

***An Origin of Welfare Stigma***  
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The Great Depression affected millions of families throughout the United States in the 1930s. The federal government finally stepped up in 1935 to create a comprehensive program to address the staggering need of the impoverished in the country. That year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally signed into law the Social Security Act, a landmark bill that not only created the Social Security Program, but also the Assistance to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC). With AFDC, however, came the continued stigmatization of welfare in the United States (Handler and Hollingsworth, 1969). Since the 1960s, “the hallmarks of the AFDC family as portrayed in the press... [are] the recurrent themes of alcoholism, mental deficiency, promiscuity, illegitimacy, and a general unwillingness to participate in the economic life of the community...”. A Gallup Poll conducted in 1965 showed that critics of welfare characterized welfare recipients as “dishonest and lazy... lacking initiative” (Miller, 1965). This paper explains the origins of that representation. Drawing on modern psychological research, it shows how differing models of agency employed by the working and middle class help explain the existence of welfare stigma.

The paper is split into five different sections. First, it reviews the two different models of agency used by the middle and working class. It examines how individuals grounded in each model of agency might interpret a decision to enroll in welfare differently. Second, the paper explains why the middle class model of agency has become the prevalent model. Third, it shows how this model of agency contributes to welfare stigma through the conceptualization of stigma. Fourth, it addresses a potential counterargument to this understanding of welfare stigma, namely that all government assistance is stigmatized, regardless of models of agency. Lastly, it describes some of the legal implications of this new understanding of welfare stigma. The paper outlines how middle class legislators designed welfare reform for working class individuals through a middle class model of agency in the 1996 welfare reform bill. I also discuss how an understanding of differing models of agency may shape future welfare reform.

***Two models of agency***

Modern psychological research has shown a significant difference in the models of agency used by working and middle class individuals. For the United States in particular, the literature shows that “lower and higher [socio-economic status] European Americans engage with different symbolic and material worlds and thus have different ideas about what it means to be an agent” (Snibbe and Markus, 2005). These models of agency are a “powerful, yet often tacit, set of

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assumptions about what constitutes normatively ‘good’ action” (Stephens et al, 2009). In the middle class context, “the model of agency that is most prevalent” is a disjoint model of agency, which “emphasizes expressing uniqueness and exerting environmental control.” “Good” actions, therefore, influence the environment according to individual motives, goals, and preferences (Stephens et al, 2009). In the working class context, conversely, the prevalent model is the conjoint model of agency, or “maintaining personal integrity (e.g., honesty, loyalty, reliability)” and self-control and being “responsive to obligations and expectations of others, roles, and situations.” In this environment, “good” actions “adjust to the environment and promote interdependence with other people” (Snibbe et al, 2005; Markus and Kitayama, 2003; Hamedani et al, 2010; Stephens et al, 2009).

Experimental research has also validated these conclusions. Undergraduates who grow up in a middle class context, when presented with five pens of two differing colors, were more likely to choose the “minority color” pen. In contrast, those who grew up in working class contexts were much more likely to pick the “majority color” pen. Even car advertisements targeted towards these two groups emphasized different models of agency. Car advertisements that were targeted towards working class consumers were “significantly more likely ... to mention relationships and connection,” a reflection of the conjoint model of agency employed by the working class. Car advertisements targeted towards middle class consumers, on the other hand, were “significantly more likely ... to contain messages of extreme uniqueness,” an expression of the disjoint model of agency employed by the middle class (Stephens et al, 2007).

Individuals grounded in the two different models of agency might interpret a decision to enroll in welfare very differently. Those employing the working class, or conjoint, model would be more likely to emphasize the impact welfare has on an individual’s relationships with his family and community. A decision to enroll in a government welfare program, then, could be interpreted through the conjoint model of agency as one designed to strengthen relationships with others, to ameliorate financial tensions within a family, or to pay back support received from others. A choice to enroll in welfare, therefore, is still agentic, in that it still reflects an individual acting in the world, but in a way that is appropriate for the working class context (Markus et al, 2003). Individuals using the disjoint model of agency, in contrast, might view a decision to enroll in welfare as passive, and lacking in agency. In the disjoint model “good” actions are those which exert environmental influence according to unique individual goals. Choosing to take welfare instead of taking control of the environment, therefore, could be interpreted as failing to exercise agency. Individuals applying these two models, thus, could view a decision to enroll in a welfare program very differently.

### **The prevailing model of agency**

To understand which model of agency becomes prevalent in society, it is important to understand whether the working or the middle class has more power in society. The research on power shows that power can be defined as “relative control over another’s valued outcomes.” Power, accordingly, is dependent on control over resources; with those resources, it is possible to reward or coerce others in order to control outcomes (Fiske and Berdahl, 2007). Because the middle class controls political and socioeconomic resources in the United States, their model of agency becomes prevalent.

The working class has practically no political representation in the United States. Not only are they less likely to vote, and therefore to decide who represents them, less likely to have well-informed preferences, and therefore to decide what policies are beneficial, and less likely to contribute money or energy to political campaigns, and therefore to help preferred candidates win, but they are also much more likely to be completely ignored by their legislative representatives. Recent research has shown that “the opinions of constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution have no apparent statistical effect on their senators’ roll call votes.” Analysis of the data from Senate roll call votes showed “senators are vastly more responsive to the views of affluent constituents than to constituents of modest means.” In fact, for those at the tenth percentile of national income, estimated levels of political responsiveness “are, in most cases, negative.” Without political responsiveness to their needs, the working class is shut out of discussions about government policy, and is left without control over political resources. Indeed, the research points out that the disparities in political responsiveness “are especially troubling because of the potential for a debilitating feedback cycle...: increasing economic inequality may produce increasing inequality in political responsiveness, which in turn produces public policies increasingly detrimental to the interests of poor citizens, which in turn produces even greater economic inequality, and so on” (Bartels, 2005). Lack of political resources ties in directly with the working class’s lack of socioeconomic resources.

The middle class controls socioeconomic resources in the United States. It has, by definition, “higher paying jobs, more education...and more geographically extended social networks” (Stephens et al, 2009). The middle class is often associated with at least some college education, while working class members oftentimes only have high school diplomas. The middle class consists mostly of white-collar workers, while blue-collar, pink-collar, and clerical workers are relegated to the working class. The working class makes less money than the middle class, often with much less job security (Gilbert, 2014; Thompson and Hickey, 1994; Beeghley, 2004). All these factors are compounding – individuals that come from poorer families are less likely to attend college, and those who do

not attend college are more likely to earn lower wages (Kaufmann, 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The middle class, with more education, better jobs, and higher income, therefore, controls socioeconomic resources in the United States. Indeed, many “new social movements” that have arisen are now being attributed to the social power of the middle class (Offe, 1985). That power, the result of control over political and socioeconomic resources, allows the middle class to control the outcome of public discourse.

Power is inextricably tied to the beliefs that become normative and preferred. A review of the literature shows a clear tie between power and the “beliefs that prevail” with regards to stereotypes (Fiske, 1993). Because the powerful control access to resources like education and wealth, “their beliefs are likely to prevail” and it is their stereotypes that are likely to become the norm (Major and O’Brien, 2005; Sewell, 1992). This logically extends to middle class beliefs about models of agency. The middle class possesses social power due to its control over political and socioeconomic resources, so it is their model of agency, the disjoint model, that becomes normative.

### **How the disjoint model leads to stigma**

The disjoint model of agency stigmatizes welfare programs. The mechanism by which disjoint observations about welfare become stigma can be seen through the conceptualization of stigma. Widely accepted research on the conceptualization of stigma reveals four components that are essential for the creation of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2005). The disjoint model of agency and its perceptions of welfare act through the second of these four components, associating human differences with negative attributes.

By viewing decisions to take welfare through the lens of a disjoint model of agency, society creates a vital component of stigma, associating human differences with negative attributes. Not all human differences are associated with negative attributes – society does not stigmatize against those with curly hair, or green eyes, or black eyeglass frames. However, when it is environmental control which is perceived as agentic, as under the disjoint model of agency, welfare recipients’ seeming lack of environmental influence is interpreted negatively. The decision to take welfare can be influenced by many environmental factors, but, taken through the disjoint model, instead reflects a lack of agency. Because the middle class uses this disjoint model to understand working class families’ decisions, they associate this lack of agency with negative attributes, like laziness or indolence. In fact, media portrayals of welfare recipients describe them as “lacking initiative,” when “initiative” is normatively preferred only in the disjoint model of agency. Through the middle class model of agency, the prevalent model, the decision to take welfare acquires a vital component of stigma. It is the difference between the two models of agency, the difference between how the actor, part of the working class, interprets the action and how

society, which reflects the views of the middle class, interprets the action, which leads to welfare stigma.

**Counter-argument, or isn't all government assistance stigmatized?**

A counter-argument might be that this theory of welfare stigma is irrelevant because it is government assistance as a whole that is stigmatized, not just government welfare. They might claim that the disjoint model of agency is unsympathetic towards any form of government assistance, as any "handout" reflects poorly upon the individual. The research, however, does not bear out this point.

A clear illustration of this can be seen in a comparison of middle class government assistance, like the home mortgage interest deduction, and working class government assistance, like welfare. The home mortgage interest deduction is a tax rebate given to homeowners who pay interest on their mortgages – they are allowed to deduct the total expense of the interest from the income that they have earned when calculating their income for tax purposes. It is common: 34.1 million households in the United States claimed it in 2012, costing the government a total of \$68 billion dollars (Forbes, 2013). Despite the fact that it costs the federal government four times as much as welfare does, however, the home mortgage interest deduction is not stigmatized to the degree welfare is. The most recent data shows that, "among the 66% of homeowners who have a mortgage, 73% claim a deduction." Those who did not claim a deduction did not do so because the deduction was stigmatized, but simply because it did not make economic sense (Keightley, 2014).

The welfare program, by contrast, is highly stigmatized. Previous quotes have already demonstrated how the stigma arose as early as the 1960s. The literature has shown that as recently as the 1990s, recipients of the then-primary program for federal welfare, Assistance for Families with Dependent Children, were portrayed negatively in the media and society. Recipients were characterized as having "deviant" childbearing and childrearing behaviors, and characterized in the media as "rejecting the American work ethic" (Jarrett, 1996).

Evidence of the effects of this stigma was found in the relatively low participation rates for AFDC as compared to the home mortgage interest deduction. The literature showed that, in 1983, the "probability of being on welfare if initially eligible" was only 38-percent. Economic analysis revealed that the low participation could "be successfully modeled as a utility-maximizing decision resulting from stigma" (Moffitt, 1983). Welfare stigma, then, is unique, and can be better understood as a reflection of the differences between middle class and working class models of agency than simply as a manifestation of stigma surrounding government assistance.

### **Legal implications of differing models of agency**

The difference between the middle class and working class models of agency has resulted in welfare legislation targeted to increase agency in the disjoint sense. After looking at the socioeconomic backgrounds of congressional officers, it is logical this would be the case. In comparison with those on welfare rolls, where only 2-percent possessed a four-year degree and 40-percent had not graduated from high school at all, most members of the United States Congress received extensive education. In the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, which served from 2013-2014, 93-percent of all House Representatives and 99-percent of all Senators had a bachelor's degree, and none had failed to graduate from high school (Hamilton et al, 2001; Manning, 2013). Of the 535 members of Congress, 99 continued their education after graduating from college to earn a master's degree, 20 had a Ph.D., 25 a M.D., and almost half, 226, a J.D. By every definition, Congress is overwhelmingly comprised of middle class, not working class, individuals (Gilbert, 2014; Thompson and Hickey, 1994; Beeghley, 2004).

The 1996 welfare reform Congress passed was largely a reflection of the values of its middle class disjoint model of agency. Remarks given by President Bill Clinton, who graduated from Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale, about the bill are indicative of this: "Today the Congress will vote on legislation...to transform a...cycle of dependence...to one that emphasizes work and independence" (Clinton, 1996). "We're going to make it all new again and see if we can't create a system of incentives which reinforce work and family and independence. We can change what is wrong" (Clinton, 1996). His remarks focused on independence, on the independence that the new bill would bring to those on welfare, independence that is a crucial feature of the middle class model of agency, but not of the working class model of agency. The welfare reform that was passed in 1996 was designed to increase agency amongst those on welfare, but only from the disjoint perspective, which the working class likely did not even subscribe to.

### **Conclusion**

By and large, recent psychological research has clarified differences in middle and working class perceptions of agency. Middle class perceptions, which are more likely than working class perceptions to become preferred, revolve around independence and environmental influence. When these views are applied to welfare, those on welfare seem to lack agency, and that observation helps explain the stigma that surrounds government welfare. Although the federal government attempted to address this stigma by increasing the agency of working class families with the 1996 welfare reform act, that legislation reflected the middle class upbringings of members of Congress, not the working class contexts families on welfare dealt with. Future legislation, therefore, ought to consider the conjoint model of agency which working families employ. With

outlays from government welfare totaling more than \$17 billion every year, the success of such a program is important for American families and the American economy (Administration for Children and Families, 2015). We owe it to those on welfare to consider not only our own views on what constitutes “good” action, but theirs as well.

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