

A Conceptual Paper on Factors That Affect Public Perceptions of Welfare

Connie Yarborough

Mentors: Dr. Wallace Southerland III, Associate Director
McNair Scholars Program, University of Maryland, College Park and
Dr. Maureen Connelly, Frostburg State University

Abstract

This is a conceptual paper to study the effects of external factors on public perceptions of social welfare. The study reviews literature on the history of social welfare during the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, and William Clinton. The paper goes on to analyze three factors that play role on perceptions. These factors are values, environmental factors (economics and politics), and the media. Studies and surveys from Gilens, Gilliam, Los Angeles Times, and the National Election study were analyzed and discussed throughout the paper in the context of factors that influence perceptions.

The factors outlined in the paper are analyzed using the theoretical framework of symbolic-interactionism. Symbolic-interactionism states that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have to them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The model is appropriate for this inquiry because it allows the reader to understand how public perceptions are influenced. Minimal biased methods were used for acquiring literature for the paper. A number of databases in fields such as sociology, social sciences, psychology, and economics were used to acquire literature on the topic. Methods for conducting future research on the effects of experience on perceptions and attitudes towards welfare are provided.

The findings of the paper include the types of factors that play a role on perceptions (values, environmental factors, and media), what factor appears to be most influential (media) and whether public perceptions of welfare has changed over time. Conclusions from the literature are drawn that states that living in society plays a key role in how perceptions are made, but the individual's interpretation of the information should be taken into consideration. The paper ends with recommendations on future research on how experience with welfare affects perceptions and attitudes towards welfare; and future research to better public perceptions of welfare.

Introduction

Problem Statement

The first problem to be addressed in this research is that some people tend to take stances on issues to which they have no connection. There are instances with public assistance, commonly known as welfare, where middle-class citizens take a position on government funding without having insight into public assistance programs. In addition to the first problem, being a recipient of means-tested welfare programs is stigmatizing. Means-tested programs are “programs that provide cash or services to people who meet a test of need based on income and assets” (McCracken, 2005, *Means Tested Programs*). Examples of these programs are Medicaid, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income, family support programs, and veterans' pensions. A possible reason these programs are stigmatizing is due to the media's portrayal of traditional welfare recipients as “welfare queens” or persons that abuse the welfare system (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007). Yet a majority of the public is uninformed as to the other types of welfare (e.g. corporate welfare, fiscal welfare and occupational welfare) that caters to middle and upper-class citizens (Abramovitz, 2001).

Purpose of Inquiry and Inquiry Questions

This conceptual paper is intended to identify and understand the factors that affect the public's perception of public assistance through an analysis of welfare history starting with the Great Depression and ending with Clinton's welfare reform in the 90s. Therefore, the inquiry questions for this paper are:

1. What factors affect the public's perception of public assistance?
2. How have public perceptions of public assistance changed over time?

The answer to the inquiry questions will be based on an extended review and analysis of literature.

Significance of the Inquiry

This conceptual paper is significant because it will explore a number of factors that affect the public's attitude towards traditional welfare. This paper will examine those factors and make recommendations for future research

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This conceptual paper integrates public programs and public perceptions which make it necessary to give a theoretical framework on public perceptions. The theoretical model that best explains how perceptions are formed is symbolic-interactionism. Symbolic-interactionism states that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have to them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The model

is appropriate for this inquiry because it allows the reader to understand how public perceptions are influenced.

Delimitations and Limitations

This conceptual paper is delimited by several elements. First, this paper only reviews three historical periods of social welfare. This is delimiting because it excludes periods before the social welfare system was in place and other time periods where social welfare was being implemented. Second, the theoretical framework uses sociological theories to explain and understand social welfare and how people create perceptions. This is delimiting because when understanding people and public policies one must go into other subjects such as psychology, politics, and economics. This conceptual paper has its analytic restraints. For example, this paper relies on data previously collected by other researchers because of the inability to collect data of my own on the topic. A second limitation was that all the literature on the topics was not explored due to time constraints.

Analysis and Discussion of the Literature

This section will explore the history of welfare in the United States during the Great Depression, Johnson's administration, and Clinton's administration. Using the historical knowledge of social welfare, key factors that influence the public's perceptions toward welfare will be explored. The implications of the literature will be summarized in chapter two also. In addition to the review of literature, chapter two will include a presentation and discussion of the theoretical framework.

Literature on Social Welfare in the United States: A Historical Perspective

U.S. social welfare dates back to the early colonization period of the mid-1800s. Although no formal system was in place for social welfare, the public expressed concern for the well-being of others. The result of such concerns was an uneven blend of programs and services, such that the beneficiaries of some programs received substantial help and others received very little (Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Communities made decisions about who was worthy to receive benefits and who was not. The decisions made by the community "demonstrated the concept of the *worthy poor* versus the *unworthy poor*; [which meant] the former deserved help and the latter did not (the implication being that they were doing something wrong)" (Kirst-Ashman, 2007, 164). The worthy poor were pitied and, therefore, cared for by the community. The community would take in less fortunate families during the year, reduce their taxes, and give them free medical attention. By the late 1820s and 1830s people were beginning to view poverty as a social problem and a potential source of crime, social unrest and long-term dependence, which led to reform of social welfare in the U.S. (Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

The concerns of the public reflected those of functionalists. Functionalism, also known as a social systems paradigm, focuses on ways in which social institutions fill social needs, especially social stability (Poore, 1999). The starting point of functionalism is that all societies have certain basic needs, or functional requirements, which must be met if a society is to survive (Poore, 1999). Functionalists are therefore concerned with the contributions that various parts of a society make towards those needs. For example, public assistance is intended to care for those citizens that are unable to care for themselves. Public assistance provides those basic needs to the less fortunate in order to maintain social order.

In the 1930s during the time of the Great Depression, an overwhelming amount of families sought food, clothing, and shelter from local and state governments and private charities (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998). As a result, in 1935, the federal government became responsible for the welfare of poor children and other dependent persons. This was America's first attempt at a social welfare state and it remained so for 60 years (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998).

The Great Depression and the Welfare State

The purpose of the "New Deal," implemented by President Franklin Roosevelt, was to provide work relief for the millions of unemployed Americans during the Depression. Direct relief was to be a temporary yet necessary measure until those who were employable could be employed (Kirst-Ashman, 2007). The federal government would provide monies to the state governments who would in turn pay for public works projects, which employed those out of work (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998). At his State of the Union Address in 1935, President Roosevelt decided to expand public welfare to include federal unemployment, old age insurance, and benefits for poor single mothers and their children. Later that year the Social Security Act was signed into law.

The Social Security Act included what Roosevelt suggested in his State of the Union Address (e.g. old-age pensions, unemployment insurance). The new law also, established a national welfare system (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998). Perceptions of welfare recipients also came along with the Social Security Act. To ensure that those who were truly needy, benefited from social welfare programs, means testing was implemented. Means-tested programs are "programs that provide cash or services to people who meet a test of need based on income and assets" (McCracken, 2005, *Means Tested Programs*).

An example of means testing during the time of the Great Depression was Aid to Dependent Families (later named Aid to Families with Dependent Children), which required its recipients to be unemployed and living below the poverty line. Means testing became a stigmatizing factor in the distribution of assistance and the recipients who were originally intended to benefit, the "worthy widows" were excluded from the scheme (Skocpol, 1995). The government's attempts to offer assistance only to those who qualified molded attitudes about women on welfare. Consequently, the lasting legacy of maternalism has been a stigmatizing program designed to assist only those mothers who needed help while continuing to have

children that who would be dependent on public assistance.

Although the intended goal of Aid for Dependent Children (ADC) was to provide for a sector of society unable to care for itself, ADC evolved into a program that faced hostility for giving to unworthy immoral women. The idea of immoral women on welfare was explored in Gilliam's 1999 experiment. Gilliam conducted an experiment to determine how viewers react to images of African-American mothers on welfare. He found that among white subjects, exposure to elements, such as race and sex, reduced support for various welfare programs, increased stereotyping of African-Americans, and heightened support for maintaining traditional gender roles (Gilliam, 1999). The disqualification of 'worthy widows' meant that the recipients became increasingly single, never marrying and perhaps, should not have been claiming money from the government (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998).

Johnson's Great Society

The era that challenges the individualistic attitude of American political culture is the period referred to as the Great Society of the 1960's. President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated the "War on Poverty," with the intent to eliminate poverty and provide a high quality of life for all. The war on Poverty was founded on the idea that what poor families really needed was encouragement and training to acquire needed job skills, allowing them to achieve economic independence (Leiby, 1987). However, the poor faced not only economic hardship, but also psychological and sociological barriers (e.g. discrimination and prejudice) to living successful lives (Leiby, 1987).

In an attempt to address these issues, several new programs were developed at the federal level (e.g. Volunteers in Service to America and Operation Head Start). Noble (1997) argues that the 'window' for reform was opened not via demands from the working class or economic depression but as a result of a 'newly found affluence' and the demands for civil rights from African Americans (Noble, 1997). This era is perhaps the first fully-fledged attempt to move from individualism to community with a little encouragement from the federal government. By increasing its role, the federal government 'could help people help themselves' (Camissa, 1998). This would eventually lead to a decreased need for government intervention, as the development of the community would revert responsibility back to the local level.

In the late 1960s ADC name was changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in part to increase public credibility of the program (Mittelstadt, 2005). Eligibility laws on the state level that denied benefits to the undeserving poor (single-never-married-mothers) were thrown out. Therefore, many of the poor who were previously denied assistance were now eligible (Moffitt, 2002). The increasing number of program participants was primarily due to changes in eligibility criteria, yet this shift led to perceptions of increasing dependency among the poor. As the number of participants grew, so did the cost to fund AFDC. Rising caseloads and welfare spending fueled concerns that welfare programs were growing out of control and supporting unacceptable family forms (DeParle, 2004)

Welfare Reform in the Clinton Era

Concerns about social welfare from the 1960s continued through the 1970s and 1980s. During this time conservative politicians portrayed welfare clients as lacking ambition toward hard work and having a propensity to cheat the system (Weaver, 2000). Conservative writers such as George Gilder, Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead spoke of the devastating impact of "learned dependency" and promoted reduction in social support programs (Mittelstadt, 2005). For example, Murray (1988) explored the consequences of custodial democracy by proposing the question, "What constitutes success in social policy?" (p.23). Murray (1988) wondered for example, if "providing food stamps to poor families creates a situation where no young man ever had to worry about whether a child that he caused to be conceived would be fed. Would that really be a better world for children to be born in? (p.23). The thoughts and concerns of conservatives were reflected in the 1990s when Bill Clinton came to office. When Clinton was elected president in 1992, liberals hoped for positive changes in social welfare policy. What Clinton had planned was to "end welfare as we know it" (DeParle, 2004, p.7). Clinton's goals for welfare reform were clear: requiring work, promoting responsibility, and protecting children.

In August 1996, the congress passed and President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The passage of PRWORA enacted federal changes to cash assistance programs. The act most notably abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and in its place Congress created the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. The effects were: the act gave more discretion over welfare program designs and TANF provided funds to state programs as a block grant instead of funding states through a matching grant like AFDC did. The effects meant that the federal government was no longer in control of welfare and that federal dollars going toward welfare were now limited to a specific amount.

In addition to the TANF block grant, the PWRORA legislation had a number of other provisions that limited the availability of cash assistance and increased the incentives for low-income families to move into work. PRWORA increased federal work requirements by placing mandates on states to do so; it enacted time limits to receive TANF cash benefits to 60 months over a lifetime; and limited access to income assistance programs among target groups (DeParle, 2004).

Although the welfare reform of 1996 primary goal was to address the issue of unemployment and getting citizens to work, the policy also addressed the issue of poverty. Some studies indicate that under TANF fewer children were living in poverty (Chase-Lansdale & Duncan, 2001; Haskins & Primus, 2002), and more single mothers were engaged in paid employment (DeParle, 2004). The welfare reform of 1996 addressed the concerns of conservative ideas by placing restrictions on those who could benefit from social welfare programs.

What affects Americans Attitude toward Welfare?

From research of U.S. history, it is undeniable what factors influence public opinions. Some of the factors will be explored in this paper, such as values, environmental factors, and the mass media.

Values

Perhaps the most important concept in public opinion research is that of values. Values are of considerable importance in determining whether people will form opinions on a particular topic; in general, they are more likely to do so when they perceive that their values require it. Values are adopted early in life, in many cases from parents and schools. They are not likely to change, and they strengthen as people grow older (*Britannica Encyclopedia*, 2008). Values encompass beliefs about religion—including belief (or disbelief) in God—political outlook, moral standards, and the like.

As Worcester's (1991) analogy suggests, values are relatively resistant to ordinary attempts at persuasion and to influence by the media, and they rarely shift as a result of positions or arguments expressed in a single debate. Yet they can be shaped—and in some cases completely changed—by prolonged exposure to conflicting values, by concerted thought and discussion, by the feeling that one is “out of step” with others whom one knows and respects, and by the development of significantly new evidence or circumstances.

An example of a value that may play a role in perceptions towards welfare is individualism. Individualism is a “commitment to the values of hard work and individual responsibility” (Gilens, 1999, p.5). Those who have individualist values believe in the importance of the individual rather than the community and are therefore, less likely to be in favor of public assistance. But most Americans temper their commitment to individualism with the understanding that people cannot always support themselves, and most believe that when individuals are in need the government has a responsibility to help (Gilens, 1999). Gilens (1999) goes on to argue that individualism does not lead to a rejection of government support for the poor, but rather to a strong demand that welfare recipients, like everyone else, share a commitment to individual effort and responsibility.

Gilens (1999) supports his argument with results from a number of surveys conducted on the matter of beliefs about individual responsibility, principled support for government help for the poor and principled support for welfare. One survey reported that 96% of Americans believed that “people should take advantage of every opportunity to improve themselves rather than expect help from the government” (National Election Study pilot survey, 1989). Another survey reported that 88% of Americans “favor the government helping people who are unable to support themselves” (*Los Angeles Times* poll, 1985). A survey conducted by National Race and Politics Study (1991) found that 78% of Americans believe that “when people can't support themselves, the government should help by giving them

enough money to meet their basic needs.” Gilens work supports the idea that values can influence a person's perceptions of public policy.

Values are supported by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism because values are instilled in a person from birth and it is his or her choice to interpret them and act them out as he or she pleases.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors play a critical part in the development of opinions and attitudes. Most pervasive is the influence of the social environment: family, friends, neighborhood, place of work, church, or school. People usually adjust their attitudes to conform to those that are most prevalent in the social groups to which they belong.

One environmental factor that may play a role in perceptions is economic factors. It is widely presumed that hard times strain the public's generosity of spirit for their fellow citizens. When the economy is growing, it is believed, many citizens are willing to share some of their economic gains with those less fortunate than themselves. Gilens (1999) found that these ideas are not always true. Since measures of public preferences toward welfare spending dated back to 1972, Gilens (1999) was able to assess both the claim that the economic problems of the mid-1970s led to greater public opposition to welfare spending and the more general claim that with hard times comes hard hearts. Gilens (1999) provides a double line graph to show the annual change in per capita gross domestic product and public preferences for increasing or decreasing welfare spending. What Gilens (1999) finds is that when the economy was declining in 1973, opposition to welfare spending was low, and when the economy improved briefly in the late 1970s, public opposition to welfare spending increased.

Another environmental factor that influences perceptions is political factors. A majority of Americans identify themselves with the Democrat or Republican parties. Political parties are an important influence on Americans' voting behavior and political attitudes. For people who think of themselves as Republicans (or Democrats), knowing what the Republican (or Democrats) leadership thinks about welfare may influence their own position. For example, former president Ronald Reagan voiced his opposition towards welfare when he said “I believe that the government is supposed to promote the general welfare. I don't think it is supposed to provide it” (Hayward, 1999, par 5). Reagan's conservative ideals were heard throughout the nation and reflected through opinion polls. When Reagan left office in 1992 opposition to welfare spending increased by 28% from 1992 to 1994 (Gilens, 1999). This shows how influential political affiliation can be on attitudes toward public assistance.

The implications of the study of environmental factors suggest that as we interact with society we form a number of ideas and perceptions of the world that can be in favor or in opposition to an issue. The idea of environmental factors such as the economy and politics aligns with the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism because it shows how contact with society influences perceptions.

The Media

Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet—including e-mail and blogs—are usually less influential than the social environment (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008), but they are still significant, especially in affirming attitudes and opinions that are already established. The news media focus the public's attention on certain personalities and issues, leading many people to form opinions about them. The mass media play another important role by letting individuals know what other people think.

An assessment of how news media portrayed poverty was conducted by Gilens (1999) in 1999. Gilens analyzed three weekly news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. The reason Gilens chose these three magazines is because “they are widely read, are national in coverage and distribution, and have been published continuously for many decades...” (Gilens, 1999, p. 111). Gilens' interest was in the perceptions of the racial composition of the poor that magazine readers are likely to form, which is why Gilens' study focused more on the pictures of poor people than the textual information. Gilens' found past research that concluded the impact of news stories and the process by which readers (or TV viewers) assimilate information suggests that people are more likely to remember pictures than words and more likely to form impressions based on examples of specific individuals than on abstract statistical information. In Gilens' study he found that magazines tended to overrepresent African Americans in pictures of the poor. In 1972, Gilens found that African Americans were portrayed to be living in poverty at a rate of 75% when in actuality African Americans only made up 30% of those who lived in poverty. Another finding of Gilens was that during the mid 1970s welfare was being attacked by the media. *Times* declared that “practically everyone feels that welfare has become a hydra—sustaining many who do not deserve help, breeding incredible bureaucracy and inefficiency, and entangling the nation in ideological clashes over just how much aid should go to whom” (Time, 1975, p. 7). The negative coverage of poverty tended to be associated with African Americans while any positive coverage was illustrated with pictures of whites.

Another study by Gilliam (1999) was conducted to determine how viewers react to images of African-American mothers on welfare. Gilliam assumed that the notion of the welfare queen had taken on the status of common knowledge. The welfare queen, according to Gilliam, had two key components: “welfare recipients are disproportionately women and women on welfare are disproportionately African-American” (Gilliam, 1999, par. 5). Gilliam found that among white subjects, exposure to the elements previously stated reduced support for various welfare programs, increased stereotyping of African-Americans, and heightened support for maintaining traditional gender roles. To come to the conclusion above, Gilliam conducted an experiment in which three groups were presented the same news report, one with an African American character, one with a white character, and one with no image at all. Three different categories of attitudes were addressed in Gilliam's study being: the subjects' attitude about the causes of and solutions to

welfare; whether attitudes is related to racial beliefs; and attitudes about gender were numerically measured by the percentage of people who preferred women to play more “traditional” gender roles. The result of Gilliam's experiment was that seeing a women in a the news story actually decreased opposition to welfare spending; and exposure to the welfare queen in the news significantly increased support for negative characterizations of African-Americans by an average of 10 percent

The implications of the two studies on the impact of media on public perceptions are that the media is biased when it presents coverage on poverty and welfare. Though it is fully up to the public to believe these stories, it is clear that the media has an impact on attitudes and opinions towards welfare.

The influence of the media falls in line with the theoretical model because the media feeds the public information. It is the public's choice to accept the information and interpret it the way he or she wants to.

Methods for Collecting and Analyzing Literature

This conceptual paper is based solely on a review and analysis of research and data from the literature. Several methods were used to collect and analyze the literature.

First, research was conducted using the Google search engine. Terms such as ‘welfare fraud’ and ‘opinions towards welfare fraud’ were used, and a limited amount of information was found. Information on an experiment on welfare fraud by Gilliam proved promising. Literature from the experiment was used to further the research on opinions towards welfare fraud. The most helpful piece of literature was Gilens' work, *Why Americans Hate Welfare* that contained results of surveys that collected data on the public's opinion toward welfare and factors that influence a person's view of welfare.

Second, research on three databases pertaining to social work and sociology were examined. The databases were SocIndex, JSTOR Sociology, and Social Work Abstracts. When ‘attitudes toward welfare’ was searched in the Social Work Abstract database, 11 journals/articles were found. Of the 11 found, 10 were deemed to be relevant to this conceptual paper. The articles were retrieved and reviewed. Other terms were searched and sorted in the same manner. The terms searched on each

Terms	JSTOR	Social Work Abs	SocIndex
Social welfare opinions	35470	0	1
Attitudes toward welfare	46291	11	30
Attitudes toward welfare during the great depression	6659	0	0
Attitudes toward welfare during the Johnson administration	7332	0	0
Attitudes toward welfare during the Clinton administration	1889	0	0

database are listed below along with the amount of articles that came up.

Third, books on the topic for this conceptual paper were searched using the University of Maryland catalog. The same terms used in the database search was used to find books related to the topic. Three books were deemed useful and were borrowed from the library for further reading.

Fourth, psychology databases were reviewed to obtain insight on perceptions and how people come to make perceptions in general. Also, a dissertation database, for social sciences, was explored in order to gain insight on how to prepare a scholarly paper.

Since the topic deals with social policy and economics, the last method for collecting literature was using economic databases. The most helpful database was Berkley, where a number of articles were deemed useful for the topic of social welfare and social policies.

Data Collection and Data Sources for Future Research

This is a conceptual paper that is based solely on a review of literature on the topic of attitudes and perceptions towards welfare. For future research a quantitative study would be conducted to obtain data on the public's perception of welfare in 2008. A quantitative method would be used because the research question would be a casual one ("Does being a recipient of welfare affect a person's perception of welfare?").

The procedures for conducting research would be to create a valid instrument that measures perceptions toward welfare. Such an instrument was created by the Los Angeles Times in 1985 that measured attitudes towards welfare. That survey has been validated, and if it could be obtained, would be a good instrument for a future study.

The sample population to be studied would be adults, ranging from ages 30 – 40. A population of that age range would be used because they are more likely to be established in society. The sample would consist of person's who have had some type of experience with the welfare system and those who haven't had any exposure to the welfare system. The sample size would be 30 participants because it would be difficult getting a larger number of participants in a timely manner. As an incentive to participants, those who fill out the survey in it's entirety will receive five dollars for his/her time.

For ethical reasons, participants will be asked to read and sign a consent form stating that they willingly participated in the study and that any answers provided will be used as data and compiled into a report. The participants will also be informed that participation in the survey is completely confidential and voluntary and they are free to leave at any time.

Data Analysis Strategies for Future Research

Since future research will rely on a survey, strategies for data analysis would be to separate the surveys from those who have had experience with welfare from

those who have not.

If the questions from the survey use a likert scale it will be easier to analyze the data. The responses to each question will be tallied in an excel spread sheet. Responses from those who have experiences with welfare will be placed in a separate spreadsheet from the other respondents.

From the responses, conclusions will be made about whether experience with welfare affects a person's perception of welfare and whether those who have experience with welfare have a more positive attitude toward welfare.

Strategies for Minimizing Bias and Error

Strategies Related to this Inquiry

To minimize bias related to this inquiry a number of aspects to the topic was explored before writing the report. General terms related to the topic were searched on a number of databases. The databases were in disciplines such as sociology, social sciences, economics, and dissertations. To limit the amount of bias topics that consistently showed up in literature were included in the paper. The topics had to deal with historical periods in social welfare, sociological theories, factors that influence public opinions, and how public opinions are developed. This method of choosing literature was chosen instead of limiting the paper to the areas of my own interest in order to effectively analyze public opinions toward social welfare.

Strategies Related to Future Inquiry

Response bias will be an issue when conducting future research. Participants will be inclined to give responses that do not reflect their true beliefs. Respondents may deliberately try to manipulate the outcome of a poll by advocating a more extreme position than they actually hold in order to boost their side of the argument. Respondents may also feel under social pressure not to give an unpopular answer. For example, respondents might be unwilling to admit to unpopular attitudes like racism or sexism, and thus polls might not reflect the true incidence of these attitudes in the population. In order to minimize these possible biases, the researcher will not inform the participants of her hypothesis. The researcher will ask participants to be as truthful as possible and as incentives give the participants five dollars once they complete the survey.

Another possible bias may be with the wording and order of questions. In order to minimize this possible bias the researcher will ask enough questions to allow all aspects of an issue to be covered and to control effects due to the form of the question (such as positive or negative wording).

Ethical Considerations for Future Research

A potential risk to those who participate in future research is feeling uncomfortable with the questions. The survey will ask questions that the participant may not want to respond to because they feel it is personal (such as have they ever

been on welfare). Before the study is conducted a proposal for the study will be given to the Internal Review Board (IRB). Until the proposal is approved, no data will be collected. Precautions will be taken to ensure informed consent and to minimize the risks to participants in the research. The participants will all be given a briefing of the purpose of the study and what is expected of them. Those participants who are still interested in participating will be given a consent form to sign that will restate all the information they were previously informed about. Before the survey is administered the participants will be informed about the five dollars for completing the survey in its entirety and that their participation is voluntary which means they are free to leave whenever they want.

Findings from Literature

Literature was useful for understanding the topic for this conceptual paper. The literature enabled me to answer the two inquiry questions.

INQUIRY QUESTION 1:

What factors affect the public's perception of public assistance?

FINDING 1:

Stereotypes aren't consistent with actual attitudes towards welfare.

It is thought that most people who value individualism are not likely to support welfare spending. In Gilens' study of welfare opinions he found that 96% of Americans believed that "people should take advantage of every opportunity to improve themselves rather than expect help from the government" (National Election Study pilot survey, 1989). Another survey reported that 88% of Americans "favor the government helping people who are unable to support themselves" (*Los Angeles Times* poll, 1985). A survey conducted by National Race and Politics Study (1991) found that 78% of Americans believe that "when people can't support themselves, the government should help by giving them enough money to meet their basic needs."

In Gilens (1999) review of studies conducted on the issue he found that when the country was in economic distress in 1973, opposition to welfare spending was low, and when the economy improved briefly in the late 1970s, public opposition to welfare spending increased. Another finding that Gilens gave was that even when the economy is doing well, political factors can impact attitudes towards welfare. In the 1980s when the U.S. economy was in surplus, president Ronald Reagan, made statements in opposition to welfare. Polls following the statements made by Reagan showed a 28% increase in opposition to welfare spending.

The two environmental factors, economic and political, play a role in public perceptions. Though it is widely believed that during economic hardships, that public support for welfare will decline, it was disproved by Gilens (1999). The idea that political party affiliation influences perceptions towards welfare was supported by research conducted by Gilens (1999).

FINDING 2:

Race and gender play a role on approval of public assistance.

The media is very influential on public perceptions. In Gilliam's (1999) study, it was found that media was biased it also showed that based on these biases, the public showed a preference for welfare only when women and children were involved. In Gilens' (1999) study he found that when race is involved, media portrays welfare in different lights. When a white face is put on welfare, the media promotes the public policy, but opposes welfare when an African American face is provided. This was based on Gilens' observation of negative and positive diction used in news articles dealing with welfare.

INQUIRY QUESTION 2:

How have public perceptions of public assistance changed over time?

FINDING:

Based on literature it is clear that perceptions of welfare have changed over the years.

The best source of information is in Gilens (1999) work where he provides a graph of how public attitudes towards welfare have changed during the time period of 1972 – 1994. When you look at the graph it shows that public perceptions are constantly fluctuating. In 1972 40% of Americans were opposed to welfare spending. In 1983, 25% of Americans were opposed to welfare spending. In 1991 only 15% of Americans were opposed to welfare spending. There's no way of knowing what factor's directly impacted public perceptions, but a number of events happened during this time period that may have had an effect. These factors are a change in presidencies, economic recession and economic surplus, the influence of the media, literature put out on the topic, and welfare policy changes.

Conclusions

The findings led me to draw conclusions about what factors affect public perception towards social welfare and make recommendations for future research. It is obvious that no single factor is responsible for perceptions about welfare. We live in a society where we are constantly receiving information and opinions are being formed accordingly. In order to gain acceptance of public assistance, policy makers must access all the factors that impact perceptions and get those factors to promote social welfare.

Another conclusion that was drawn from this conceptual paper is that some factors have more influence on perceptions than others. Media is able to influence opinions by presenting information in a manner that will get the public to think a certain way towards a topic. The public is in constant contact with the media and in order to lessen the media's influence on opinions something must be done to question the credibility of the media.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the literature the following recommendations for future research are below:

Recommendation 1: Further research should be conducted to test whether experience with welfare acts as an influential factor on attitudes towards welfare.

Recommendation 2: Further research should be conducted to better public

References

- Abramovitz, M. (2001). Everyone is still on welfare: The role of redistribution in social policy. *Social Work* (pp. 297-307). Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, Inc.
- Blank, R. M. (2004). What did the 1990s welfare reform accomplish? Retrieved July 3, 2008, from <http://urbanpolicy.berkeley.edu/pdf/Ch2Blank0404.pdf>
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Constitutional Rights Foundation. (1998). How welfare began in the United States. *Bill of rights in action: Welfare*. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria14_3.html
- Centre for public policy and management. (n.d.). Welfare and equality. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/publicpolicy/introduction/equality.htm>
- DeParle, J. (2004). *American dream: Three women, ten kids, and a nation's drive to end welfare*. New York, New York: Penguin Group Inc.
- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gilliam, F. (1999). The "welfare queen" experiment: How viewers react to images of African-American mothers on welfare. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from <http://repositories.cdlib.org/ccf/media/007>
- Karger, H. & Stoesz, D. (2006). *American social welfare policy: A pluralist approach* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Kirst-Ashman, K. (2007). *Introduction to social work and social welfare: Critical thinking perspectives* (2nd ed.). Thomson Brooks/Cole: Belmont, CA.
- Kohler-Hausmann, J. (2007). The crime of survival: Fraud prosecutions, community surveillance, and the original welfare queen. *Journal of Social History*, 41.2, 329-354.
- Leiby, J. (1987). History of social welfare. In A. Minahan (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (vol. 1, pp. 755-777). Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers.
- Lukes, S. (1971). The meanings of individualism. In *Journal of the history of ideas* 32-1, 45-66. University of Pennsylvania Press.

- McCracken, M. (2005). Retrieved June 30, 2008, from http://www.teachmefinance.com/Finacial_Terms/means-tested_programs.html
- Mittelstadt, J. (2005). *From welfare to workfare: The unintended consequences of liberal reform, 1945-1965*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Moffitt, R. (2002). From welfare to work: What the evidence shows. In I. Shawhill, R. Weaver, R. Haskins, & A. Kane (Eds), *Welfare reform and beyond: The future of the safety net* (pp 79-86). Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950-1980*. New York: Basic Books.
- Poore, S. (1999). Functionalism as a sociological perspective. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from <http://www.hewett.norfolk.sch.uk/curric/soc/T&M/funct.htm>
- Public opinion. (2008). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved July 02, 2008, from Encyclopedia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/482436/public-opinion>
- Self-interest. (2008). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Retrieved June 23, 2008, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-interest>
- Skocpol, T. (1992). State Formation and Social Policy in the United States :Social policies in the United States existing theories and their shortcomings U.S. state formation and patterns of social provision U.S. institutions and social groups in politics continuing ambivalence about the role of the state reference. *The American Behavioral Scientist (1986-1994)*, 35 (4/5), 559. Retrieved June 19, 2008, from ABI/INFORM Global database.
- Welfare. (n.d.). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th ed.)*. Retrieved July 01, 2008, from <http://www.answers.com/topic/welfare-1>