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**THAT WHICH WE CALL
WELFARE BY ANY OTHER NAME
WOULD SMELL SWEETER**
AN ANALYSIS OF THE
IMPACT OF QUESTION WORDING
ON RESPONSE PATTERNS

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Abstract Responses to survey questions are dependent on the words used in the questions. Sometimes the alteration of words can completely change the response distribution without obviously changing the meaning or intent of the question. This situation occurs when "welfare" is used instead of "poor." In all contexts examined "welfare" produced much more negative and less generous responses than "poor." In addition the two terms appear to tap slightly different dimensions with "welfare" accessing notions of waste and bureaucracy that are untapped or tapped much less by "poor."

Although the order of words in a question and the alteration of "small, simple" words in the query and response categories can alter the perceived meaning and response distribution of a question (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Payne, 1951), it is generally believed that abstract "concept" words that specify the object being evaluated or the state along which the object is being evaluated are particularly susceptible to variation. Fee (1979, 1981), for example, has shown that abstract words in common use in the mass media often mean very different things to different people. "Big government," for example, tapped four major definitional clusters: (1) welfare-statism, (2) corporatism, (3) federal control, and (4) bureaucracy. Similarly Smith (1981) found that "confidence" was defined in four distinct ways as (1) trust, (2) capability, (3) attention to common good, and (4) following respondent's self-interest.

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Since the same word can conjure significantly different meanings to different respondents, it is not surprising that different words designed to tap the same object or feeling state can actually serve as significantly different stimuli and trigger different response patterns. Smith (1981) and Lipset and Schneider (1983) have shown that using different descriptors for institutions being ranked on confidence can significantly vary the level of confidence. For example, 46% have a great deal of confidence in "colleges" while only 29% have such confidence in "professors" and 48% have a great deal of confidence in "the military" while only 21% rank "military leaders" as high.

A recent experiment on the General Social Survey (GSS) comparing three different versions of spending priorities scales revealed systematic differences by question form and some large differences between particular referents used (Smith, 1984). The largest observed difference in support for spending was between the traditional category "welfare" and the two variant forms "assistance for the poor" and "caring for the poor." Two of the three forms used in the 1984 experiment (excluding "caring") were again employed on the 1985 survey and again showed a large effect. When we compared these results to other surveys that (1) employed some type of program priority question and (2) inquired about "welfare" (or some variation that used this term) and about "the poor," "the unemployed," or "food stamps" (in one variation or another), we found that the effects were large, similar in magnitude, and persistent across time and survey organization. As Table 1 shows, on average support for more assistance for the poor is 39 percentage points higher than for welfare. Similarly, support for the unemployed always exceeds support for welfare (averaging 12 percentage points), although the margin is somewhat variable. Only support for food stamps is as low or lower than support for welfare.

The welfare/poor contrast is consistently replicated across various other questions as well. The feeling thermometer in Table 2 shows that people on welfare are rated more coolly (negatively) than blacks, poor people, or working men (by 9.9, 19.5, and 25.8 degrees, respectively). Similarly, Table 3 shows that people on welfare are more likely blamed for having too much influence than blacks, poor people, or workingmen (by 0.8%, 24.8%, and 26.2%, respectively). (See also Jaffe, 1978.)

In sum, "welfare" consistently produces much more negative evaluations than "the poor."

One common explanation for the low level of public support for welfare (and by extension for its low standing versus help for the poor) is that welfare is associated with minorities in the public mind. Wright (1977) argued that "welfare," like law and order or local/community control of schools, is a code word for racism. He showed that next to spending for "improving the condition of blacks," spending on "wel-

Table 1. Percentages Favoring More Assistance/Spending for Welfare/Poor

Source	Date	Poor	Welfare	Unemployed	Food Stamps
MAP ^a	1968	61.0 N.A.	32.0 N.A.	—	—
Harris ^b	12/72	62.0 N.A.	22.0 N.A.	—	—
HF ^c (Gallup)	1976	—	28.8 (625)	34.7 (625)	—
HF ^d (Gallup)	1976	—	25.3 (524)	45.7 (524)	25.6 (524)
Yank. ^e	1/76	51.0 (951)	17.5 (951)	—	—
Harris ^f	3/76	—	51.2 (1517)	69.1 (1515)	—
MAP(Yank.) ^g	1982	59.0 N.A.	25.0 N.A.	—	—
ISR ^h	Fall/1982	—	19.3 (1407)	26.3 (1408)	14.5 (1407)
GSS ^b	3/84	69.3/64.0 (473)(427)	24.6 (471)	—	—
GSS ⁱ	3/85	64.7 (762)	19.3 (719)	—	—

^a MAP = Monitoring Attitudes of the Public by Institute of Life Insurance. Percentages wanting government to do more for "the poor" and "people on welfare."

^b Percentages for increase for "helping the poor" and "people on welfare."

^c HF = Hopes and Fears surveys conducted by Gallup. Percentages for increase for "welfare program to help low-income families," "program to help the unemployed," and "program to provide food stamps to low-income families to help them buy food."

^d Percentages for increase for "welfare program to help low-income families," "program to help the unemployed," and "program to provide food stamps to low-income families to help them buy food."

^e Yank. = Yankelovich, Skelley, and White. Percentages for more spending for "help for the poor" and "welfare."

^f Percentages saying abolishment of programs would be a very serious loss for "jobs for unemployed" and "welfare."

^g ISR = Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan election study. Percentages saying spending too little for "welfare," "unemployment compensation," and "food stamps."

^h Percentages saying spending too little for "caring for the poor"/"assistance to the poor" and "welfare."

ⁱ Percentages saying spending too little for "assistance to the poor" and "welfare."

fare" was most strongly associated with race of respondents. Replication of his finding using the 1984 and 1985 GSS confirms this pattern. But "welfare" is no more associated with race than "assistance to the poor" is. Similarly, a comparison between spending on welfare and the poor and 20 racial items from the 1984 and 1985 GSS showed that for both items more spending was associated with more tolerant racial attitudes, but there were no differences in the magnitude of the associa-

Table 2. Feeling Thermometer (Mean Degrees) Towards Groups^a

	1972	1974	1976	1980	1984
Poor people	73.6	77.2	71.5	75.2	71.2
People on welfare	—	—	54.4	52.2	52.8
Blacks	64.0	65.5	60.8	64.2	64.2
Workingmen ^b	78.6	—	75.3	82.8	—

SOURCE: 1972, 1974, 1976, 1980, 1984 American National Election Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

^a "Here is a card on which there is something that looks like a thermometer. We call it a "feeling thermometer" because it measures your feelings towards these people. Here is how it works. If you don't feel particularly warm or cold towards a person, then you should place him in the middle of the thermometer, at the 50 degree mark. If you have a warm feeling toward a person, or feel favorably toward him, you would give him a score somewhere between 50° and 100°, depending on how warm your feeling is toward that person. On the other hand, if you don't feel very favorable toward a person—that is, if you don't care too much for him—then you would place him somewhere between 0 and 50 degrees. Of course, if you don't know too much about a person, just tell me and we'll go on to the next name. We'd also like to get your feelings about some groups in American society, using the feeling thermometer just as we did for the leaders. If we come to a group you don't know much about, just tell me and we'll move on to the next one." Above is 1974 version. Small variations occur in other years.

^b In 1980, workingmen and workingwomen.

Table 3. Comparisons of Group Influence: Percentage Having Too Much Influence

	1972	1974	1976
Poor people	5.4 (2164)	3.7 (2469)	6.5 (2396)
Blacks	27.2 (2158)	29.8 (2464)	30.6 (2392)
People on welfare	27.3 (2146)	30.1 (2468)	32.6 (2390)
Workingmen	3.2 (2160)	—	4.4 (2394)

SOURCE: 1972, 1974, 1976 American National Election Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. "Some people think that certain groups have too much influence in American life and politics, while other people feel that certain groups don't have as much influence as they deserve. On this card [1976:Here] are three statements about how much influence a group might have. For each group I read to you, just tell me the number of the statement that best says how you feel."

tions by descriptor (1984: welfare = 0.228, poor = 0.237, 1985: welfare = 0.254, poor = 0.246—average gammas). While this could be interpreted to mean that both "poor" and "welfare" are equivalent racist code words, we doubt Americans are such accomplished cryptographers that these and dozens of other words are merely ciphers for racism. In any event, the fact that *no* difference in racial association appears between the two terms indicates that racial connotations with the term "welfare," as opposed to "poor," do not explain the large difference in support that these two terms elicit. (See also AuClaire, 1984.)

A second explanation suggests that "welfare" is seen as a wasteful program that encourages sloth and sponging. The perception of public assistance as a boon to the lazy and cheats has long existed. Back in the nineteen thirties the WPA (Works Progress/Projects Administration) was derisively referred to as standing for "We Piddle Around." Schiltz (1970) has shown that the public has consistently labeled public assistance as wasteful, excessive, and disproductive. The negative connotation that "welfare" carries is apparent from such terms as "welfare queen" and "welfare Cadillac."¹

To examine whether such connotations are influencing the public's evaluation of "welfare" vs. the "poor," we studied the relationship of these spending items to measures of political orientation and attitudes towards social welfare and redistributive actions of government. Overall, the "poor" spending items have stronger associations than "welfare" in 18 of 21 comparisons on the 1984 and 1985 GSS, averaging gammas in 1984 of 0.287 for "assistance to the poor," 0.265 for "caring for the poor," and 0.204 for "welfare" (see Table 4). In general, the "welfare" associations are similar in direction and slightly smaller in magnitude than the "poor" associations. The one notable and instructive difference is on taxes. Those who oppose more spending for the poor tend to rate their tax load as more onerous than those who favor more welfare spending. (The insignificant association in 1985 is an outlier since on four of six surveys tax is significantly associated to welfare spending and gamma averaged -0.125.) For spending for the poor the associations are reversed. Those who oppose more spending for the poor are slightly less likely to rate their taxes as too high. This suggests that "welfare" triggers more concerns about the cost of public assistance service and perhaps more of a concern with waste, especially in the sense of fraud and program abuse.

1. A survey of nine dictionaries reveals that use of the term "welfare" to refer to government or private activity concerning the disadvantaged dates only from 1904 and that the use of the term to refer to relief payments was not recognized until the mid-1960s. No dictionary indicated any recognition of any negative connotations associated with the term.

Table 4. Association between Welfare/Poor Spending and Other Variables (Gammas/Probability)

	Welfare		Assistance to the Poor		Caring for the Poor
	1984	1985	1984	1985	1984
<i>Political Items</i>					
Party identification (PARTYID)	.212 (.003)	.228 (.000)	.331 (.000)	.340 (.000)	.322 (.001)
Political ideology (POLVIEWS)	.128 (.044)	.220 (.000)	.285 (.001)	.385 (.000)	.188 (.009)
<i>Redistribution and Entitlement Items</i>					
Govt do more (HELPNOT)	.302 (.000)	—	.289 (.003)	—	.316 (.000)
Govt health care (HELPSICK)	.280 (.000)	—	.288 (.000)	—	.353 (.000)
Govt help poor (HELPPOR)	.355 (.000)	—	.506 (.000)	—	.464 (.000)
Govt equalize incomes (EQWLTH)	.235 (.000)	—	.366 (.000)	—	.349 (.000)
Govt care for all (GOVCARE)	-.374 (.000)	—	-.396 (.000)	—	-.376 (.001)
Must look out for self (EQUAL1)	-.113 (.628)	—	-.051 (.424)	—	.034 (.542)
Profits benefit all (EQUAL2)	-.068 (.615)	—	-.275 (.012)	—	-.137 (.049)
Govt run economy (EQUAL3)	.181 (.050)	—	.257 (.000)	—	.386 (.000)
Govt meet needs (EQUAL4)	.257 (.002)	—	.356 (.000)	—	.437 (.000)
Welfare disincentive (EQUAL5)	-.203 (.005)	—	-.281 (.005)	—	-.170 (.057)
All can live well (EQUAL6)	-.297 (.000)	—	-.284 (.003)	—	-.293 (.024)
Profits fairly divided (EQUAL7)	-.091 (.326)	—	-.273 (.000)	—	-.254 (.045)
Success is earned (EQUAL8)	.049 (.289)	—	-.110 (.175)	—	.055 (.853)
Own efforts count (USCLASS4)	.073 (.228)	—	.259 (.015)	—	.236 (.001)
Decent life for all (USCLASS5)	.263 (.000)	—	.387 (.000)	—	.369 (.000)
Taxes too high (TAX)	-.186 (.016)	-.003 (.544)	.176 (.005)	.123 (.005)	.037 (.428)
<i>Anomia Items</i>					
Aver. man worse off (ANOMIA5)	.170 (.024)	.188 (.001)	.380 (.000)	.268 (.000)	.289 (.001)
Future bleak (ANOMIA6)	-.047 (.267)	.073 (.082)	.368 (.000)	.200 (.007)	.189 (.006)
Officials don't care (ANOMIA7)	-.196 (.035)	.084 (.015)	.240 (.026)	.213 (.006)	.279 (.012)

While items explicitly tapping concerns about government waste were lacking, we looked at three anomia items. On the "poor" spending items, opposition to more spending was associated with socially integrated (nonanomic) responses. This association prevails because those with lower SES are both more alienated and more in need (and in favor) of these types of governmental benefits. Support for more welfare spending was either less strongly associated or the relationship actually reversed. We believe that the association with welfare is attenuated and/or reversed because some alienated people see "welfare" as a waste rather than a potential benefit and therefore shift their positive support for the poor to a negative vote on welfare.²

We have considerably less information about the differences between support for "welfare" and references to the unemployed. It is well established, however, that Americans are much more in favor of workfare programs than welfare (Schiltz, 1970; Erskine, 1975). For example, in a 1968 Gallup Poll 31.9% endorsed welfare payments of up to \$3200 for families of four while 77.2% backed the government guaranteeing enough work for a family wage earner to earn up to \$3200. The unemployment references may benefit from both avoiding the negative connotation of welfare as well as gaining some positive association with workfare programs.

Food stamps are ranked at a low level comparable to welfare. While one might assume that the program's face association with preventing hunger might encourage public support, it does not apparently have any more appeal than welfare. Like welfare it may be tarred by images as a wasteful, mismanaged program open to abuse.

Overall the term "welfare" obviously carries more negative connotations than does "poor." If we think of a continuum in which the least favorable descriptor might be "loafers and bums" and the most favorable terms might be the "truly needy" or "widows and orphans," it would appear that "welfare" would fall nearer the loafer end (maybe rather close to it) while "poor" would be towards the "truly needy."

Poor also seems to be a more valid measure of support for the welfare state, in particular of support for programs to equalize conditions and provide for the care of people. Welfare clearly taps these same concerns but perhaps not as cleanly. It seems to conjure up a second concept of waste and perhaps an antibureaucratic image as well. Welfare receives more negative ratings because of these additional associations and shows lower associations with questions dealing with redistribution and entitlements. Presumably welfare would correlate more highly than poor with questions on government waste and red tape.

These large differences have important linguistic lessons for writing survey questions. The welfare/poor distinction illustrates the major

2. Welfare may also suffer by emphasizing the program rather than the problems. On this point see Smith (1984).

impact that different words can have on response patterns. It argues for more systematic investigation of the impact of such wording differences and is another example in favor of using multiple measures of phenomena. It also serves as a stark warning about the possible policy and scientific misapplication of survey data. Taking the welfare item alone might lead a social scientist to conclude that the public was callous towards the poor and perhaps backed a social Darwinism approach to poverty. It might lead a politician to decide that public assistance programs, lacking public support, could (and should?) be cut with impunity. Opposite errors could be made if only the "poor" item was used. An investigator might conclude that concern about ending poverty was the public's top concern, while welfare administrators might think there was strong public support for their programs. In truth the situation is much more complex and even both items reveal only small slices of the public's attitudes towards public assistance.

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