational variables, observers tend to make dispositional attributions (i.e., to explain the actor's behavior in terms of personality or character variables; Kelley &

Table 4

Correlations Between Component Scores and Welfare-Reform Policy Items

Items	Individu-alism	Legiti-macy	Structural-ism	Dis-honesty
People should only be allowed to receive AFDC for 2 years.	.15	-.38	-.32	.33
States should have the right to experiment with welfare.	.11	-.28	-.32	-.10
Women who have babies while on AFDC should not get increased benefits.	.10	-.22	-.18	-.16
AFDC should not be available to single, teenage mothers.	.18	-.32	-.27	.22
Fingerprinting AFDC recipients is a good idea because it might help reduce welfare fraud.	.32	-.10	.01	.30
AFDC should be completely eliminated.	.15	-.29	-.23	.18
Benefits to AFDC families should be reduced if kids do not attend school regularly.	.21	-.11	.10	.31
AFDC benefits should be adjusted each year to keep up with cost-of-living increases.	-.14	.37	.42	-.08
After being on AFDC for 2 years, recipients who cannot find jobs should work for the government to get welfare.	.17	-.16	-.04	.22

Mischela, 1980). The tendency of middle-class participants (observers) to endorse individualistic over structural explanations illustrates this bias.

Although middle-class respondents were more supportive of individualistic than structural attributions, stronger acceptance was expected. Several explanations may account for the relatively weak middle-class support for individualistic attributions. Previous research indicates that Republicans (i.e., conservatives) are more likely than Democrats (i.e., liberals) to endorse individualistic explanations for poverty and to support reduced welfare spending. In this study, middle-class Independents and Republicans endorsed individualistic attributions more

strongly than did middle-class Democrats. Both Democrats and Independents endorsed structural attributions more strongly than did Republicans. The relatively weak support for individualism among middle-class participants may have been the result of the high percentage of Democrats (42%) and Independents (26%) in this study. Middle-class respondents may also have been political moderates. However, this seems unlikely because, overall, they were significantly more supportive of restrictive welfare-reform policies than were low-income participants. It is more plausible that some participants were uncomfortable endorsing openly critical statements about the poor. Some middle-class participants openly acknowledged their animosity toward welfare recipients through unsolicited comments. For example, one 40-year-old man with a graduate degree wrote:

> Welfare—America's most abused meal ticket—should be a "temporary stop" when one is on hard times and NOT a way of life. Schools are not to blame—We all have the same shot—Some take advantage of school—Others "piss it away"—that's the problem. Why should I work hard to make up for someone else's shortcomings? You make your bed, now lie in it, whether it's made of silk or straw—DEAL WITH IT! If you wasted your chances and wasted your life—I'm not paying for waste products—SHIT GOES DOWN THE TOILET WHERE IT BELONGS.

Although some participants confidently voiced their beliefs, others may have felt uncomfortable endorsing pejorative statements about the poor. For example, the majority of middle-class women who strongly endorsed individualistic explanations completed their surveys anonymously.

It may also be that, to some extent, "traditional" individualistic explanations have been supplanted by the so-called culture-of-poverty hypothesis. Since the 1960s, the culture-of-poverty hypothesis has emerged as a prominent explanation for poverty (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1989; Piven & Cloward, 1987), however, very little research has examined the extent to which laypeople endorse this explanation. Although traditional individualistic attributions (e.g., lack of intelligence, inability to spend money wisely) are part of the culture-of-poverty hypothesis, this hypothesis extends such explanations by focusing on the flawed psyche of the poor as a permanent, cross-generational way of life.

In this study, middle-class participants endorsed the culture-of-poverty hypothesis more strongly than did low-income participants. Middle-class participants were more likely than poor participants to believe that welfare recipients are trapped in a cycle of poverty. The middle-class group was also more likely than was the poor group to believe that welfare dependency is permanent. Furthermore, a significant interaction regarding the intergenerational transmis-

sion of welfare dependency revealed that middle-class women and men were more likely than were poor women and men to believe that children who grow up in welfare families rely on assistance as adults.

Middle-class participants may have felt more comfortable endorsing statements which focused on the "psychology" of the poor (i.e., culture-of-poverty explanations) than traditional individualistic statements because these explanations may have appeared less harsh. In other words, it may be easier to blame the psychology or culture of poor people than their lack or intelligence. Several explanations may account for the general rejection of culture-of-poverty beliefs among poor participants. Perhaps, as a result of their own experiences on welfare or by observing others who have exited the system, the poor were less likely than were the middle class to believe that dependency is permanent. Furthermore, hope for a better life for themselves and their children may have served as a form of self-protection that contributed to their rejection of stereotypes about welfare dependency and intergenerational poverty. It is important to note that these results highlight group differences in attributional patterns but do not explain the origin of these differences. Further research is necessary to understand the processes by which people justify their attributions for poverty.

Although poor participants were less supportive of culture-of-poverty beliefs than were middle-class participants, it is interesting that they were as likely as were middle-class respondents to endorse individualistic explanations. When this finding is considered in conjunction with responses to the Attitudes Toward Welfare Questionnaire, the paradoxical attitudes of low-income participants is revealed. Poor participants were found to hold more negative views toward recipients of welfare than were middle-class participants. The highest average estimate, that 45% of welfare recipients cheat the system, was given by poor women. Yet, in spite of poor participants' higher dishonesty/idleness estimates, they were also more likely than were middle-class participants to regard the welfare system as socially legitimate. Thus, it appears that poor participants are skeptical of the integrity of other welfare recipients, but that they are more likely to endorse structural attributions for poverty and to regard the welfare system as legitimate and necessary.

The greater tendency among poor participants to perceive welfare recipients as dishonest/idle and of poor women, specifically, to overestimate the percentage of welfare cheats may be explained by poor participants' knowledge of individuals who cheat on welfare. Because low-income respondents were recruited from classrooms and agencies which serve welfare recipients, the majority of poor participants probably have acquaintances who are also poor. In all likelihood, the organizations from which middle-class participants were recruited probably had very few, if any, members who received welfare. Furthermore, only individuals with welfare-free histories and families were included in the middle-class sample. Therefore, the difference in both perceived dishonesty/idleness scores

and cheating estimates may have been the result of greater knowledge of and familiarity with individuals who cheat the welfare system.

To qualify this interpretation, the wide range of behaviors which the welfare system defines as *cheating* must be considered. Any unreported wages constitute cheating in the eyes of the welfare system. From this perspective, failing to report a small win on a lottery ticket, accepting money from a child's father without reporting it, and collecting "under-the-table" earnings are regarded as cheating. Also, the wording of this item on the survey left "cheating" open to the participants' interpretation. Thus, poor participants' estimates of cheating may have been influenced by their knowledge of how broadly cheating is defined by the welfare system. The high estimates of cheating given by poor participants may also reflect racism. Although not empirically tested, during data collection some European American participants remarked that cheaters were usually Black or Latino. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that both the poor and middle-class groups overestimated the percentage of known welfare cheats.

Alternatively, poor participants' beliefs regarding the extent of dishonesty/idleness among welfare recipients may reflect their acceptance of classist stereotypes. Consistent with previous work on racial identification and preference (e.g., Clark & Clark, 1950), it may be that welfare recipients, like the Black children in Clark and Clark's research, developed negative attitudes toward their own group. Despite the potential harm caused by endorsing dominant stereotypes, members of subordinate groups may adopt negative beliefs to distance themselves from the low-status group to which they belong (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Perhaps poor respondents perceived welfare recipients as more dishonest/idle than did middle-class participants because they accepted the negative language and images prevalent in media representations of poverty. Media reports concerning welfare focus almost exclusively on single motherhood, low self-esteem, and the "underclass." Low-income participants may have endorsed stereotypes about other welfare recipients, while excluding themselves and the system as a whole from negative evaluation.

Support for this explanation is illustrated by qualitative studies indicating that welfare recipients often describe themselves as different from other people receiving assistance (Hagen & Davis, 1994). Although not systematically analyzed in this study, difference did emerge as a dominant theme during data collection when some poor women discussed working harder to "get off the welfare" than other recipients they knew, and voiced angry concern about cheaters "giving welfare a bad name."

The desire to distinguish the truly needy from welfare cheats is further illustrated by responses to the policy measure, which focused on fingerprinting welfare recipients to reduce fraud. No significant differences were found on this measure, and the examination of class means reveals that both poor and middle-class groups supported this policy. It may seem surprising that poor participants

would endorse such a policy. However, during data collection, many welfare recipients expressed their support for fingerprinting in the hope that such a policy would confirm their "deserving" status.

Despite skepticism regarding the integrity of other welfare recipients, poor participants were more likely to endorse structural attributions for poverty and to rate welfare as more socially legitimate than were middle-class participants. Consistent with these other class effects, poor participants were also significantly more likely than were middle-class participants to reject restrictive welfare policies. Because the implementation of these policies would directly affect poor participants' standard of living, the consistency of these findings is understandable. Furthermore, although the policy measures focused specifically on AFDC, an entitlement granted primarily to women, the consistency of these class effects indicates solidarity among low-income respondents.

These findings do not just tell us about poor people's attitudes toward welfare reform—they also inform us about the absence of poor people in our political process. For the most part, poor people in this study were not participating in mainstream American politics, but this does not mean that they were "apolitical." During data collection, conversations focusing on welfare-reform policies created some of the most impassioned discussion, but if the voices of the poor are to be heard, they must vote and become politically mobilized. During the 1930s and 1960s, grass-roots organizations swelled in size as poor people banded together to fight for welfare rights (Piven & Cloward, 1993). However, grass-roots opposition to the recently enacted Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-93) was not particularly strong. Perhaps, in part, the lack of organized resistance by low-income groups to this legislation was facilitated by the internalization of negative stereotypes among welfare recipients.

Consistent with previous research, attributions for poverty were found to be related to attitudes toward welfare (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Specifically, structuralism was found to be positively correlated with social legitimacy, whereas individualism was found to be positively correlated with perceived dishonesty/idleness. These findings strongly suggest that attributions for poverty are related to how welfare recipients are perceived and the extent to which the welfare system is regarded as legitimate (Furnham, 1982a, 1985a; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Furthermore, in this study, individualism and dishonesty were found to be positively related to restrictive welfare-reform policies, whereas structuralism and social legitimacy were negatively correlated with restrictive policies. Although the complexity of public-policy decisions concerning poverty cannot be understood solely in relation to attributions, beliefs about why people are poor appears to be an influential component.

Consistent with national public opinion research indicating that women are more likely to hold more positive attitudes toward social welfare issues than are

men (O'Connor & Sabato, 1997), women in this study held more positive attitudes toward the welfare system and welfare recipients than did men. Although women did not endorse structuralism more strongly than did men, women were significantly less supportive of individualistic attributions than were men. Several other gender effects also indicate that men held more pejorative attitudes toward welfare recipients and the welfare system than did women. Regardless of class, men had higher dishonesty/idleness scores than did women and were more likely to believe that welfare dependency is permanent. They were also more likely than women to regard the welfare system as illegitimate, to believe that AFDC benefits should be limited to 2 years, and that AFDC recipients should work for the government to get their welfare checks after 2 years of assistance.

Several explanations may account for these gender differences. Because a greater percentage of poor women than poor men were receiving public assistance at the time of data collection, experiences with welfare may have influenced participant responses. For example, poor women may have rated receiving welfare as more shameful because they had been humiliated when using AFDC or food stamps. Furthermore, poor women may have regarded the welfare system as more legitimate and rejected proposals to limit benefits because such policies would impact their current financial situation and their children.

Perhaps, middle-class women aligned with poor women more than did middle-class men because, as women, they recognize the shame associated with living on welfare and women's responsibility for children. It is estimated that one third of all families in the United States headed by women live below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Recognizing the feminization of poverty (Pearce, 1978), middle-class women may have been acknowledging the precariousness of their own economic status, as well as expressing sympathy for the humiliation so frequently experienced by welfare recipients (Popkin, 1990). Perhaps by increasing awareness of shared beliefs more interclass alliances could be formed. Although shared beliefs about welfare may not be enough to sustain an intimate, interclass friendship, it may be enough to initiate one. Furthermore, in light of some of the gender effects found in this study, particularly in relation to limiting AFDC benefits to 2 years, interclass alliances between women may have important political implications.

Middle-class men, in particular, expressed hostility toward the welfare system and welfare recipients. On average, men earn higher salaries and pay higher taxes than do women; therefore, the resentment expressed by the middle-class men in this study may reflect taxpayer anger toward a system which they believe "drains" their income. It is also possible that men, particularly middle-class men, perceive the welfare system as a threat to the male "breadwinner" role and to the nuclear family (Miller, 1990). Because the welfare system allows women to live independently of men, men may be particularly likely to regard welfare as a threat to traditional gender and family roles.

The results of this study clearly confirm that welfare recipients are stereotyped as minorities by European Americans. Although approximately 60% of welfare recipients are European American (Ehrenreich, 1991; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996), both groups underestimated the percentage of European Americans receiving public assistance, and it is possible that the anti-welfare attitudes expressed in this study are, in part, related to racism. For example, Gilens (1995) found that attitudes toward African Americans are a better predictor of European American opposition to welfare than are individualism and economic self-interest. Further research testing this assertion is needed.

As the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow, it is crucial that we continue to study attributions for poverty, attitudes toward welfare, and classist stereotypes. Contemporary attributions for poverty, particularly support for the culture-of-poverty explanation, warrant further investigation. It is also important that psychologists move beyond middle-class analyses and focus on how the poor perceive poverty and welfare reform. In this study, low-income participants were more likely than were middle-class respondents to endorse structural attributions for poverty and to perceive the welfare system as legitimate, but they were also more likely to perceive welfare recipients as dishonest. Future studies must investigate these complexities. Research examining the extent to which classist stereotypes are endorsed by low-income people as well as the consequences of internalizing these beliefs is also needed.

Finally, like other research in this area, this study focused on attitudes, stereotypes, and attributions, while very little psychological research has examined discriminatory behavior against poor people, particularly in the interpersonal realm (Bullock, 1995). Attitudes and attributions may not accurately predict how non-poor individuals behave in face-to-face interactions with low-income people, and identifying the variables which contribute to discriminatory behavior is crucial. Future research must examine under what conditions classist behaviors are most and least likely to occur, and strategies for improving interclass relations must be tested empirically.

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