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God helps those who help themselves?: The effects of religious affiliation, religiosity, and deservedness on generosity toward the poor. Will, Jeffrey A.; Cochran, John K.

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This study examines the role of religious affiliation and religiosity in formulating levels of generosity toward the poor. A number of studies have been carried out which address perceptions and beliefs about the poor, but few have examined the influence of religious factors on issues of deservedness (cf. Kluegel and Smith 1985). In this paper we employ the 1986 General Social Survey and its accompanying Factorial Survey Component in order to better understand how religious affiliation and personal religiosity affect generosity toward the poor.

Systematic polling of public attitudes toward social service programs has been chronicled from as early as the Great Depression and the New Deal (Schiltz 1970). The results from these inquiries have been mixed. On the one hand, we find that the public is strongly in favor of support for the elderly and "assistance" to the poor. On the other hand, we find little support for wealth redistribution policies, and a strong public distaste for "welfare" (Smith 1987).

Schlitz (1970) found that between 1930 and 1970 a majority of the adult population supported either increased spending on government assistance programs or at least maintaining the current spending levels. More recent studies show less consistent support for welfare spending, and often contradictory responses to specific spending items (Shapiro et al. 1987b). Mixed findings concerning perceptions of welfare recipients, particularly with regard to "welfare cheating," have been reported in various surveys throughout the past 20 years (Shapiro et al. 1987a; Schiltz 1970; Cook et al. 1988). Thus despite general support for public assistance programs over the past 50 years, considerable variation in measuring this opinion and variation in the level of support and in the programs supported continue to cloud the overall picture.

An extensive body of literature exists examining the impact of religion on public opinion. However, research on religious beliefs and attitudes toward the poor are less prevalent. A few studies have examined how religious affiliation is related to support for welfare policy and public assistance programs; however, the results are often mixed (e.g., Tamney et al. 1988; Wuthnow 1991; Pyle 1993). For instance, Pyle found that there appear to be differences between faith groups with regard to support for government policies aimed at lessening economic inequality, although, ". . . the findings offer little support for the assertion that religious influences themselves significantly lessen class-based political differences" (Pyle 1993:398). Moreover, Wuthnow found that while religious belief and participation may increase some feelings of compassion in a more general sense, actual behaviors are less supportive of this position. "Participation in religious organizations, it appears, has a genuine, but limited, effect on charitable behavior" (Wuthnow 1991:126).

Hence, the extant literature offers little light concerning the influence of religion on compassion and charity toward the poor. Our concern in this study, therefore, is to examine the influence of religious variables on generosity toward the poor. Drawing from Pyle's (1993) discussion of religious commitment to the poor, and Will's (1993a; 1993b) discussion of the "deserving poor," we examine how specific characteristics of poor families influence generosity and how the effects of deservedness vary across faith groups.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this paper come from the 1986 General Social Survey and the Factorial Survey Component adopted for that year. In the 1986 survey, both conventional survey items dealing with attitudes toward the poor and public assistance programs, as well as a supplemental factorial survey section addressing respondent assessments of deservedness for government assistance were employed.

Generosity and Deservedness. In the factorial survey component of the 1986 GSS, respondents were asked to indicate the level of economic support (measured in dollars per week) they would award to hypothetical welfare families portrayed in several vignettes. These vignettes were short descriptions of specific situations which represented various characteristics of "typical welfare" families. Each respondent was given seven vignettes, with each vignette being composed of an independent, random selection of one level from each of the 10 vignette dimensions of deservedness: number and age of children, mother's marital status, situation of the children's father, mother's education, mother's employment status, father's marital status (if he is out of the home), the family's financial prospects, familial support, family household income, and family savings. Each dimension consisted of a varying number of attribute levels. A sample vignette follows.(1)

Sample Vignette and Rating Scale

This family has four children (the youngest is six months old), living with their mother. The mother is divorced. The mother has a college degree and is unemployed and not looking for work because she has no ready means of transportation. The father has remarried and is permanently disabled. The family is likely to face financial difficulties for a couple of years. Her parents cannot help out financially. The family has \$1,000 in savings. All in all, the family's total income from sources other than the government is \$100 per week.

What should this family's weekly income be? Include both the money already available from sources other than the government, and any public assistance support you think this family should get.

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

Generosity is defined as the level of economic support respondents award the hypothetical welfare families depicted in the vignettes.

Religious Affiliation. We employed Smith's (1990) classification of Protestant denominations in order to examine differences in levels of generosity between members of conservative, moderate, and liberal Protestant faith groups. We also included Catholics, Jews, and the non-affiliated in the analysis. Our goal is to better understand how members of these faith groups frame their decisions for generosity. In all, slightly over one third of the respondents were classified as conservative Protestants (i.e., Baptists, Protestant fundamentalists, etc.), 13.2 percent moderate Protestants (Lutherans, Methodists, etc.), and 15.7 percent liberal Protestants (Presbyterians, Episcopalians, etc.). Approximately one quarter of the respondents were Catholic. Although the total number of Jewish respondents and those indicating no affiliation were quite small, they are included as separate categories in our initial analysis.

We also used two measures of personal religiosity: attendance at religious services and religious identity salience. Respondents were asked how often they attended religious services and how strongly they identified with their faith group. On average, respondents attended church about once per month, and showed only moderately strong levels of religious identity salience.

Control Variables. In addition to measures of respondents' religious affiliation and personal religiosity, we also included measures of respondents' age, education, race, gender, and household income as statistical control variables.(2)

FINDINGS

As stated above, the dependent variable "generosity" was measured as the amount of money respondents would award the hypothetical families portrayed in the vignettes. By virtue of the measurement used in the dependent variable (i.e., dollars per week), we interpreted the unstandardized OLS regression coefficients as direct increases or decreases in the dollar amount awarded for each one-unit increase in the independent variable. For example, an unstandardized regression coefficient of $b = 12.00$ is equivalent to an increase of \$12 per week in the level of generosity awarded.

For the first model examined here, we regressed the individual generosity ratings against each level of each dimension of deservedness, the religious variables, and the five socio-demographic control variables. For the quantitative vignette dimensions of deservedness (e.g., the number of children or youngest child's age) the dimension was coded to represent the precise value. For categorical, or qualitative dimensions, dummy variables were created for each level of the dimension, with one level being omitted to serve as a reference category for comparative purposes.

¹ For a discussion of the Factorial Survey approach, see Rossi and Nock (1982). For a full description and discussion of the dimensions and levels used in this factorial survey study, see Will (1993b).

For example, work status with four levels was represented by three dummy variables (unemployed-looking, unemployed-not looking, and never worked), with "currently employed" being omitted for reference purposes. The dimension for number and age of children was transformed into two separate variables, one each for the age and number of children. The education of the vignette family mother and the weekly family income were all used as continuous variables. Family savings was presented as 1 for those families with \$1,000 in savings and 0 for no savings. Dummy variables were created for each of the levels for the remaining dimensions: mother's and father's marital status, father's employment situation, mother's employment status, future financial prospects, and the parental help dimensions. In Table 1, we present the results for the first regression model.

[TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 1 OMITTED]

Deservedness and Generosity. A mean of \$186.42 per week was awarded to the vignette family, with a number of dimensions and levels eliciting significant increases and decreases in this level of generosity. As can be seen in Table 1, the employment characteristics of both the parents in the vignette family proved to have strong effects on the overall income

award given by respondents. Of particular importance was the current situation of the father in the vignette. For those families where the father was disabled, and thus unable to provide substantial support for the family, the level of generosity was more than \$26 higher than for those families where the father worked (p [less than] .001). In vignettes where the father was unemployed yet looking for work, the level of generosity increased by more than \$10 over families with an employed father (p [less than] .001). However, unemployed fathers who were not looking for work were penalized \$7.80 per week (p [less than] .05), while families where the father was in prison received slightly higher levels of generosity.

When examining the effect of the mother's employment status, respondents appeared less generous and even somewhat punitive. The average increase in the weekly income award for mothers who were unemployed but looking for work was only \$4.75 over that allotted to working mothers, and about half the almost \$8 increase for unemployed fathers looking for work. For those vignettes where the mother was choosy about her employment, stiff penalties were imposed. When the mother was unemployed and not looking for work, she received \$9.14 less than employed mothers (p [less than] .01), while those who could not work because of a lack of transportation received \$10.65 less than mothers who worked full time (p [less than] .01). For mothers who were unemployed because the only work available paid minimum wage, the level of generosity was reduced almost \$20 per week when compared to full time workers (p [less than] .001).

² Variable coding schemes, means, standard deviations, and other descriptive statistics are available from the primary author upon request.

Two remaining family characteristics - the number of children in the vignette family, and that family's cash flow - also had strong effects on the overall levels of generosity. The age of the youngest child, however, had virtually no effect on the overall award. For each additional child in the vignette family, the generosity increases \$12.00 per week (p [less than] .001). For scenarios where vignette families had \$1,000 in savings, the level of generosity increased \$4.08 compared to families with no savings (p [less than] .05).

As can also be seen in Table 1, the marital status of both the mother and the father of the vignette family had no significant effect on the level of generosity awarded by respondents. The family's future financial prospects and the extent of parental help also had only minimal effect. Generosity toward families facing financial problems for "the next few years" increased over \$5 per week over comparison groups facing only short term hardship (p [less than] .05). Those vignette families with extended family willing to help out, but in which the vignette character would not ask, were slightly penalized, although not at levels statistically significant.

TABLE 1

OLS Regression for Overall Vignette Ratings and Selected Demographic Characteristics	
	Model 1 b
Vignette Characteristics	
Age of children	.26
Number of children	12.00***
Child's mother's education (continuous)	.78
Marital Status (parents married omitted)	
Mother divorced	-.01
Mother never married	-1.27
Father's Marital Status (blank omitted)	
Father remarried	-.01
Situation of Father (father employed omitted)	
Father disabled	26.34***
Father unemp., not looking	-7.80**
Father in prison	4.74
Father unemp., looking	10.71***
Mother's Situation (mother employed full-time omitted)	
Mother works part time	.60
Mother looking for work	4.75
Mother unemp., no child care	-.27
Mother unemp., not looking	-9.14**
Mother unemp., no transport	-10.65**
Mother unemp., only min wage jobs	-19.55***
Financial Prospects (trouble for 6 months omitted)	
Problems for next few years	5.32*
Problems continually in future	3.22
Parental Help (parents help omitted)	
Her parents cannot help	-.23
Her parents could, but won't help	-.40
Her parents would, she won't ask	-5.28
Family Financial Situation (continuous variables)	
Family's savings	4.08*
Family's income	.39***
Respondent Characteristics	
Gender (male = 1)	-2.20*
Race (White = 1)	-45.04***
Age	.01
Education	1.46***
Income (1986 GSS Categories)	-1.57***
Religious Affiliation (Liberal Protestant omitted)	
Conservative Protestant	-7.99**
Moderate Protestant	-12.30***
Catholic	14.23***
Jewish	3.82
None	18.26***
Constant	186.42
Adjusted R Square	.184
Total N (Vignettes Rated)	8930

* = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .01$ *** = $p < .001$

Religion and Generosity. Rather dramatic differences in levels of generosity were evident across categories of religious affiliation. Compared to liberal Protestants, all other Protestant denominations showed significantly reduced levels of generosity. For instance, average generosity levels for conservative Protestant denominations were almost \$8 less per week than liberal Protestants, (p [less than] .01), while moderate Protestants were even less generous (-\$12.30 per week, p [less than] .001). On the other hand, Catholics and non-affiliated showed much higher levels of generosity than liberal Protestants (\$14.23 per week and \$18.26 per week, respectively, p [less than] .001). In fact, Catholics showed generosity levels that were over \$25 per week higher than moderate Protestants and over \$20 per week more than conservative denominations; for non-affiliated respondents, the results were similar. Jewish respondents did not display levels of generosity that were significantly different from liberal Protestants.

Finally, important differences were also found when examining respondent's socio-demographic characteristics and generosity. First, males were slightly less generous than females (-\$2.20 per week, p [less than] .05). In addition, non-whites were dramatically more generous than whites, awarding over \$45 per week more than whites (p [less than] .001). Similarly strong increases in generosity correlated with increases in respondent's level of education (\$1.46 per week, p [less than] .001). In contrast to the positive relationship we find between education and generosity, there is an equally strong negative relationship between respondent's income level and generosity. That is, as income level increases, we find a decrease in generosity of over \$1.50 per week for each of the income classifications. Thus, respondents with incomes in the top category of more than \$60,000 per year awarded over \$30 per week less to the vignette families than respondents who earned less than \$1,000 per year. Overall, this model explains about 18 percent of the variance in generosity ([R.sup.2] of .184).(3)

What "Drives" the Denominational Differences?

As we have shown, there are indeed significant differences in levels of generosity across faith groups. What is less clear is

how these differences are made manifest. In this regard, we have expanded our analysis by modeling the decision-making processes which members of the different religious affiliations invoke when determining deservedness. In Table 2, we present four separate regression models, one for each faith group, in which generosity is regressed on all of the vignette dimensions and levels of deservedness, personal religiosity, and the socio-demographic control variables. It should be noted that the overall number of vignettes rated by Jews and the non-affiliated is too limited to permit analysis of these groups.

When comparing the regression models presented in Table 2, respondents from each faith basically agreed with each other on several dimensions of deservedness. For instance, the number of children in the vignette proved to be a salient factor for all faith groups, with each additional child increasing the income awards by at least \$10 per week (all significant at p [less than] .001). Similarly, the impact of vignette family income on award was relatively the same across all of the faith groups.

[TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 2 OMITTED]

We also found some important differences in how several of the deservedness dimensions were used by different faith groups. For example, while almost all of the respondents, regardless of faith group, were quite sympathetic to cases in which the father of the vignette family was disabled, both liberal Protestants and Catholics showed a significant negative response toward vignette families with unemployed fathers not looking for work. Here both groups reacted punitively and significantly reduced their generosity levels.

For moderate Protestants, the most dramatic change was in generosity for women who were unemployed because of a lack of child care, with increases averaging over \$36 in the weekly award to the vignette families (p [less than] .01). For conservative Protestants, however, if the mother was not looking for a job or would not take a job because it only paid minimum wage, a strong punitive reaction resulted. This was particularly intriguing when examining the reactions of conservative Protestants due to the fact that when the father was not looking, virtually nothing changed, but when the mother was not looking (or was being "picky") respondents decreased awards by almost \$15 and \$24 per week, respectively.

Punitive responses by Protestants were also evident along other vignette dimensions. For instance, significant punitive reaction was also found among liberal Protestants in those cases where the mother was unemployed because of transportation problems. In these cases, weekly awards were decreased by almost \$22. Similarly, conservative Protestants were the only faith group to show a significant decrease in generosity for families who had \$1,000 in savings (a \$13.50 per week reduction, p [less than] .001).

³ Anderson et al. (1983) indicate that responses to factorial survey vignettes are sensitive to individual differences within the sample, and that "it is quite usual for models to have R^2 in the neighborhood of .15-.20" (244). However, preliminary analysis indicated that including the average vignette income award for each respondent as a variable in the overall regression equation increased the R^2 to over .50.

When we examined effects of respondent characteristics on level of generosity across religious faith groups, we again found some important differences. For example, blacks were more generous to the vignette families than were whites, but only among conservative and moderate Protestants, as well as Catholics. Indeed, race differences for these faith groups were all over \$45 per week (and significant at p [less than] .001). Note, however, that for liberal Protestants race was not a significant factor in determining generosity levels.

Respondents' age was a significant predictor of generosity only for Catholics, with older Catholics increasing weekly award levels by \$0.30 per year over age 18 (p [less than] .05). Respondent income was a significant predictor of generosity for conservative and liberal Protestants, with respondents from each of these faith groups showing a decrease in weekly income award as personal income increased (p [less than] .001).

TABLE 2

Vignette Rating Regression Models for Religious Affiliation

	Model 2 Conservative Prot. b	Model 3 Moderate Prot. b	Model 4 Liberal Prot. b	Model 5 Catholics b
Vignette Characteristics				
Age of children	-.002	.41	1.59	-.89
Number of children	12.29***	12.41***	12.18***	10.15***
Child's mother's education (continuous)	1.32*	-.37	.81	1.74*
Marital Status (parents married omitted)				
Mother divorced	-.55	-8.18	2.87	3.06
Mother never married	-2.05	-5.78	5.38	-6.48
Father's Marital Status (blank omitted)				
Father remarried	1.34	.88	2.94	-2.68
Situation of Father (father employed omitted)				
Father disabled	24.15***	27.44**	11.56	24.83***
Father unemp., not looking	.50	-9.76	-17.77*	-15.17*
Father in prison	7.18	4.10	-4.43	3.42
Father unemp., looking	10.84	9.86	-.86	8.79
Mother's Situation (mother employed full-time omitted)				
Mother works part time	-5.53	5.53	16.43	4.74
Mother looking for work	5.00	17.93	1.55	6.08
Mother unemp., no child care	-9.23	36.23**	4.37	2.69
Mother unemp., not looking	-14.51*	-1.72	-5.37	-3.38
Mother unemp., no transport	-12.43	7.95	-21.82*	-7.72
Mother unemp., only min wage jobs	-23.46***	-6.71	-12.65	-13.00
Financial Prospects (trouble for 6 months omitted)				
Problems for next few years	5.94	1.73	14.36*	-.60
Problems continually in future	1.07	.11	6.89	-.59
Parental Help (parents help omitted)				
Her parents cannot help	-1.34	9.75	3.45	-.75
Her parents could, but won't help	-.19	18.54*	-8.80	2.52
Her parents would, she won't ask	-6.05	.47	-9.73	-2.31
Family Financial Situation (continuous variables)				
Family's savings	-13.50***	-1.61	2.58	-3.61
Family's income	.40***	.42***	.41***	.36***
Respondent Characteristics				
Gender (male = 1)	-.86	-5.21	-3.34	-2.62
Race (white = 1)	-56.59***	-45.32***	2.71	-45.20***
Age	.11	.02	-.05	.30*
Education	4.36***	-2.15	-.33	-.72
Income (1986 GSS Categories)	-2.18***	.94	-1.73***	-.69
Religious Salience (3 = strong)	-5.83*	-2.37	-10.00**	2.77
Attendance	1.41	2.09	-.86	2.91**
Constant	159.12	164.05	141.44	191.89
Adjusted R Square	.211	.190	.213	.144
Total Vignettes Rated	2932	1076	1280	2145

* = p < .05 ** = p < .01 *** = p < .001

Finally, we examined the effect of personal religiosity across these faith groups. Again, the impact of personal religiosity varied across the different religious affiliations. For example, religious identity salience was a significant predictor of generosity for both conservative and liberal Protestants, with increased strength of religious identity related to decreased levels of generosity among each faith group (\$-5.83 per week, p [less than] .05 and -\$10 per week, p [less than] .01, respectively). Strength of conviction, however, did not prove important for either moderate Protestants or Catholics. The effect of church attendance on generosity, on the other hand, was significant only for Catholics, among whom increased attendance increased generosity (\$2.91 per week, p [less than] .01). Indeed, highly religious Catholics were more generous toward the poor, while highly religious Protestants, especially among the liberal and conservative faith groups, were less generous. The amount of variance explained by these models also varied widely, from a high [R.sup.2] of .2134 for liberal Protestants to a more modest [R.sup.2] of .144 for Catholics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research revealed some interesting observations regarding predictors of generosity across religious faith groups. First, social phenomenon such as support for government assistance for the poor were far more complex than has been implied by previous attempts at modeling such attitudes. Predictors of generosity operated across an array of dimensions and levels, and the influence of these dimensions varied dramatically across social structures and audiences.

More specifically, there were interesting similarities and differences in generosity and regarding the effect of dimensions of deservedness across religious categories. All faith groups responded with increased generosity for larger welfare families, and all showed increased assistance levels as the family's economic situation improved. Increased generosity was found among all but the liberal Protestants when the father of the welfare family was disabled. Punitiveness was found among white respondents from all but the liberal Protestants.

In addition to these similarities, we also noted distinct differences in how members of religious faith groups responded to our vignette families. In particular, conservative Protestants were unique in the emphasis they placed on the vignette mother's

situation as compared to the father's. Conservative Protestants were punitive toward some unemployed mothers, but appeared to disregard the employment status of the father. In addition, highly religious conservative Protestants were less generous toward the poor. The same is true of highly religious liberal Protestants. Personal religiosity is irrelevant in regards to generosity levels awarded by moderate Protestants, and highly religious Catholics were significantly more generous.

In his study examining faith and commitment to the poor, Pyle (1993) found no support for the link between religious conservatism and economic conservatism. Similarly, Wuthnow found that variations in compassion among his respondents was not due to some deep philosophical differences (1991:149). In our study, however, we did find important differences in compassion for the poor across mainstream American faith groups. In several cases, perceptions of who within the vignette family was to "blame" for the situation resulted in religious conservatives being quite different from non-conservatives in levels of generosity.

One reason for these discrepant findings may be the research designs and methodologies used to examine this issue. Whereas most previous research examined attitudes toward general principles and policies, the vignette analysis presented here provided for reaction to more "concrete" situations. Although the vignette scenarios reviewed by respondents were fictitious, they represented the actual conditions of typical welfare families. Vignette respondents were thus reacting to a wide and complex array of information, which we believe allowed us to avoid the problems of semantics and question wording addressed by Smith (1986).

The data used in this presentation do not come from a study specifically designed to focus on religious variables. The findings do, however, raise some important questions for future research and theoretical development. There are a number of differences in generosity patterns across the denominations. Are these differences due to theology, class, or other social experiences? In addition, would other characteristics of poor families (e.g., race, living conditions, religion) be important in determining generosity and deservedness. Future research designed to include additional measures of respondent and vignette characteristics would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of these, and other, concerns about determining who represents the "deserving poor."

Because of the unique features of the factorial survey methodology, our findings offer important insights for future research and theoretical developments associated with understanding the role of religiosity and religious faith groups regarding compassion. We strongly encourage others to consider the advantages of the factorial survey in their future projects.

1 For a discussion of the Factorial Survey approach, see Rossi and Nock (1982). For a full description and discussion of the dimensions and levels used in this factorial survey study, see Will (1993b).

2 Variable coding schemes, means, standard deviations, and other descriptive statistics are available from the primary author upon request.

3 Anderson et al. (1983) indicate that responses to factorial survey vignettes are sensitive to individual differences within the sample, and that "it is quite usual for models to have R in the neighborhood of .15-.20" (244). However, preliminary analysis indicated that including the average vignette income award for each respondent as a variable in the overall regression equation increased the [R.sup.2] to over .50.

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