

Beliefs about Group Difference and Social Policy Attitudes: Effect of Beliefs about Merit,
Superiority, and Upward Mobility on Beliefs about Poverty Policy

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Abstract

In a world where the global economy is in recession, and thus an increasing number of low-income households are in need of aid, understanding attitudes toward poverty policy is essential. Past research suggests that beliefs about poverty policy might be affected by beliefs about merit, superiority, and upward mobility, and that these differences might vary across genders. This study explored the relationships between these variables using a sample made up mostly of female undergraduates, ages 20-29. The results indicate that beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs about upward mobility significantly predict variation in beliefs about poverty policy. These findings lend greater understanding to how political attitudes develop, and thus how one might go about shifting these attitudes.

Beliefs about Group Difference and Social Policy Attitudes: Effect of Beliefs about Merit, Superiority, and Upward Mobility on Beliefs about Poverty Policy

“To produce the same results for different people, it is necessary to treat them differently. To give different people the same objective opportunities is not to give them the same subjective chances” (Hayek, 1944, p. 88). Almost all human societies are characterized by some group-based hierarchy in which there is at least one subordinate oppressed group, and one hegemonic group, which holds a disproportionate amount of social status, power, and other socially valued things (Brown, 1991, p. 137-139). Societies are able to maintain these hierarchies through systematic institutional and social practices that advantage the dominant group and disadvantage the oppressed group (Pratto et al., 2000). One practice that can mitigate these group differences, and thus combat the inherent social hierarchy, is poverty policy; those government laws and practices that address poverty (e.g. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Welfare, and Medicaid). Because of the hierarchal nature of human society, understanding people’s attitudes toward poverty policy, and those that need aid, is always important to be able to run an effective political system. In today’s global recession, where an increasing number of households are looking to governments for aid, this knowledge is even more important.

Social Dominance Theory argues that – because this group conflict and group-based inequality is basic to the human condition – societies minimize this conflict by “creating consensus on ideologies that promote the superiority of one group over another” (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994, p. 741). This Social Dominance Theory argues for a personality variable, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) that predicts social and political attitudes and whether an individual will accept ideologies that either promote or reject inequality (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). SDO is an attitudinal orientation toward intergroup

relations, and whether one prefers for these relations to be equal or hierarchical based on a superior-inferior dimension (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Individuals who are high in SDO generally support group hierarchy and believe that social groups “do and should differ in value” while those low in SDO support group equality and oppose group differentiation based on status and power (Pratto & Shih 2000; Pratto, Sidanus, Stallworth & Malle, 1994).

Research by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle (1994) found that high SDO individuals tend to favor social practices that maintain or exacerbate group inequality (e.g. chauvinist policies and military policies) and oppose policies that reduce group inequality (e.g. social welfare programs, ameliorative racial policy, environmental policy, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights). Based on these findings it is clear that whether an individual supports poverty policy is based in part on superiority beliefs and beliefs about merit. Superiority beliefs, or the extent to which an individual believes that some groups are inherently better than others, are a part of SDO because those high in SDO believe in group hierarchy and that groups can and should differ (Pratto & Shih, 2000; Pratto, Sidanus, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Beliefs about merit, or the extent to which an individual believes that economically or socially privileged people earned their privilege, are also a part of SDO because it is a hierarchy-enhancing ideology, based on the idea that social values (e.g. wealth) are already distributed fairly based on the deservingness of recipients (Pratto, Sidanus, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Those in the United States who believe that a meritocracy exists tend to feel that poverty is due to some fault in the poor (e.g. laziness), and that equal opportunity is given to all (Klugel & Smith, 1986).

Another factor that influences people’s beliefs about poverty policy is their belief in the possibility of upward mobility. Research by Benabou and Ok (2001) found that the extent to which people believe in certain redistributive policies (i.e. redistributive taxes) depends on the

amount which they believe in the “possibility of upward mobility.” The more individuals believed that their income would increase in the future; the less likely they were to support redistributive policies (Benabou & Ok, 2001). Thus suggests that the more people believe in upward mobility, the less likely they are to strongly support poverty policy.

Finally, Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle (1994) found a gender difference in SDO, that men tend to be higher in SDO than women. This suggests that men will tend to be less supportive of poverty policy. This finding is supported by the fact that men tend to show higher levels of support for hierarchy-enhancing policies (e.g. ethnic prejudice, racism, capitalism, and right wing policy) than women (Sidanius, Cling & Pratto, 2010).

Based on the above research it seems that superiority beliefs, beliefs about merit, and beliefs in upward mobility, will each be correlated to beliefs about poverty policy and will together be significant predictors of beliefs about poverty policy. More specifically, an individual is less likely to support poverty policy if they hold (a) higher agreement with the statement that people who are economically or socially privileged earned their privilege (b) higher agreement with the statement that some groups are inherently better than others and (c) lower agreement with the statement that if you were born in a low-income family, it would be possible for you to be successful. Further, research suggests that there will be a gender difference, namely that men will tend to be less supportive of poverty policy.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants in this study were 509 friends and family members of students in an experimental psychology course at Tulane University. Participants were mainly female (81.5%), employed (56%), and educated (89.2% completed or plan to complete at least a Bachelor's

Degree). Participants tended to be liberal in their political orientation ($M = -30.03$, $SD = 49.74$), 68% indicating they were more liberal than conservative. They ranged from under 20 years old to over 60 years old ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.185$). Finally, participants were geographically dispersed (26.9% originally from the Southern U.S., 38.5% from the Northeast, 15.5% from the Midwest, 4.9% from the West, and 4.9% from outside the U.S.).

Students in the course created a survey of 128 items, measuring various constructs, and participants responded to the survey items online through Qualtrics.com. For this set of analyses, only the following variables were analyzed: beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, beliefs in upward mobility, beliefs about poverty policy, and gender.

Measures

Beliefs about Merit. This variable is designed to measure the extent to which participants believe that people who are economically or socially privileged earned their privilege. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale ranging from -5 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). High scores indicate that participants believe that people who are economically or socially privileged earned their privilege.

Superiority Beliefs. This variable is designed to measure the extent to which participants believe that some groups are inherently better than others. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale ranging from -5 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). High scores indicate that participants believe that some groups are inherently better than others.

Beliefs in Upward Mobility. This variable is designed to measure the extent to which participants believe that it would be possible for them to be successful if they were born in a low-income family. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale ranging from -5 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). High scores indicate that participants believe that it would be possible for them to be

successful if they were born in a low-income family.

Beliefs about Poverty Policy. This variable is designed to measure the extent to which participants believe the federal government should address policies. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale ranging from -5 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). High scores indicate the participant believes the federal government should address poverty.

Gender. This variable is designed to measure the gender a participant identifies with. Response options are dichotomous, categorical options of either 0 (Female) or 1 (Male). High scores indicate the participant identifies as male.

Results

Participants were generally neutral about beliefs about merit ($M = -.55$, $SD = 2.53$). The average score on superiority beliefs was low ($M = -2.44$, $SD = 2.87$), 39.9% of participants indicated a score of -5 (Disagree) on the superiority beliefs scale. Participants were generally high in beliefs in upward mobility ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 2.61$), 19.1% indicated a score of 5 (Agree) on the beliefs in upward mobility scale. Participants were also generally high in beliefs about poverty policy ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 2.06$), 39.1% indicated a score of 5 (Agree) on the beliefs about poverty policy scale.

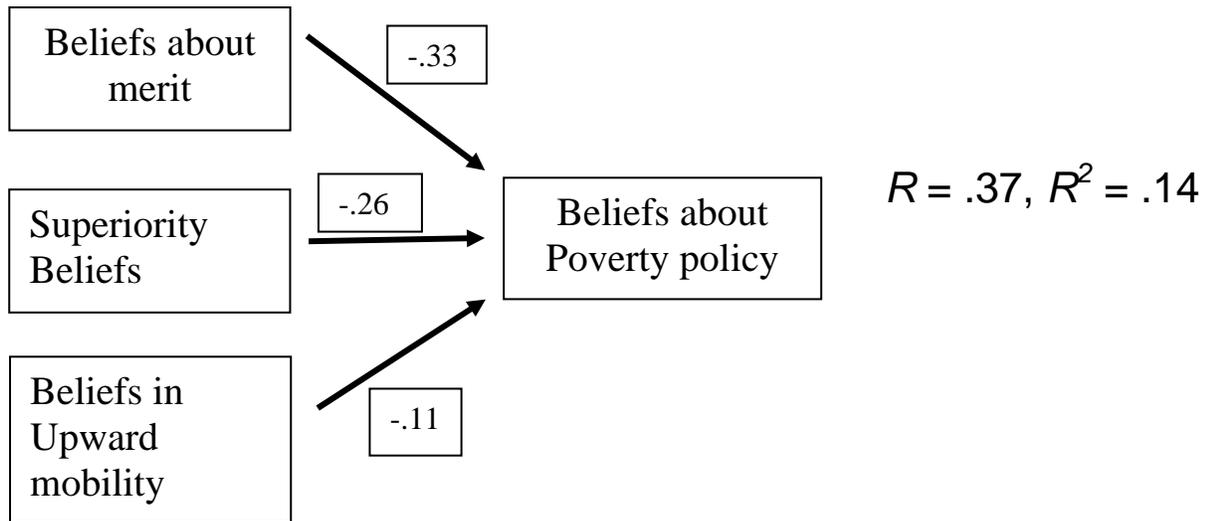
In this study, the relationships between beliefs about merit, superiority Beliefs, beliefs in upward mobility, beliefs about poverty policy, and gender were examined. The hypothesis that beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility predict beliefs about poverty policy was being tested. The hypothesis that this relationship would be different for males and females was also being tested. First, a correlation analysis was run with the file split by gender. For females ($N = 415$), beliefs about poverty policy was inversely related to beliefs about merit ($r = -.33$, $p < .001$), superiority beliefs ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$) and beliefs in upward

mobility ($r = -.11, p < .001$). Thus, for females, superiority beliefs and beliefs in upward mobility were slightly related to beliefs about poverty policy, and beliefs about merit was moderately related. For Males ($N = 94$), beliefs about poverty policy was inversely related to beliefs about merit ($r = -.43, p < .001$), superiority beliefs ($r = -.29, p = .004$) and beliefs in upward mobility ($r = -.29, p = .004$). Thus, for males, superiority beliefs and beliefs in upward mobility were slightly related to beliefs about poverty policy, and beliefs about merit was moderately correlated. All three variables (beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility) were more strongly related to beliefs about poverty policy for males than for females.

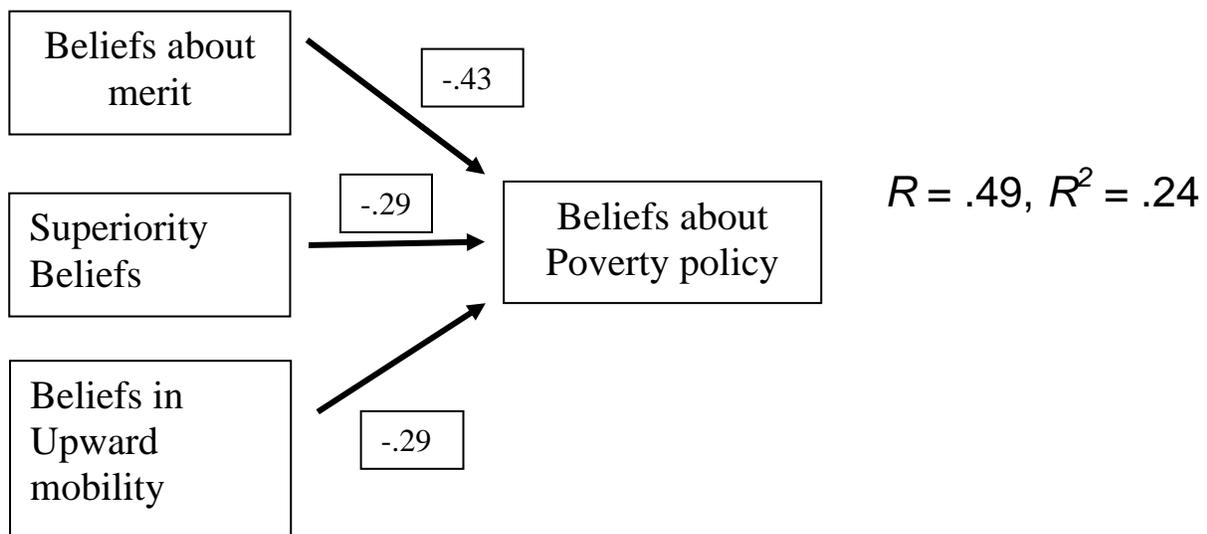
To examine the overall contribution of the three significant predictors (beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility) in accounting for beliefs about poverty policy for females and males, multiple regression was used. For females, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that these three predictors accounted for a small proportion of the variance in beliefs about poverty policy, $R = .37, R^2 = .14, p < .001$. Thus, beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility together accounted for 14% of the differences in overall beliefs about poverty policy. For males, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that these three predictors accounted for a small proportion of the variance in beliefs about poverty policy, $R = .49, R^2 = .24, p < .001$. Thus, beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility together accounted for 24% of the differences in overall beliefs about poverty policy. The three predictors accounted for more of the group differences in overall beliefs about poverty policy in men than in women.

Figure 1.

Females:



Males:



Discussion

The beliefs people hold about poverty policy has a clear and important impact on our lives individually and as a society as a whole. Understanding the beliefs that lead to certain attitudes about poverty policy can help lawmakers understand the best direction for programs like Medicaid and welfare, and how to best address the disagreement among voters. Further, this research helps show how certain beliefs can help perpetuate a system in which one group dominates at the expense of another.

This research looked at beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility as predictors of beliefs about poverty policy, and possible gender differences. Past research suggested that all three of these variables would be related to beliefs about poverty policy, and that there would be a gender difference. Research by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle (1994) on Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) suggested that those who are higher in SDO generally support group hierarchy and thus oppose policies and practices that reduce group inequality (e.g. welfare programs). Individuals who are higher in SDO also tend to be higher in beliefs about merit and superiority beliefs, because they believe that there is an inherent difference between groups and that social values are already distributed fairly and based on deservingness (Klugel & Smith, 1986; Pratto & Shih, 2000; Pratto, Sidanus, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Thus, past research suggests that beliefs about merit and beliefs about upward mobility will be inversely related to beliefs about poverty policy.

Research by Benabou and Ok (2001) suggests that beliefs in upward mobility is also related to beliefs about poverty policy, because individuals who believe more strongly in the possibility that their income will increase in the future (in their upward mobility) tend to oppose redistributive policies. This research suggests that beliefs in upward mobility will be inversely

related to beliefs about poverty policy. Finally, past research suggests that there will be group differences along gender lines, because men tend to be higher in SDO than women, and show higher support for hierarchy-enhancing policies (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994; Sidanius, Cling & Pratto, 2010).

This research found evidence supporting all relationships suggested by past research that are described above. In both females and males, beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility were significantly inversely correlated with beliefs about poverty policy. For both men and women, beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility were significant predictors of beliefs about poverty policy, explaining a slight proportion of the variance in beliefs about poverty policy. Further, there were group differences in this relationship along gender lines. For men, all three variables were more strongly correlated with beliefs about poverty policy, and explained more of the variance in beliefs about poverty policy.

This research is important because it addresses the beliefs that lead to certain political attitudes, and thus to opinions about policies that directly impact people's lives. Greater understanding of the beliefs that lead to these opinions gives us as a society the tools to educate the public on their misconceptions and to effect change in the political system. Understanding beliefs underlying political attitudes could lead to shifts in public policy that have the potential to create desirable, lasting change.

One weakness of this study was that the sample was composed largely of female college students at a private university. This has several implications, the first being that these results might only apply to this group of college women at a private university, or to college-age individuals in general. Secondly, because the sample is mostly composed of women it is possible

that the observed gender differences are simply due to the sample size of men being significantly smaller than that of women. Finally, the fact that most participants attended a private university suggests that they are more educated and belong to a higher socio-economic status group than the average person. Research suggests that many demographic variables affect these beliefs (e.g. religion, race), but that an individual having a high socio-economic status is especially important to their beliefs about poverty policy because it suggests that they would not benefit from the policy (Benabou & Ok, 2001). Due to these differences, future research would benefit from using a more representative sample, and especially from a more equal representation of gender and different socio-economic groups.

Another weakness of the study is that it does not address the fact that there are many distinct types of poverty policies, and thus does not allow us to differentiate people's beliefs about the numerous, vastly different policies. It may be that beliefs about morality, superiority beliefs, and beliefs in upward mobility only predict support for some of the types of poverty policy or are more highly correlated to support for certain types of policies than others. Future research would benefit from looking at the effects of these three predictor variables on different types of poverty policies.

Future research could go in many directions, but one interesting direction might be looking at the causes of the predictive variables (beliefs about merit, superiority beliefs, and beliefs about upward mobility) themselves, as they are formed beliefs and attitudes. Another interesting direction for this research would be to look at how an economic recession might affect people's opinions about these three predictive variables, and their relationship to beliefs about poverty policy. Research shows that in times of economic hardship, people tend to increasingly favor their in-group, which suggests that they might be less supportive of poverty

policies, which tend to be redistributive (Rodeheffer, Hill & Lord, 2012). Thus, research examining the effect of economic recession or hardship on the relationships of these variables might be interesting and important.

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Appendix

SPSS Output

CITI Training Printout