



Social empathy and attitudes about dependence of people living in poverty on government assistance programs

M. Alex Wagaman, Kimberly S. Compton & Elizabeth A. Segal

To cite this article: M. Alex Wagaman, Kimberly S. Compton & Elizabeth A. Segal (2018) Social empathy and attitudes about dependence of people living in poverty on government assistance programs, *Journal of Poverty*, 22:6, 471-485, DOI: [10.1080/10875549.2018.1460740](https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2018.1460740)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2018.1460740>



Published online: 25 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 703



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Social empathy and attitudes about dependence of people living in poverty on government assistance programs

M. Alex Wagaman^a, Kimberly S. Compton^a, and Elizabeth A. Segal^b

^aSchool of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia USA; ^bSchool of Social Work/Phoenix, Arizona State University, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

Although 43 million people live in poverty in the United States, disdain for government assistance continues to grow. This disdain may come from a lack of contextual understanding of the conditions surrounding poverty, which in turn can lead to a deprioritization of income-assistance programs. This study investigates the relationship of one's social empathy and attitude about poverty-related social programs using a binary logistic regression. Participants with more contextual understanding are less likely to believe that the poor are too dependent on government assistance. Findings suggest that increasing social empathy could improve attitudes toward people living in poverty and government assistance.

KEYWORDS

contextual understanding;
poverty; social empathy;
social welfare policy

As reflected in President Ronald Reagan's first inaugural address during which he stated that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (1981), government intervention has acquired a particularly negative view in the United States. Although most Americans believe that government services for the poor, specifically, are inefficient and wasteful, more than one half also believe that it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who are in need (Pew Research Center, 2012). Amidst this tension between who is responsible and who is best poised to respond to people living in poverty, 43 million people remain in poverty without adequate social services (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). Economic and social assistance from the government is often a critically important resource available to people who live in poverty (Ben-Shalom, Moffitt, & Scholz, 2012; Nord & Prell, 2011; Sherman, 2012; Sherman, Danilo, & Parrott, 2013), and, in the case of interventions such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), such assistance has been shown to have a positive impact on the economy (Keith-Jennings & Rosenbaum, 2015; Moses, 2009). Unfortunately, public disdain for government services may mean that the public's political support for those services is not a priority, thus leading to fewer services for those who are in need of them.

Distance and division

Historically, public attitude toward the poor has been one of distance, due in part to a lack of awareness and understanding of the lived experiences of the poor and through processes of political division. During the height of debate on public assistance during the 1990s, attitudes toward public assistance were negative, in part, because of a lack of understanding between people of means and people who were dependent on public programs (Abramovitz, 1996; Block, Cloward, Ehrenreich, & Piven, 1987; Dujon & Withorn, 1996). Gilens (1999) found that wealthy Americans were more likely to support spending cuts on welfare, but this attitude did not appear to be motivated by “self-interest” (p. 31), or a desire to continue to obtain more wealth. Instead, their perceptions of welfare and the people who use it predicted their attitudes toward welfare spending (Gilens, 1999). Gilens’ research suggests that a lack of experience and understanding between those of means and those who receive government assistance contributes to a disdain for government intervention. In 2015, the top 5% of households alone accounted for more than 22% of all income (Proctor et al., 2016) suggesting a wide economic gap in the United States. This lack of understanding and lack of empathy may worsen as the gap widens between those with means and those without.

A political divide—or a divide in political ideology—may also play a role in whether people support government assistance for those living in poverty. Appelbaum (2001) found that when people were asked to recommend policies to alleviate poverty, people with a liberal political orientation were more likely to recommend government assistance benefits whereas those with a conservative political orientation were more likely to recommend no benefits. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), the majority of people in the United States believe that the gap between the wealthy and the poor has grown. However, there is a political divide on what to do about it. Seventy-two percent of people who identify as Democrats think government should play a major role in helping people get out of poverty, compared to only 36% of those who identify politically as Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2014). Fifty-nine percent of Republicans supported easing the tax burden for the wealthy to increase economic growth as the solution to reduce poverty (Pew Research Center, 2014). If economic and political division contribute to different perspectives on helping the poor, then finding ways to bridge the gap in understanding are important to explore.

The field of neurology offers new insight on the political ideological divide: political orientation may be neurologically distinguishable (Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Dodd, Hibbing & Smith, 2011). When comparing neurological brain activity between participants who identify as liberal and conservative, Dodd, Hibbing, and Smith (2011) found that for liberals there is a greater tendency to take in social cues and context whereas conservatives

were more focused on the individual. Other neurological research found that people who identified as liberal dedicated more neurological activity to processing complex and conflicting information, whereas the neurological activity in people who identified as conservative was connected to maintaining habitual patterns (Amodio et al., 2007). Neurological research suggests that conservatism is linked more strongly to maintaining the status quo and seeing the individual in isolation, whereas liberalism is linked more strongly to seeing structural and contextual factors related to poverty. Differing neurological processes between people who identify as liberal and people who identify as conservative may be influenced by and also contribute to other types of distancing from the experiences of people living in poverty.

The differences in attitudes toward people living in poverty, the disdain for public assistance, and divisions in political ideology when it comes to responding to people in poverty raise the question of how to bridge the divides that exist in the country to benefit those who are the most vulnerable. If the problem is distance and division, then could one solution be to decrease distance and division by building empathy and contextual awareness? Perhaps people with a greater sense of social empathy, or “the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations . . . [and] gain[ing] insight into structural inequalities and disparities” (Segal, 2011, pp. 266–267) have more positive views of people living in poverty and the social services dedicated to them. It may be possible that drawing on insight into the experiences of others can help others to see their needs, and in some cases one’s own needs, through a contextualized lens and be more supportive of social programs designed to address them.

Empathy and concern for the well-being of others

Empathy is a useful prerequisite for acting in the interest of others’ needs but can be affected by distance and difference. The empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson & Shaw, 1991) purports that by taking the perspective of others, we are more likely to be “moved” to help them. When we understand the needs of others, we have a true empathy, and when we act on this empathy, in congruence with the needs of others, this leads to altruistic motivation, or “motivation with the ultimate goal of increasing the other’s welfare by removing the need” (Batson, 2012, p. 50). Although empathy is critical to the development of prosocial behaviors, or the actions that we take voluntarily to benefit other people or society (Eisenberg, 1986), research suggests that the power of empathy to contribute to prosocial behavior is diminished with distance (e.g., Einolf, 2008). Einolf (2008) found that prosocial behaviors were correlated with empathy, but the more distant the prosocial behavior, the less significant the relationship with empathy. For example, when someone volunteered or donated to a charity, empathy was not as strongly

correlated as when someone was engaged in directly helping someone (Einolf, 2008).

One way to bridge distance is through an understanding of the contextual factors that surround ourselves and others. Taking into account context can help to engage our empathic insights (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Zahavi, 2012). Which groups we are part of, which groups we are not part of but have experience interacting with, and which groups we know nothing about all affect how we understand others (Decety, 2015). At a neurological level, empathetic brain activity is more pronounced when information on context is included (Iacoboni et al., 2005). In an experiment using brain imaging to code the neurological brain activity related to empathy, researchers found that when viewing a simple task without context (such as someone grasping a teacup), less brain activity occurred than when viewing that same task as part of a setting that showed context (grasping a tea cup at a tea party) (Iacoboni et al., 2005). It may not seem astounding to assume that our brain is more active when taking into account the context of events, but it becomes more important when we connect those regions of the brain to engaging in empathy (Iacoboni et al., 2005).

Social empathy as a bridge to build support for government assistance

Interpersonal empathy, which is the empathic feelings between individuals or in small groups, and social empathy, which is the expanding empathic feelings across groups and society, are interconnected yet distinct (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012). Evidence suggests that interpersonal empathy may affect how people view government assistance for people living in poverty; in previous research, higher levels of interpersonal empathy were associated with more positive attitudes towards government intervention (Wagaman & Segal, 2014). Levels of interpersonal and social empathy can explain differences in willingness to contribute to poverty relief. For example, lower interpersonal empathy was accompanied by less willingness to give money or volunteer to work with a poverty relief organization (Willer, Wimer, & Owens, 2015). Simulation interventions aimed at building empathetic understanding of people in poverty have seen success; participants' empathy has been shown to increase through a deeper understanding of the barriers that are faced by those living in poverty (Strasser, Smith, Denney, Jackson, & Buckmaster, 2013; Yang, Woomer, Agbemenu, & Williams, 2014).

Social empathy combines the elements of interpersonal empathy with a broader understanding of context (Segal, 2014). Deep understanding of the lived experiences of people from groups different from ourselves means learning about that group's historical exposure to oppression or privilege, barriers to or support for social and economic opportunities, and what it would feel like to be in such a marginalized or privileged position (Segal, 2007). Contextual understanding can reveal the structural impediments, such as institutionalized discrimination, to

economic gain that are built into our society, which can shift the focus on poverty from individual change to larger scale system change. Social empathy specifically can provide the framework to support such a deeper understanding of poverty (Segal, 2007) by enhancing an understanding that our experiences of the same phenomena may differ and that contextual factors in society often shape those differences.

The aim of the present study was to investigate how one's level of social empathy is related to attitude about poverty-related social programs. Further, this study explored the role of political ideology in that relationship. It was hypothesized that lower levels of social empathy would significantly increase a person's likelihood of believing that the poor are too dependent on government assistance programs.

Method

Study design

This study used a cross-sectional survey design to capture participant responses. All participants voluntarily took part in an online survey administered in the fall semester of 2015. The survey was part of a larger study that aimed to explore the relationships between empathy (interpersonal and social), policy positions, and social/political action among college students. The survey, in its entirety, was composed of items assessing five main areas, including (1) demographics, (2) political affiliation and political thinking, (3) interpersonal and social empathy, (4) positions on 10 policy issues, and (5) engagement in social and political actions. Instructors teaching introduction to social work courses at the bachelor's level at two public, urban universities—one in the southwestern United States and the other in the mid-Atlantic United States—were asked to invite their students to participate in the study. Previous studies on social empathy have been limited primarily to one region of the United States. Thus, the researchers aimed to assess if findings would be similar with a sample drawn from regions that differed geographically.

Students received an e-mail directly from the researchers outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as research participants, and the timeline for the online survey. The following week, students received the survey link from Qualtrics (2014), an online survey software system, through which they could choose to anonymously participate. Instructors were not able to determine whether students had selected to participate in the study. Students had 2 weeks to complete the online survey, during which time they received one reminder via e-mail. At the end of the survey, participants had the option to be diverted to a separate survey where they could share their name and contact information for a drawing. Participants at the southwestern university had a chance to be randomly selected to receive one of five \$100 gift cards. Participants at the mid-Atlantic university had a chance to be

randomly selected to receive one of two \$100 gift cards. The number of gift cards was determined based on the target student population size at each university.

Sample characteristics

A total of 10 classes participated ($N = 691$ students)—seven ($n = 603$ students) from the southwestern university and three ($n = 88$ students) from the mid-Atlantic university. Of those invited, 232 students responded for a response rate of 33%. Respondents were removed from the final sample if they completed 30% or less of the survey items ($n = 32$) or if they did not respond to the item used for the dependent variable ($n = 24$). The total analytic sample for the study was 176.

In this sample, the majority (59%, $n = 104$) of participants reported “social work” as their major and 16% ($n = 28$) reported “criminal justice.” The remaining respondents (25%; $n = 44$) represented 19 other majors. Approximately 60% of the sample ($n = 105$) identified as a junior or senior in college, and 65% reported being employed at the time of the survey. Participants predominantly identified as White (49%, $n = 87$) and Latino/a (25%, $n = 45$), 8% ($n = 16$) identified as Black or African American. Twenty participants reported a country of origin other than the United States. Female participants made up 82% of the sample ($n = 143$), and approximately 14% of the sample identified as a sexual minority Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer (LGBQ+). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 65 ($M = 26.4$) with 63% falling between ages 18 and 25. Approximately 44% ($n = 76$) reported growing up in families of origin that were poor or working class, 38% ($n = 66$) reported growing up in families of origin that were middle class, and 19% ($n = 34$) grew up in families of origin that were upper middle class or wealthy.

Measures

The dependent variable—attitude about the poor’s dependence upon government assistance—was assessed using a single item adapted from the Pew Research Center’s American Values Survey (2012). Respondents rated the item—among a series of other policy position statements—from 1 (*completely agree*) to 4 (*completely disagree*) with lower scores indicating a belief that people who are poor in the United States have become too dependent upon government assistance programs. The responses were fairly evenly distributed, with approximately one third reporting *mostly agree* and another third reporting *mostly disagree*. The remaining third were almost evenly split between the ends of the scale—*completely agree* and “completely disagree.” However, for conceptual clarity the four categories were collapsed into two categories (*agree* and *disagree*).

Independent variables in the analysis included interpersonal empathy, and two components of social empathy. The Social Empathy Index (SEI) (Segal,

Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, Geiger, 2017) is composed of 40 items rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). The Empathy Assessment Index, which is included within the SEI, is composed of 22 items to assess interpersonal empathy. Responses to the 22 items were mean scored. The scale's reliability was good in the sample ($\alpha = .90$).

The remaining 18 items of the SEI assess two social empathy-specific components—macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking and contextual understanding. Contextual understanding is the ability to understand the ways in which the social, political, and economic barriers and privileges of the past and present affect one's experiences. Macro self-other awareness/perspective taking is the ability to cognitively understand the experiences of others who are different from ourselves through the lens of contextual understanding (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012). Contextual understanding was assessed using the mean score of nine items ($\alpha = .89$) as was macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking ($\alpha = .86$). All three empathy-related items were slightly skewed in the positive direction, which is common given the self-report nature of the items.

Age, class background, and political thinking were used as controls in the study because class background was believed to be a factor in how one perceives those living in poverty, and age may influence the amount of exposure one has had to information that could influence political positions or beliefs, particularly for college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Political thinking is related to policy positions and beliefs about government assistance or intervention (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Age was self-reported as age in years at the time of the survey. Class background was measured with the response to the following: "When I was growing up, I would describe my family as . . ." Response options included *poor*, *working class*, *middle class*, *upper middle class*, and *wealthy*. Respondents were recoded into three class background categories to more evenly distribute responses between categories for the purpose of analysis: *poor/working class*, *middle class*, and *upper middle/wealthy*.

Political thinking was measured with response to the question, "When you consider your political thinking, which of the following best describes you?" Respondents reported where their political thought fell on a 5-point scale from 1(*consistently liberal*) to 5 (*consistently conservative*). The sample was slightly negatively skewed with a majority of participants ($n = 77$) reporting liberal thinking (*consistently* or *mostly*). Another 71 respondents reported being *mixed* in their political thinking. Only four respondents reported being *consistently conservative*. Based on the distribution of responses, the five categories were collapsed into three: liberal, mixed, and conservative. Descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for items used in analysis ($N = 176$).

Variable	% or M (SD)
Political thinking	
Liberal	43.8
Mixed	40.3
Conservative	15.9
Interpersonal empathy	4.56 (0.67)
(1 to 6, higher scores indicating greater empathy)	
Contextual understanding	4.9 (0.92)
(1 to 6, higher scores indicating greater understanding)	
Macro perspective-taking	4.73 (0.84)
(1 to 6, higher scores indicating greater perspective taking)	
"Poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs"	52.8
% disagree	

Analysis

Data were cleaned and prepared for analysis using SPSS 24 software (IBM Corp, 2016). The dependent and independent variables were assessed for assumptions of normality using outliers and skew and kurtosis values. The values for the dependent and independent variables were within an acceptable range to proceed without transformation or corrections, however some were recoded as detailed above. Additionally, the data were assessed for the logistic regression assumptions of multicollinearity and independence of observation and were found to be in adherence.

Binomial logistic regression analysis was conducted to test the study's hypothesis that lower scores on the components of social empathy (contextual understanding and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking) would significantly increase a person's likelihood of believing that "the poor are too dependent on government assistance programs," as well as to explore the role of political thinking and interpersonal empathy in that relationship. Age and class background were included to control for differences across these demographic characteristics.

Results

Pearson's correlations indicated significant relationships between all of the variables except interpersonal empathy and political thinking. Political thinking was negatively correlated with contextual understanding, macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking, and belief about poor people's dependence on government assistance programs. As contextual understanding and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking increased, political thinking became more liberal. As political thinking became more conservative, respondents' agreement that poor people are dependent upon government

Table 2. Pearson's R correlations for dependent and independent variables ($N = 176$).

	1	2	3	4
(1) Interpersonal empathy				
(2) Political thinking	−0.14			
(3) Contextual understanding	0.64**	−0.44**		
(4) Macro perspective-taking	0.72**	0.74**	−0.28**	
(5) Poor/government assistance	0.26**	0.50**	0.33**	−0.34**

Note. ** $p < .01$.

assistance strengthened. All other correlations were positive associations. Bivariate correlations between the dependent and independent variables are summarized in Table 2.

Logistic regression analysis

To test the likelihood of believing that the poor have become too dependent upon government assistance programs, a binomial logistic regression analysis was conducted with interpersonal empathy, and the two components of social empathy included as independent variables. The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 39.99$, $p < .01$, and explained 28.7% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in attitudes towards the poor's dependence on government assistance. A model with interpersonal empathy, contextual understanding, and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking scores as predictors while controlling for age, class background, and political thinking correctly classified 68.5% of cases. Interpersonal empathy ($p = .61$), and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking ($p = .38$) were not significant predictors in the model. Age ($p = .4$), class background ($p = .26$), and political thinking ($p = .61$) were also not significant. Contextual understanding was a significant predictor suggesting that as a participant's contextual understanding increased, their likelihood of agreeing that poor people are too dependent on government assistance would decrease, $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 4.703$, $p < .01$. Binary logistic regression results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Results from binary logistic regression on attitudes about the poor's dependence on government assistance (1 = *Disagree*) controlling for demographics.

	B	SE	e^B
Political thinking	−.14	.28	.87
Interpersonal empathy	−.22	.43	.806
Contextual understanding	1.548	.38	4.7**
Macro perspective-taking	−.32	.37	.72

Note. e^B = exponentiated B .

Nagelkerke $R^2 = 28.7$.

Controls for age and socioeconomic status are omitted from the table.

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that with less social empathy, particularly with less contextual understanding, participants are more likely to believe that people in poverty are too dependent on government assistance. That is, more contextual understanding would decrease a participant's likelihood of believing people are too dependent on government assistance. Interpersonal empathy and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking were not significant predictors in the model. The findings suggest an affirmation of existing literature demonstrating the importance of understanding context to one's ability to be empathic to others (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Decety, 2015; Iacoboni et al., 2005; Segal, 2014; Segal, Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, Geiger, 2017; Zahavi, 2012). This interpretation, the authors recognize, acknowledges an assumption that those in poverty in the United States are not dependent upon government assistance. Rather, we assume that poverty-alleviation programs (such as SNAP) supported by the U.S. government are not provided at a level at which people could solely depend upon them. However, without a significant understanding of the context within which someone might seek such assistance, it is understandable that people would base their attitudes and beliefs on something else, including information that is not empathically informed.

So, why does contextual understanding matter? Contextual understanding is the ability to understand how context—the sociohistorical environment—has affected and continues to affect the experiences of individuals and communities. Contextual understanding uses a systemic lens to understand problems, looking at the influence of structures and institutions on people's lives (Segal, Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, Geiger, 2017).

Poverty is a product of social forces and individual factors. As such, contextual understanding may play a more important role in understanding the condition of being impoverished. Considering the context of poverty can help a person see external factors, such as discrimination or lack of educational opportunities that can impede economic success, rather than solely focusing on the individual's character or personal decisions, which is often the focus of social narratives about people living in poverty. Contextual understanding, as a component of social empathy, may increase individuals' capacity to view the role of government assistance in the larger context of what a person in poverty is experiencing and what is needed to alleviate it.

The significance of contextual understanding in this study highlights the importance of system-level awareness as an important bridge for understanding the experience and alleviation of poverty. Interpersonal empathy and macro self-other awareness/perspective-taking were not independently significant, which could be due, in part, to the fact that poverty is a product of sociostructural forces. Even if individuals have personally experienced poverty, have relationships or interactions with people living in poverty, or

have some other intra/interpersonal understanding of poverty, it does not necessarily give them the context necessary to understand the role of a system-level or policy intervention to alleviate poverty's impact.

Contextual understanding, as a point of educational intervention for social workers and others working to address poverty, has the potential to shift our thinking toward system-level change. This is important when we know, as social service workers and community organizers, that solving poverty will require a recognition of and strategies to address the institutions and policies that maintain the status quo as opposed to focusing solely on the individual as the cause or source of poverty. We believe that contextual understanding, as a component of social empathy, can be taught and thus can be increased. In other disciplines, empathy has been increased through teaching approaches that are experiential in nature (Giordano, Stare, & Clarke, 2015; Kolb, 2014). The emphasis on field education as a key component of preparing students in social work uniquely positions the discipline to incorporate social empathy into practicum experiences and experiential learning activities that are community based. This could take the form of preparing field instructors to provide intentional guidance on understanding context, or bridging the field and classroom through field-based instruction.

In this study, it is important to acknowledge that political thinking was not an individually significant variable in the model. Political thinking was significantly correlated with attitude about the poor's dependence upon government assistance at a bivariate level, suggesting that political thinking does have an influence on attitudes toward people living in poverty as reflected in the literature (Amodio et al., 2007; Appelbaum, 2001; Dodd, Hibbing & Smith, 2011). However, once other variables were introduced to the analysis, political thinking explained less of the variability in attitudes about the poor's dependence than contextual understanding—a component of social empathy. This could suggest a number of things. First, for educators, it offers hope that the influence of social welfare-focused educational efforts may affect future practitioners' attitudes toward government-supported poverty assistance programs. The influence of this education has the potential to outweigh preexisting beliefs that are aligned with political ideology. Second, the influence of political thinking may have been lessened by the sample pool, which was college students. Attending college has been shown to affect sociopolitical attitudes (Campbell & Horowitz, 2015) and values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Given that this change or shift occurs during college, the sample pool would suggest many of the participants may have been in the process of forming or re-forming their political thinking.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study that should be considered in the application of the findings, as well as inform future research. First, the

findings are limited to the sample of students who selected to take an Introduction to Social Work course in the participating universities. Among those who were invited to participate from the sample pool, there may have been an unknown self-selection bias. Thus, the generalization of findings is limited.

The measures also posed limitations to the study. First, the dependent variable was measured using a single item, which may limit a full understanding of participants' beliefs about the poor and their dependence on government assistance. Future research could explore this more deeply, as well as some of the underlying factors that might have informed this belief. Similarly, political thinking was measured on a liberal/conservative scale that provided little opportunity to explore the range of perspectives within the answer options, such as those who might be fiscally conservative versus those who are more socially conservative. Measures of political thinking and affiliation need to be tested in other populations to assess their validity.

Implications

These findings suggest that enhancing social empathy, and specifically the component of contextual understanding, is one way to increase support for social welfare programs and policies that advance economic justice for those living in poverty. The power of social empathy is that it is a point of intervention. The components of social empathy can be increased through education. For example, contextual understanding can be enhanced through educational efforts that help people learn the history of poverty in the United States and to make explicit connections between the historical values that shaped our nation's response to poverty and how those values are reflected in our current, dominant social response and beliefs about people who are living in poverty. Similarly, people can be taught about the ways in which various systems affect the opportunities that different populations might have access to for their own economic gain. For example, if people understand the way that redlining occurred in many U.S. cities to link the property value of communities to the racial make-up of the community, then a connection can be made to other systems that are based on property value. Building on the redlining example, the U.S. education system has been and continues to be highly connected to the tax base of the surrounding community, which is also linked to property value. In other words, the quality of one's education is directly connected to the wealth of one's community, which can have a direct effect on one's earning potential.

As people begin to understand the links between an individual's experience and the institutional forces that pose barriers to achieving economic success, people can increase their capacity to empathically understand differences in experiences that may affect their perspectives on social policies or

programs to benefit people living in poverty. In the classroom, these intentional educational interventions that link contextual understanding to policy and practice interventions can be employed and evaluated. Further research is needed to explore the educational efforts that most successfully increase social empathy, and the causal relationship between interventions to increase social empathy and changes in attitude or belief about those living in poverty. In addition, more research is needed to connect social empathy and actions taken on an individual and policy level to poverty and its impact on people and communities. In the meantime, teaching contextual understanding of poverty, inequality, and inadequate access to resources can go a long way to building people's understanding of what it means to be poor in this country, and indeed how valuable government assistance can be to alleviate some of the disparity and despair.

References

- Abramovitz, M. (1996). *Regulating the lives of women*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Amodio, D. M., Jost, J. T., Master, S. L., & Yee, C. M. (2007). Neurocognitive correlates of liberalism and conservatism. *Nature Neuroscience*, 10, 1246–1247. doi:10.1038/nn1979
- Appelbaum, L. D. (2001). The influence of perceived deservingness of policy decisions regarding aid to the poor. *Political Psychology*, 22(3), 419–442. doi:10.1111/0162-895X.00248
- Batson, C. D. (2012). The empathy-altruism hypothesis: Issues and implications. In Decety, J. (Ed.), *Empathy from bench to bedside* (pp. 41–54). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Batson, C. D., & Shaw, L. L. (1991). Evidence for altruism: Toward a pluralism of prosocial motives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 2(2), 107–122. doi:10.1207/s15327965pli0202_1
- Ben-Shalom, Y., Moffitt, R. A., & Scholz, J. K. (2012). An assessment of the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs in the United States. (No. w17042). National Bureau of Economic Research. Jefferson, P. A. (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of the economics of poverty*. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com>
- Block, F., Cloward, R. A., Ehrenreich, B., & Piven, F. F. (1987). *The mean season: Attack on the welfare state*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Campbell, C., & Horowitz, J. (2015). Does college influence sociopolitical attitudes? *Sociology of Education*, 89(1), 40–58. doi:10.1177/0038040715617224
- De Vignemont, F., & Singer, T. (2006). The empathic brain: How, when and why? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 10(10), 435–441. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2006.08.008
- Decety, J. (2015). The neural pathways, development and functions of empathy. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 1–6. doi:10.1016/j.cobeha.2014.12.001
- Dodd, M. D., Hibbing, J. R., & Smith, K. B. (2011). The politics of attention: gaze-cuing effects are moderated by political temperament. *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*, 73(1), 24–29.
- Dujon, D., & Withorn, A. (Eds.). (1996). *For crying out loud: Women's poverty in the United States*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Einolf, C. J. (2008). Empathic concern and prosocial behaviors: A test of experimental results using survey data. *Social Science Research*, 37, 1267–1279. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.06.003
- Eisenberg, N. (1986). *Altruistic emotion, cognition, and behavior*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Giordano, A. L., Stare, B. G., & Clarke, P. B. (2015, 01). Overcoming obstacles to empathy: The use of experiential learning in addictions counseling courses. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 10(1), 100–113. doi:10.1080/15401383.2014.947011
- Iacoboni, M., Molnar-Szakacs, I., Gallese, V., Buccino, G., Mazziotta, J. C., & Rizzolatti, G. (2005). Grasping the intentions of others with one's own mirror neuron system. *PLoS Biology*, 3(3), 529–535. doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0030079
- IBM Corp. (2016). *IBM SPSS statistics for windows*, Version 24.0. Armonk, NY: Author.
- Keith-Jennings, B., & Rosenbaum, D. (2015). *SNAP benefit boost in 2009 Recovery Act provided economic stimulus and reduced hardship*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <http://www.cbpp.org/>
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT press.
- Moses, J. (2009). *Basic needs assistance for the poor advances economic recovery and employment goals*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <http://www.americanprogress.org>.
- Nord, M., & Prell, M. (2011). Food security of SNAP recipients improved following the 2009 stimulus package. United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. *Amber Waves*, 9(2), 1–8.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pew Research Center (2012). *Partisan polarization surges in Bush, Obama years: Trends in American values: 1987–2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/>
- Pew Research Center (2014, January 23). *Most see inequality growing, but partisans differ over solutions*. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/>
- Proctor, B. D., Semega, J. L., & Kollar, M. A. (2016). *Income and poverty in the United States: 2015 (P60-256)* [U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports]. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov>
- Qualtrics. (2014). *software*. Retrieved from <https://www.qualtrics.com>.
- Reagan, R. (1981, January 20). Inaugural address. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Segal, E. A. (2007) Social empathy: A tool to address the contradiction of working but still poor. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 88(3), 333–337.
- Segal, E. A. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility that promotes social justice. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(1), 266–277.
- Segal, E. A. (2014). Social empathy. In *The encyclopedia of social work online*. New York: Oxford University Press and the National Association of Social Workers. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.1152
- Segal, E. A., Gerdes, K. E., Lietz, C. A., Wagaman, M. A. & Geiger, J. M. (2017). *Assessing Empathy*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Segal, E. A., Wagaman, M. A., & Gerdes, K. E. (2012). Developing the Social Empathy Index: An exploratory factor analysis. *Advances in Social Work*, 13(3), 541–560.
- Sherman, A. (2012). *The power of the safety net: What the supplemental poverty measure shows*. Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity Commentary. Retrieved from <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org>
- Sherman, A., Danilo, T., & Parrott, S. (2013). *Various supports for low-income families reduce poverty and have long-term positive effects on families and children*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <http://www.cbpp.org>

- Strasser, S., Smith, M. O., Denney, D. P., Jackson, M. C., & Buckmaster, P. (2013). A poverty simulation to inform public health practice. *American Journal of Health Education, 44*, 1–6. doi:[10.1080/19325037.2013.811366](https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2013.811366)
- Wagaman, M. A., & Segal, E. A. (2014). The relationship between empathy and attitudes toward government intervention. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 41*(4), 91–112.
- Willer, R., Wimer, C., & Owens, L. A. (2015). What drives the gender gap in charitable giving? Lower empathy leads men to give less to poverty relief. *Social Science Research, 52*, 83–98. doi:[10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.12.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.12.014)
- Yang, K., Woomer, G. R., Agbemenu, K., & Williams, L. (2014). Relate better and judge less: Poverty simulation promoting culturally competent care in community health nursing. *Nurse Education in Practice, 14*(6), 680–685. doi:[10.1016/j.nepr.2014.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2014.09.001)
- Zahavi, D. (2012). Comment: Basic empathy and complex empathy. *Emotion Review, 4*(1), 81–82. doi:[10.1177/1754073911421387](https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073911421387)