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The Rise of Structural Individualism: Millennial Attitudes toward Welfare and Poverty

Jamesha E. Watson

Longwood University, jamesha.watson@live.longwood.edu

JoEllen Pederson

Longwood University, pedersonjg@longwood.edu

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

This article examines college student attitudes towards social policy by linking how millennials define poverty and welfare to their beliefs about redistribution and policy changes. Using a mixed methodology, we develop a theory to explain why students often use structural definitions of poverty and social policy coupled with a reliance on individualistic solutions for individuals saddled with poverty or in need of social assistance. 450 surveys and 10 interviews were conducted to examine attitudes toward poverty, welfare policy, and people receiving welfare. The results, while not generalizable, shed light on how millennials think about the link between poverty and welfare.

Keywords

Welfare, Poverty, Attitudes, Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

Attitudes toward social welfare policy in the United States are difficult to understand because Americans are likely to say that the government should help people in poverty, but they are also very likely to agree with statements about economic self-reliance and laissez-faire capitalism (Gilens, 1999). Most research addressing public opinion and welfare has relied heavily on quantitative investigation to illustrate the correlation between political and social values and self-interest with policy attitudes. While this research is the foundation of this article, we take an in-depth approach to understanding policy attitudes by surveying 450 college students and interviewing 10 millennials between the ages of 18 and 22 years old.

Our findings indicate that most of the respondents in our study state that they are unsure of their opinions on government spending regarding the poor and welfare programs. Understanding welfare state attitudes through an ideological lens presumes that individuals base their attitudes on their deeply rooted value systems, “regarding the proper relationship between the individual, the state and other institutions such as labor markets and voluntary organizations” (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003, p. 418). These ideological systems have been discussed using several dichotomies. Lipset (1996) described the opposing values in terms of achievement and equality. Similarly, McClosky and Zaller (1984) defined these opposing values as capitalism compared to democracy. More recently, researchers have approached this dichotomy through comparing economic individualism and social equality/egalitarianism (Blekesune & Quadagno, 2003).

Individualist Attitudes

Generally, Americans tend to have negative attitudes toward public assistance welfare policies, or those policies that are targeted at helping the able-bodied poor population. Theories of American exceptionalism argue that Americans’ opposition to government intervention based on individual rights has resulted comparatively meager social policies, few universal welfare programs, and negative attitudes toward government assistance generally. While this approach to understanding the cause of American Exceptionalism has been debated in the literature (see Quadagno, 1994), it remains a commonly cited reason for lack of support for social programs in the United States. In summary, Americans tend to have an attitude of individualism, where they feel people should achieve and help themselves on their own (Garlington, 2014).

Economic individualism, or as we will refer to it, individualism, is the belief that people should be self-reliant, and should be free from government interference in personal and economic decisions (Arikan, 2011). Individualism in America refers to “equal individual rights, limited government, laissez-faire, natural justice and equal opportunity, and individual freedom” (Gilens, 1999, p. 32). Gilens (1999) discovered that when Americans are asked to choose between individual responsibility or government aid, the majority will respond that individuals should be responsible for themselves.

Egalitarian Attitudes

Egalitarian attitudes, on the other hand, are beliefs that the well-being of others should take priority over selfish interest. Egalitarian attitudes are associated with high levels of empathy and high levels of selfless motivation (Hadarics, 2015; Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; van Oorschot, 2002). Research has supported the thesis that

attitudes toward welfare are linked to ideological beliefs including egalitarian beliefs (Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; Svallfors, 2007). Both Sears et al. (1980) and Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989) found that endorsement of the concept of social rights was a key predictor of welfare state support. While few studies on welfare state attitudes employ qualitative methodology, McClusky and Zaller (1984) used open-ended interviews to ask respondents about welfare attitudes. They, too, concluded that egalitarian beliefs influenced favoritism toward welfare policy.

While attitudes toward welfare and the poor have typically been dichotomized into either individualistically motivated or motivated by egalitarian views, research on millennials indicates that a more nuanced approach may be necessary. For example, the Pew Research Center suggests that millennials have more negative views on news media and religious organizations than any other generation (Fingerhut, 2016). To date, welfare state literature does not focus specifically on millennials' attitudes. For this reason, the current research examines how college students between the ages of 18 and 24 (and thus millennials) answer questions about welfare and poverty. We find that most of the respondents to our study are unsure of their opinions on government spending on the poor and on welfare programs. We also suggest that our respondents do not fit neatly into two different ideological camps and propose a third ideological perspective.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses a mixed methodology. The sample population for this study was Longwood University undergraduate students. Longwood University is located in a rural community in south-central Virginia.

Longwood is a small public institution with 4,800 undergraduate students. The quantitative data come from a paper survey conducted in face-to-face approach yielding a sample of 450 university students. Surveys were distributed by students in a sociology course to students around campus. Each student collected 40 surveys over the course of five weeks. A quota sample was collected so that equal amounts of surveys, about 90, were collected among freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and fifth-year seniors. Class standing was determined by how many years they had been enrolled at Longwood and the amount of credits the individual had, this information was self-reported. While emphasis was placed on collecting surveys from each class, the survey was a convenience sample. Therefore, no data used is generalizable. The survey consisted of 31 questions that asked about respondents' opinions on disability resources and insurance, poverty, welfare policy and programs. After collecting surveys, SPSS was used to analyze the data. Specific questions analyzed for this project included questions that asked attitudes toward welfare spending, social security spending, government spending on the poor, welfare versus individual responsibility, whether or not welfare provides enough to live on, and whether or not people on welfare try to find jobs.

For qualitative data, ten university students were interviewed individually face-to-face using a semi-structured format. Again, a quota sample was used to identify participants. Six females and four males were interviewed. Among the six females one was freshman, two were sophomores, one was a junior, and two were seniors. One male from each academic class was interviewed. This type of sample was collected to ensure that students with

different levels of exposure to university instruction were included in the study.

Interviews were conducted in a private room in the University library so that there could be privacy and no interruptions. Before the interview, participants were given a survey and asked to sign a consent form before recording the interviews and their responses. The first part of the interview consisted of questions asking for their definition of poverty, reasons why individuals experience poverty, and their definition and opinion of welfare. They were also asked where they learned about poverty and welfare. The second part of the interview consisted of scenarios about people who may be eligible for government assistance. Scenario 1 asked about what government assistance a 72 year-old woman who did not have any retirement savings should receive, if any. Interviewees were not told about Social Security or Medicare, but some assumed these would be an option. This scenario is based on data that shows 28% of non-retired adults in the United States indicate that they have no retirement savings (The Federal Reserve, 2017). Scenario 2 asked respondents what government assistance an 18 year-old single mother should receive, if any. Single young mothers in the United States are at higher risk of poverty than partnered parents or single mothers with higher levels of educational attainment (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Scenario 3 asked if a person who has been physically disabled since birth should take a job even if it mean she may become ineligible for government health care. This scenario is based on data that shows for many Americans living with disabilities, taking a well-paying job would prevent them from receiving Medicaid and Medicare, but would also not cover the high cost of special needs medical supplies and medicine (Livermore, et al. 2011). Following a description of each scenario,

interviewees were asked to describe what kind of assistance or choices they thought would be best. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed. Analysis consisted of qualitative coding to facilitate the creation of categories. Therefore, answers to questions were eventually coded into one of three categories: Individualistic, Egalitarian, or Structural Individualist, which was developed for answers that had both individualist and egalitarian components. From this analysis, we were able to group respondents into three general categories for how they viewed welfare and poverty: Individualistic, Structural Individualism, and Egalitarian.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

When asked if the United States of America is spending too much, about right, or too little on welfare spending, 17.6% of respondents said too little federal dollars are being spent on welfare, 30% said about right, 32.4% said too much is being spent on welfare, and 19.5% said they were unsure. When asked if the United States is spending too little, about right, or too much on the poor, 45.4% of respondents said too little, 23.7% said about right, 16.2% said too much and 13.9% answered they are not sure about how much is being spent on the poor. These results are similar to previous research findings, but adds that such a large percentage of college students are unsure about government spending on the poor. When asked if the United States is spending too little, about right, or too much on social security spending, 31.9% of respondents answered too little, 33.2% about right, 12.2% too much, but then 22.1% of respondents answered they were not sure,

which leads us to believe that few students understand how the welfare system works. As a result, we cannot define their attitudes as either egalitarian or individualistic.

Variable	%
Welfare Spending	
Too little	17.6
About right	30.0
Too much	32.4
Not sure	19.5
People on welfare try to find jobs	
Agree	32.6
Neutral	28.4
Disagree	39.1
Spending on the Poor	
Too little	45.4
About right	23.7
Too much	16.2
Not sure	13.9
Welfare stops responsibility	
Agree	35.1
Neutral	32.8
Disagree	32.2
Welfare does not give enough to live on	
Agree	29.8
Neutral	33.2
Disagree	37.0

Table 1. Attitudes of college students toward welfare and responsibility for the poor, percentages. N=450.

Previous research suggests that a large portion of the population has a negative view of the welfare system, but based on the survey results, a lot of students had neutral viewpoints. When asked if welfare stops responsibility, 35.1% said they agreed, 32.2% disagreed, but then 32.8% answered neutral. When respondents were asked about welfare not giving individuals enough to live on, 29.8% agreed, 37% disagreed, but then 33.2% answered neutral. Then, when asked if people on welfare try to find jobs, 32.6% agreed, 39.1% disagreed,

but then 28.4% answered neutral (See table 1). The percentages in the neutral category were high, which lead to the interviews being planned as a way to better understand why there was so much neutrality.

Qualitative Findings

Ten interviews from students were collected to better understand why so many students reported neutral feelings toward items on the survey. Each of the students interviewed stated they were neutral on at least one of the items of interest, and most were neutral on several items. After transcribing and coding the interviews, participants fit into three different categories consisting of Individualist (those with individualistic attitudes), Egalitarians (those with predominately egalitarian attitudes), and Structural Individualist (those who answered with both individualistic and egalitarian attitudes). These three categories were created after using axial coding for concepts related to previous research findings. These concepts included “equality”, “support”, “needing assistance”, “lazy”, and “using the government”. While previous research explains individualistic attitudes and egalitarian attitudes, we found the majority of our interviewees fit between these seemingly opposite attitudes. Specifically, Structural Individualist understood structural causes of poverty (for example, few available jobs, jobs that don’t pay a living wage, national or local economic issues) but relied on individualistic views when answering questions about how issues of poverty should be solved. The following paragraphs outline how individuals in each category responded to interview questions.

Individualist

Individualists have a seemingly negative attitude toward welfare and poverty. These individuals believe that the government should not be involved in the redistribution of wealth and resources; Individuals are responsible for their success or failures. One interviewee in particular represented the ideal type of this category. When this interviewee was asked why they think individuals are poor, they responded, “Sometimes people end up making the wrong decisions in life so they end up creating that state for themselves.” When asked about our responsibility as a country for people who are elderly and disabled, the interviewee stated, “I don’t know how involved as a country or as a government we need to be because personal things are important, the family of the elderly should be able to kind of take care of them or plan for that.” They went on to say,

I think in the United States it’s a very individualistic society. We favor doing things on your own, taking charge, and making it by yourself. Naturally in life we don’t like it when people ask us for too much help all the time. We want to be like, ‘Hey do it on your own. Figure it out’, so it has a negative connotation.”

Later during the interview when asked several different scenarios, they still answered from an individualistic viewpoint. When asked if an elderly woman should receive government assistance so she can retire, the individual responded that, “at least you’ve seen someone and maybe they didn’t save and maybe you have kids and you thought about that maybe you should’ve thought about that. It is too much time to say you didn’t know ... I don’t know maybe they should’ve made good decisions beforehand.”

When asked about what a single teenage mother should do the respondent stated, “Maybe the kind of assistance she can receive is finding a job agency that provides temporary jobs or whatever or helps people find jobs so she can go get these quick jobs, do it, then get the money and take care of her family for that time.”

The last scenario the individual was asked was about Jessie, who was born with a disability and received a job offer but feared losing her government health insurance. When asked if Jessie should take the job or not, the interviewee responded, “She should go for the job ... everything is always a risk.” Overall, this individual has a very individualistic view on society and believe that individuals who find themselves in unfortunate positions should be able to handle it themselves and not depend on the government.

Egalitarians

Traditionally, people with egalitarian attitudes believe the government should help people in need, offer an equal income, and offer universal health care (Svallfors, 2013). Egalitarians also believe it is not the individual’s fault that they are in poverty or in need of government assistance and understand that some people were placed or born into those situations through inequalities that were beyond their own agency. Again, one interviewee’s answers consistently reflected the ideology of this category. The first question asked, “Why do they think individuals are poor?” They responded with, “I do believe that the majority of the people, they are not receiving basically their essential share of wages, I guess would be the term for it. Their jobs are either not paying them enough or they’re in a position where they can’t work enough.” When this individual was asked who should receive welfare, they

stated, “I do believe people who are below a certain income bracket should receive welfare no questions asked.” Later during the interview, the respondent was asked if a 72-year-old woman who was unable to save money for retirement should receive government assistance so she could retire and the individual stated, “I do believe she's entitled to welfare to retire, as to what kind I'm not entirely sure.” When asked if the individual could create a program to help the 72-year-old woman, the respondent responded by saying,

I do believe in a very European idea of a guaranteed minimum income where someone who is unable to survive is able to receive government assistance to get to their day-to-day basics and I guess there's like this weird American stigma against it because we believe that, oh you have to be working at all times and if you're not working you're lazy.

When asked about an 18-year-old single mother and what kind of assistance she should receive, the individual stated, “I do believe she should receive government assistance. I do default to a welfare program or a guaranteed minimum income if she's unable to provide.” The last scenario the individual was asked was about Jessie, when asked that scenario, the individual responded by saying, “if this thing is exhausting them and they're not getting their proper health insurance then this is a negative scenario for her. So I guess in this instance, it's weird to say, but she shouldn't take a job if there's a threat of her losing her health insurance if it's compromising their life.”

Based on these statements, this interviewee consistently showed egalitarian attitudes. The interviewee believed in government redistribution, and that people in need of government assistance should

receive that assistance, “no questions asked.”

Structural Individualist

The third category is a group of individuals previously ignored by welfare state researchers who display qualities and beliefs of both egalitarian thinking and individualistic thinking. These individuals, who we refer to as Structural Individualist, understand poverty to be caused not by individual choices but by structural inequalities. They also define welfare broadly in terms of public pensions, healthcare, and redistribution. However, when they were asked different scenarios about specific people in poverty or in need of assistance they had very individualistic responses. For example, even though they were quick to cite lack of jobs or lack of good paying jobs as a reason for poverty in the United States, when asked about elderly or disabled individuals they would rather see them get a job than to receive government assistance.

When Interviewee 3 was asked about what our responsibility is for the elderly as a country, the individual responded by saying “I think it is, like, to just make it easier on them because if they did work, I know back in the day was cheaper for them to live than it is now. Also, maybe provide them with a little more to compensate.” When, however, given the scenario about if a 72-year-old woman who has no retirement savings and would need to rely on Social Security and Medicare if she decided to retire, the individual hesitated and stated, “What is her given state of health at the age of 72? Because she may not have to retire right now.”

When Interviewee 9 was asked about what our responsibility is for people who are poor, they stated, “I think that we have a very strong responsibility for taking care of

people who are poor.” When asked the scenario of an 18-year-old single mother, the individual stated, “I think what the government should do is actively help her look for a job that would support her daughter and her because I’m sure there are jobs out there.”

Interviewee 6, when asked what they thought our responsibility is for people who are disabled, responded by saying, “We have to take care of our elderly and disabled because they can’t take care of themselves,” but later when given the scenario about a person who was born with a disability and worried about losing healthcare if they took a job that was offered to them, Interviewee 6 stated, “She should take this job, and work for herself, and not take from those who could have. You know what I’m saying?”

These interviewees seem to understand welfare as a safety net, will state that we need to take care of individuals, but then when asked about a specific situation or scenario they say that the individual should get a job rather than receive government assistance, no matter what the situation.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that the millennials included in our study are unsure of how they feel about government aid to the elderly, disabled, and poor. When asked about their attitudes and beliefs in an interview setting, respondents had a structural understanding of why poverty and welfare are needed, including a lack of available jobs or jobs that do not pay a living wage. When asked different scenarios about individuals who could receive welfare, they exhibit attitudes based on individualism and feel as though everyone should be working.

The findings indicated a shift from two opposite value systems shaping welfare

state attitudes among millennial college students compared to findings from previous research on multiple age cohorts. Three different categories emerged: Individualist, Egalitarians, and a new category called Structural Individualist. The limitation of this study is the use of the convenience sample for the quantitative data and the small sample size of the qualitative data. While more research is needed to fully understand the spectrum of attitudes that may fall between the traditional understanding of individualistic and egalitarian attitudes, this research indicates the potential of this spectrum.

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