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## RECIPIENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD WELFARE\*

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While the general plight of welfare recipients has long been recognized, little or nothing to date has been ascertained concerning their views toward the system that largely determines their lives. Many recipients find themselves manipulated by a less than personalized bureaucracy but few researchers have sought to examine the experiences and attitudes of these recipients toward that system. Given the recent figures which indicate a "welfare explosion" (Piven and Cloward, 1971), and the vast expenditures for public assistance programs (Skolnick and Dales, 1969:5), the lack of systematic empirical research in this area is disconcerting. Such information should be of considerable value to the practitioner within the social welfare context. Differing policy orientations frequently are implemented without the guidance of relevant baseline information.<sup>1</sup> Further inquiry into the strains inherent in the system would certainly lend itself to a more efficient and workable model. Our purpose here is to carry out such an analysis.

While some would seek to abolish public welfare, most scholars challenge such a proposition (Smith, 1966). Many have suggested that the present welfare system is weak and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968:457) reported that it was largely responsible for the urban riots of the past decade. The Commission has further noted two major system deficiencies:

First, it excludes large numbers of persons who are in great need, and who, if provided a decent level of support, might be able to become more productive and self-sufficient;  
Second, for those who are included, it provides assistance well below the minimum necessary for a decent level of existence, and imposes restrictions that encourage continued dependency on welfare and undermine self-respect (457).

Additionally, recipients have alleged invasion of privacy, stigmatization and general degradation (Handler and Hollingsworth, 1969). General deficiencies have given rise to numerous welfare rights organizations (Paull, 1967) and have prompted a number of legal battles (Reich, 1965).

Though aspects of the welfare system are dysfunctional for those it

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seeks to serve, many positive benefits certainly accrue to the recipients and it would be inaccurate to assume that a pattern of negative evaluations is the norm. The right to an adequate level of food, clothing and shelter is endorsed by most Americans. In fact, much of the literature dealing with this area points to a positive orientation toward welfare on the part of the general public. Kallen and Miller (1971) interviewed three hundred white and black women in the Baltimore area and their data indicate a weak approval of welfare with the modal group being ambivalent. A California study (Ogren, 1973) concluded that "the most significant finding was that support for public welfare--both as a concept and a program and in abstract and concrete terms--far outweighed opposition" (Ogren, 1973:107).

Although a general lack of information characterizes our understanding of recipient attitudes toward welfare, earlier inquiries provide us with certain information. Briar (1966) studied ninety-two AFDC-U recipients in the Berkeley, California area and reported a conservative, anti-welfare orientation in the respondents. While this striking pattern would hint of inconsistency, Briar reports that the respondents typically saw themselves as "different" from the others. He writes:

Our respondents almost never (and most respondents never) referred to welfare recipients as "we" but as "they." This characteristic estrangement--also manifest in a tendency to view oneself as an atypical recipient, a self conception which seemed to be held by nearly all the recipients interviewed--reflects the desire of these recipients to disassociate themselves from the image they have of other recipients (375).

A study similar in purpose but broader in scope (Handler and Hollingsworth, 1969) corroborated Briar's implication that recipients attitudes are tempered by their adjustment to the welfare experience. Those AFDC recipients who felt stigmatized were considerably less satisfied with the welfare system than those who did not feel stigmatized. A third study (Grann *et al.*, 1972) provides us with a comparative understanding of individuals in several types of assistance programs. Persons supported by AFDC and Aid to Disabled displayed the most liberal orientation.

A careful examination of the above studies reveals that none has systematically examined client orientation toward welfare by program and client characteristics. Furthermore, measurement of attitudes toward welfare has been less than rigorous. Our understanding in this area is far from complete and a Southern urban centered study was conducted to further specify the relationship between recipient welfare attitudes, demographic characteristics and welfare experiences.

#### Data and Methodology

Data for this study were gathered during the winter of 1973 in Fulton County (Atlanta, Georgia) from a sample of 549 individuals who were currently receiving assistance from one of three types of welfare programs of Social Rehabilitation Services of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. A systematic random sample of 700 persons was drawn from the official list

of over 33,000 individuals currently receiving assistance from the Fulton County Welfare Department. The final sample included 258 Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients, 154 blind or disabled individuals and 137 persons who were receiving old age benefits.

Data were collected by means of a 45 minute personal interview. In addition to standard demographic and background information, a complete assessment was made of the respondents' experiences with welfare and attitudes toward welfare. The difficulties of reliable and valid data collection in low income areas are obvious and special efforts were made to insure that the data were collected under optimum circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Interviewers were matched by race with the respondent and were indigenous to the areas in which they worked.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 20 percent had been or were presently on welfare. A comprehensive training program was used to thoroughly acquaint the interviewers with the instrument and interviewing in general. Convincing the respondents that the information would be confidential was greatly enhanced by the similarity between the interviewer and respondent, a finding determined by validation checks with the respondents.<sup>4</sup>

#### Dependent Variable

A scale originally developed by Kallen and Miller (1971) to assess recipient attitudes toward welfare was incorporated in the questionnaire and was tested for internal consistency on the Atlanta sample. A principal components factor analysis with orthogonal rotation was used to determine the structural configuration of the original scale.<sup>5</sup> Two distinct factors were extracted from the eleven item pool and the least squares method was used to assign scores to the individual recipients (Rummel, 1970:437-441).

The first factor plainly reflected a disassociative orientation toward welfare and has been termed "disassociation." It is composed of items reflecting a negative stance toward welfare and tends to be endorsed by those persons seeking to disassociate themselves from the typically stigmatized aspects of welfare. Thus, the individual scoring high on this scale is one who views welfare as necessary for those requiring assistance. Not that he is lazy or dishonest about his need but that no other option is available for subsistence.<sup>6</sup> The scales and their components are presented below.<sup>7</sup>

Conceptually one can picture the scales as two continua which do not necessarily covary. Indeed, their uniqueness is confirmed by a zero order correlation of +.06, indicating two dimensions of attitudes toward welfare. Certainly it would not be inconsistent for an individual to score highly on both indices. Briar (1966), for example reports a characteristic tendency by recipients to view themselves as different from other recipients in that they themselves do not see themselves as stereotypic of those on welfare. Thus, a person might feel that most recipients exploit the available programs yet this stance does not preclude them from identifying with welfare and its humanitarian connotation. In this way, one is able to maintain self esteem yet be divorced from allegedly less deserving recipients.

## The Recipients

Significant demographic differences were evident among the three groups of recipients. Certain of these differences stem from the type of aid itself. For example, AFDC recipients are almost exclusively female (97.7%) and the aged group has the highest median age (70.9 years as opposed to 27.9 for the AFDC group). Many of the other demographic differences among the three groups are in part explained by the differences in age structure. In the AFDC group, 88.7% are between the ages of 15 and 45, a range primarily determined by simple biological factors of reproductive capability and child dependency. The disabled and blind sample has the broadest distribution by age with 58.2% between 41 and 65 and 84.4% between 36 and 75, while all of the aged recipients are 65 or older by definition.

The differences in age structure in part explain the observed differences in years of school completed. The AFDC recipients have a median education level of 10.0 years and a median age of 27.9 years. The disabled and blind recipients have a median age of 52.1 years and a median education level of 6.6 years, while the aged group has a median age of 70.9 years and a median education level of 5.0 years. These age-education levels follow the expected pattern, based on the median school years completed for the entire U.S. black population for comparable ages. However, the education levels for the recipients are somewhat lower than the corresponding figures for the national population for each age. This can be partially explained by the fact that the South has a lower overall educational attainment level than other regions of the country for each relevant age group (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972b). A summary of demographic characteristics by type of aid is provided in Table 1.8

- Table 1 about here -  
Experience with Welfare

The recipients were asked a series of questions dealing with aspects of their experiences with welfare which covered such areas as case worker contact, difficulties in obtaining assistance and adequacy of support. The responses of the three groups were largely similar, with relatively slight absolute differences.

The existing literature on public attitudes toward recipients indicates a stronger public bias against AFDC recipients than other categories of assistance. Ogren (1973), for example, found that the general public ranked aid to the aged and disabled as having higher priority than aid to families with dependent children. The public's disapproval of AFDC programs is also indicated by the concentration of agency efforts, primarily aimed at AFDC recipients, to "uncover welfare cheaters." The most publicized of these being the infamous "midnight searches," a tactic far less frequently used with other types of recipients. Matza (1971) includes such factors as illegitimacy, absence of father due to socially disapproved reasons, and long-term dependency as among several reasons that the public views AFDC recipients as "disreputable." It was expected that these public opinions would be reflected in the experiences

of the AFDC client who would have a harder time applying for aid, would experience delays in receiving aid, and who would be less likely to perceive the case worker as "helpful." In each case, however, these expectations were not realized. By the same token, one might wish to propose a counter hypothesis that because AFDC clients might be considered more "helpable" and may be more aggressive due to their relative youth, they would fare reasonably well in spite of the alledged stigmatization.

Of all categories of recipients interviewed, the AFDC recipients seemed to have the best relationship and experiences with the agency. AFDC recipients are most likely to describe the welfare application process as "easy" or "very easy" (82.5% versus 70.6% for disabled and 78.5% for aged) and also reported slightly less delay in receiving payment. AFDC clients received assistance in an average of 24.8 days from the time of application, while the disabled group took 26.9 days and the aged group 25.8 days. Additionally, the AFDC recipients had the most frequent interaction with the case-worker (average time between visits was 4.8 months for AFDC, 5.8 for disabled, and 6.2 for aged), are most likely to talk with the caseworker in their own home, and were most likely to describe the caseworker as "helpful" or "very helpful" (72.4%, 65.8% and 53.8% for AFDC, disabled and aged respectively).

The aged recipients appear to be the most "forgotten" group in that they report the least frequent interaction with the caseworker, are least likely to describe the caseworker as "helpful" or "very helpful", and are least likely to be visited in their own home. The disabled group is intermediate or similar to the aged group on all measures except the evaluation of the application process. The disabled were least likely to describe the application process as "easy" or "very easy."

The final question concerning the respondent's experience with welfare assessed the adequacy of the welfare payment. Much of the public criticism of welfare aid has been associated with the idea that welfare recipients "get too much," or that the standard of living on welfare is higher than recipients could attain if working, thus removing the incentive to work. The recipients were asked to describe their ability to get along on the welfare money in terms of four responses: (1) Can't make ends meet, (2) barely able to get along, (3) have enough to live comfortably, and (4) have more than enough. The responses were similar for each aid group. The proportion responding that they "could not make ends meet" was 29.2%, 30.5%, and 26.7% for the AFDC, disabled and aged groups respectively and 58.4%, 61.0%, and 61.5% for the same respective groups for the "barely able to get along" response. Thus, relatively few of the recipients viewed life on welfare as "comfortable," with only 12.1%, 8.4%, and 11.9% for the AFDC, disabled and aged groups respectively responding in this category. If this is a valid indication of their evaluation of life on welfare, it does not seem likely that, at least for the Atlanta sample, welfare payments are great enough to motivate people to choose them over other means of support.

### Findings

Overall, the distribution of the recipients on the identification and disassociation scales is in sharp contract. Over 80 percent of the sample

scored highly on the identification scale while only two percent registered low identification. Due to the highly skewed distribution characterizing the scale, its ability to discriminate is limited. The distribution probably illustrates a general endorsement of the positive functions welfare serves for those in need. In essence, the items comprising the scale assess approval or disapproval of a humanitarian orientation toward those genuinely requiring assistance. To reject such a notion is not normative for the recipients nor does it set them apart from the general populace (Ogren, 1973).

Focusing on the disassociation scale, a more normal distribution is apparent. Nearly 50 percent of the cases fall in the middle range while only six percent lie in the extreme categories. The resulting distribution might be attributed to a number of factors. The negative connotations attached to the status of recipient may necessitate a mental adjustment process which allows one to maintain a positive self image while receiving assistance. Both Briar (1966) and Handler et al. (1969) report that recipients typically view themselves more favorably than they do other recipients. The resulting distribution perhaps results from the difficulties in resolving these inconsistencies.

- Table 2 about here -

Table 2 provides further insight into the relative evaluation made of the welfare system by persons supported by the three district programs.

A shift from the total distribution patterns on the two scales is apparent. The AFDC recipients exhibit a slight tendency to identify more strongly with welfare than do the blind, disabled and aged respondents, however, the overall tendency for all groups is toward identification with welfare. These differences might stem from the belief that AFDC recipients are less entitled to the benefits they receive than are the blind, disabled and aged. Matza (1971) contends that all recipients are not viewed as a whole.

Certain forms of dependency are understood, tolerated, and subsequently exempted from the special stigma of demoralization. We have long regarded the disabled, the aged, the blind as occupying a special moral place in society--a place where the normally assumed relation between dependency and demoralization is either inoperative or irrelevant (613).

Recipient differences on the disassociation scale are more apparent. The tendency to divorce oneself from the negative aspects of welfare is greater among the AFDC recipients than by the blind, disabled and aged recipients. Perhaps the latter feel they have a "right" to accept welfare whereas the AFDC group senses less freedom to maintain a similar stance.

#### Client Characteristics and Attitudes Toward Welfare

A major determinant of attitudes which will now be considered is the respondents' demographic characteristics. Due to the interrelationship between client attributes and the enrolling program, the analysis will focus on two levels. Both the total sample and the respective program sub-samples

will be considered to ensure that variation is not masked by the restricted variable ranges frequently encountered when only employing a sub-sample analysis.

The findings for the effect of race on attitudes illustrates the difficulties in going from a sample to a sub-sample analysis. Considering the total sample, 82.5 percent of the blacks and 71.7 percent of the whites exhibited high scores on the identification scale, a finding consistent with the sub-sample results discussed previously. However, when the sub-samples are considered by racial categories, the lack of whites in the AFDC category makes analysis by race unfeasible. The pattern of high scores on the identification scale holds true for all demographic attributes because of its highly skewed distribution. With respect to the disassociation scale, there was a significant difference by race ( $\chi^2 = 31.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Whereas 19.2 percent of the black sample scored high on the scale, only 4.4 percent of the whites also scored exceptionally. This may be a function of two factors. First, the disproportionate distribution of blacks among the aid groups, and second, the possibility that blacks have been stigmatized both as blacks and as recipients (Kallen and Miller, 1971) may account for their tendency to disassociate themselves. The AFDC group has the largest proportion black, and is generally seen as subject to the greatest degree of public hostility.

Age is perhaps the most important demographic characteristic to be considered because of its close relationship with the type of aid and the extent to which other demographic characteristics are a function of age and aid category. Age and disassociation for the total sample were inversely related ( $\gamma = -.338$ ), with the younger groups exhibiting considerably more disassociation. The effect of the restricted age distribution in the sub-samples is clearly evident. For example, the proportion of respondents scoring high on the disassociation scale in the AFDC group was 26.0 percent, the disabled group, 11.2 percent and the aged group, 4.4 percent. However, examination reveals this difference to be a function of the relative lack of overlap in the composition of each group. This is also true of the educational and dependency patterns between groups which are both positively related to disassociation (education and disassociation,  $\gamma = .283$ ; dependents and disassociation,  $\gamma = .285$ ), but covary very weakly with the identification measure.

#### Client Experiences and Attitudes Toward Welfare

The pattern of relationships between experiences and attitudes differs from that observed between attributes and attitudes in that significant relationships are found more frequently for the identification scale rather than the disassociation scale. The overall pattern concerning the effect of experiences on attitudes for both scales, however, is that variations in client's experiences with the system appear to have relatively little effect on attitudes toward welfare. This is probably due primarily to the high degree of similarity among client groups in their experiences with welfare agencies.

The experience variables which exhibited the most significant relationships with attitudes are those concerned with visiting the client in his own



home, helpfulness of the caseworker, and adequacy of the welfare payment. The measures of length of time on assistance, ease of application, and frequency of talking with the caseworker, had little effect on either attitude scale for either the sample or sub-samples. The measure of visiting in the client's home was found to be associated with identification in the overall sample at the .05 level, with those who had been visited identifying strongly with welfare. This trend was most pronounced within the AFDC group, where twice as many of those who have been visited express high identification as those who have not been visited ( $X^2 = 18.19, < .01$ ).

Overall, those clients who viewed the caseworker as helpful or very helpful tended to have a lower level of disassociation than those who viewed them as unhelpful. Scores on the identification scale, both overall and within groups, were high and unrelated to the helpfulness of the caseworker.

The measure of adequacy of payment exhibited an interesting relationship with the identification scale. Those who said they could live "comfortably" on the welfare payment consistently identified only weakly with positive aspects of welfare. This finding seems inconsistent with the overall tendency of the whole sample to identify so strongly with the humanitarian view of welfare. Perhaps it could be hypothesized that this is a guilt reaction.

#### Conclusions

Throughout the preceding analysis we have sought to further understand both the demographic and contextual aspects of a major urban welfare program and their relationship to client evaluation of such a program. A meaningful contribution is believed to have been made in that we have gone well beyond past efforts and have focused on an urbanized area which is not unlike a number of other metropolitan centers.

The major methodological contribution is the development of two scales which assess distinct orientations toward welfare. Previously, attitudes toward welfare were assumed to be of a unidimensional nature and were treated as such. Whereas the identification scale proved to have little discriminative power, the disassociation scale did reveal considerable variation among the clients and suggests that recipients do not uniformly seek to divorce themselves from what middle class America might view as a rather degrading situation.

The type of aid program in which the recipient was enrolled determined, to a great extent, his characteristics, experiences and attitudes toward welfare. Certainly the value of examining the welfare situation by client type rather than as a totality has been demonstrated. Few client welfare experience differences were found between programs and experiences with welfare are a poor predictor of one's overall evaluation of the system. That client experiences with welfare played no apparent role in coloring their evaluation of the system belies common sense and suggests that such experiences as ease of payment, frequency of caseworker contact, and perceived caseworker interest, are unimportant.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of policy orientations and the poor, see Gordon, 1972 and Valentine, 1968.
2. Weiss (1968-1969) reported that the responses of black welfare mothers in the New York City area were subjected to validity checks and that the data were highly valid. This finding in conjunction with our experiences lends further credence to the Atlanta data.
3. Schuman and Converse (1971) have addressed the issue of interviewers bias due to racial differences. Matching of interviewer and respondent is particularly important when the subject area is controversial or sensitive.
4. Ten percent of the sample was contacted to insure that interviews had been conducted and comments concerning the interview situation were overwhelmingly favorable.
5. The PA 2 program (principal factoring with iteration) in the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences was utilized.
6. Kaplan and Tausky (1972) for example, found that a sample comparable to the Atlanta study evinced a strong desire to work, endorsed the work ethic and negatively evaluated those receiving public assistance.
7. The positively stated items were recoded to render them consistent with the remaining items prior to the factor analysis. Response categories ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The factor loadings of the items comprising the "disassociation from welfare" scale (Factor I) were:
  - .64 Too many women receiving AFDC from the welfare department are having illegitimate babies in order to increase the amount of money they get.
  - .59 Too many people getting welfare spend their money on drinking.
  - .51 I don't see any reason why a person who is able to work should get welfare money.
  - .44 There are too many people receiving welfare who should be working.
  - .42 No mother who had had an illegitimate child should get welfare.
  - .38 Too many people are moving to Georgia from other states to get welfare money here.

Those items included in the "identification with welfare" scale (Factor II) were:

- .54 There would be fewer people on welfare if jobs were easier to find.
- .51 One of the main troubles with welfare is that it doesn't give people enough money to get along on.
- .50 In general most people getting welfare try to find jobs so they can support themselves.
- .39 Although there may be a few cheaters, most people who get welfare money are honest about their need.
- .35 Welfare is a right and not a privilege.

The magnitude of the factor loadings assures us of item homogeneity within each factor (Palumbo, 1969:285-306). Factor I ("Dissassociative") explained 17 percent of the variance in the matrix while Factor II ("Identification") explained 12 percent. The respective eigenvalues were 1.62 and 1.10.

- 8. A further discussion of the diversity, both attitudinal and demographic, which characterizes the poor can be found in Ferman et al. (1965).

TABLE I

Demographic Characteristics of Recipients

	AFDC	Disabled	Aged
Median Age	27.90	52.10	70.90
Sex Ratio (Males/100 Females)	2.00	61.10	26.90
Percent Black	93.80	74.70	69.30
Median Education (Years)	10.00	6.60	5.00
Median Income	\$1430.00	\$1023.00	\$961.00
Mean Dependents (Including Recipients)	3.91	1.54	1.32
Mean Income per Person	\$ 423.00	\$ 814.00	\$814.00
Percent Employed	32.90	5.80	.70

TABLE 2

Recipients' Attitudes by Type of Aid  
(in percentages)

Identification		AFDC	Blind/Disabled	Aged
(Low)	5-9	0.8	0.0	0.7
	10-13	0.8	2.6	1.5
	14-17	17.4	14.9	19.7
	18-21	58.1	66.2	65.7
(High)	22-25	22.9	16.2	12.4
		n = (258)	(154)	(137)
		$\chi^2 = 11.55, NS$		
Disassociation		AFDC	Blind/Disabled	Aged
(Low)	6-10	1.9	6.5	5.8
	11-15	21.3	38.3	38.0
	16-20	50.4	44.2	51.8
	21-25	24.0	10.4	2.2
	21-30	2.3	0.6	2.2
		n = (258)	(154)	(137)
		$\chi^2 = 53.15, p < .001$		

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