

Racial Contexts' Enduring Influence on  
Attitudes toward Poverty

Daniel J. Hopkins<sup>1</sup>  
Post-Doctoral Fellow  
Institute for Quantitative Social Science  
Harvard University

February 24, 2009

ABSTRACT

This article's objective is to reply to Rodgers (2009) and to expand on the claim that living near poor African Americans influences Americans' views of poverty. Methods: It first presents additional analyses of the 2001 Poverty in America survey demonstrating that respondents' racial contexts are consistent predictors of attitudes toward poverty. Other contextual variables are not. The article then presents results from an exogenous shock—the post-Katrina migration—to reinforce its claims. Despite the widespread understanding that the evacuees were not to blame for their situation, their arrival in Houston and Baton Rouge led to more individualistic explanations of poverty. This article concludes that even in unlikely cases, racial contexts influence attitudes toward poverty.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Luke McLoughlin, Ryan Moore, Eleanor Powell, and Harrell Rodgers Jr. for comments on an earlier draft, and to the SSQ editors for their assistance and for the opportunity to reply.

I am grateful for Professor Rodgers' attention to my article and for his views about its contribution. The original article investigated the extent to which local contexts shape attributions about poverty. Using multiple surveys, it found robust conditional correlations between racial and political contexts and Americans' attitudes toward the poor. All else equal, people living in Democratic-leaning counties and in counties where the poor were predominantly white were less likely to blame poverty on the poor themselves. Theoretically, these findings are provocative because they suggest that local processes shape views of the poor alongside portrayals by the national media.<sup>1</sup> Professor Rodgers' commentary does not challenge these findings. It instead seeks to contextualize them and suggest directions for future research. He argues against treating the poor as a homogeneous group, and for more research into the role of misperceptions about who is poor and what benefits they receive.

This reply first addresses the concern that the original article conflates disparate groups of poor people. Section 1 argues that ambiguity in defining the poor is precisely why it is valuable to know which contextual factors influence attitudes toward poverty. The generic term "the poor" might take on different meanings in different parts of the country. Depending on one's local context, the poor might conjure up images of the young or the old, the working or the unemployed, of urban ghettos or rural reservations. Indeed, the original analysis demonstrated that while living near poor African Americans influences Americans' attitudes about poverty, proximity to other poor groups does not. The original paper's focus on racial aspects of poverty was thus an empirical finding rather than a theoretical omission.

Like Professor Rodgers' response, this reply acknowledges the limits of commonly used survey methods in making sense of attitudes toward the poverty. It also acknowledges the tremendous diversity of America's poor. But its prescription for future research differs in emphasis. It sees the endogeneity of perceptions of who is poor, attitudes about the poor, other political views, and residential choices as persistent threats to validity that require an increased reliance on experiments and quasi-experiments. In Section 2, this reply summarizes a study of one such exogenous shock. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Houston and Baton Rouge saw dramatic demographic shifts as a poor, predominantly African American population of evacuees sought shelter. Strikingly, although the evacuees were victims of a natural disaster, the analysis in Section 2 shows that their unexpected arrival hardened their hosts' attitudes about the poor. This reinforces the claim that attitudes toward poverty are responsive to local conditions, and that racial attitudes and attitudes toward the poor are deeply interwoven. Doubtless, there are many dimensions of poverty. But in both the original study and this follow-up work, the racial dimension proves especially potent and politically relevant. There is consistent empirical evidence from a variety of studies that proximity to poor African Americans influences views about poverty (see also Taylor 1998): no other group has yet produced such a consistent contextual effect. At the same time, the design of this new research reduces the threat of endogeneity, placing a key finding from the original paper on firmer ground.

### *1. Many Types of Poor, Few Contextual Effects*

One criticism is that the original article ignores the heterogeneity of the poor. Professor Rodgers writes that it “clearly is not a good idea to assume that the public feels the same way about the elderly poor or poor children as it does about substance abusers and unemployed single mothers with children fathered by several men”(2009:XXX). Specifically, Professor Rodgers is concerned that the article conflates the poor with those on welfare. If true, this would be a noteworthy error, as there is strong empirical evidence that Americans’ attitudes differ based on the group in question. In addition to the evidence cited in the original paper (Gilens 1999, Wilson 1996, Lee et al. 1990, Cook and Barrett 1992, Hochschild 1981) and in Professor Rogers’ reply, Smith uses experimental evidence to show that “support for more assistance for the poor is 39 percentage points higher than for welfare”(1987:76). Attitudes toward the poor are also quite distinctive from attitudes toward African Americans. In the 2006 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS), 74% of respondents wanted to see spending on the poor increased. But just 43% wanted to see spending on blacks increased.

Yet the original article never makes any claims to the contrary. In fact, it is motivated by a similar spirit: given that Americans live in such varied local environments, do their assessments of the poor as a generic category differ depending on where they live, what they overhear, and which sub-groups of the poor they are likely to encounter? Rather than assuming that the poor population is monolithic, the original research tested a wide variety of local, poverty-related measures that might shape explanations for why people are poor. Although space constraints limited the discussion in the original article, this section provides additional details.

For example, one might suspect that whether the poor are young, old, or middle-aged would lead to different responses, as the young and the old are not expected to provide for themselves. As an empirical matter, however, when the original paper’s first model includes the percentage of those under 18 who are poor, it has no predictive power for either individualism or structuralism. The same is true when including the percentage of those over 65 who are poor. A wide variety of other poverty-related measures were also tested, including the share of the county receiving public assistance, the percentage of the poor who are Latino, the county’s overall percent poor, and even the percentage of homes that are trailers or apartments. (These final metrics allow us to assess the claim that what matters is not the level of poverty but its visible manifestations.) Yet none of these measures is a strong predictor of poverty-related attitudes. The original article’s emphasis on the percentage of the poor who are white and on local partisanship came from empirical testing, not from a misplaced use of Occam’s razor.

Also, Rodgers’ commentary suggests that “in states or communities with large black populations, it very well may be the case that the population thinks that most of the poor are black because the media focus on welfare recipients rather than the larger poverty population”(2009:XXX). Using the original data set, and using a logistic regression specified in the same way as model one, we find evidence in line with that intuition. People in places where 96% of the poor are white (90<sup>th</sup> percentile) are evenly divided when asked if most people on welfare are black. But among those in places where only 37% of the poor are white (10<sup>th</sup> percentile), 67.3% indicate that a majority of those on welfare are black. That 17 percentage

point change is statistically significant, with a 95% confidence interval from 5 percentage points to 29 percentage points. As the neighboring poor become increasingly of color, respondents are more likely to say that most people on welfare are black. This could be the influence of local media coverage, or of people's direct observations of their surroundings. Intriguingly, there is no such relationship when the dependent variable is assessments of the percentage of the *poor* who are African American, perhaps indicating that sustained political attention to welfare influences local perceptions on that specific issue.

Still, endogeneity makes it difficult to estimate the relationship between perception and attitudes. Do contexts shape attitudes through perceptions of who is poor, or do people modify their perceptions to bring them into line with their attitudes? In the same vein as Professor Rodgers' comments, future work could productively use survey experiments to vary respondents' perceptions about the poor and then test for corresponding changes in attitudes.

## 2. Research Design and Exogeneity

Professor Rodgers uses the R-squared statistic in building a broader argument that the research design employed in the original article was insufficient. Yet R-squared is sensitive to the variances of the independent variables, and so is not a general measure of explanatory power (Achen 1977; King 1986). Highly convincing empirical tests can produce low R-squared values, and high R-squared values can accompany poorly specified models. If the goal were to increase a model's R-squared value, a researcher would include as many independent variables as possible, with an emphasis on endogenous measures that are likely to be highly correlated with the outcome.

A better test of the research design is the number of alternative explanations that it eliminates *ex ante* (Rubin 2007). As with many contextual studies, one prominent alternative explanation here is that people choose to live in different places for reasons that are correlated with underlying attitudes such as their views on poverty. If so, the correlations above might reflect the influence of these selection processes. To reduce this concern, the original paper considered those GSS respondents who lived in their communities for more than four years. But more convincing data would come from a sudden shock, where people's local contexts changed in unanticipated ways.

The post-Katrina evacuation provided one such exogenous shock, as hundreds of thousands of residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—many of them poor and African American—were forced to flee to Baton Rouge, Houston, and other nearby communities. This section uses the original 2001 survey along with the 2006 SCCBS to identify changes in attitudes toward poverty in affected communities subsequent to Hurricane Katrina. This is a hard case for the original hypothesis, since Katrina was a highly unusual event that generated an outpouring of sympathy and understanding for the evacuees. If a group that is predominantly poor and African American can generate individualistic explanations of poverty in this case, when the evacuees were clearly not to blame for their predicament, then similar demographic changes should induce individualistic explanations under more normal conditions as well. Understanding

responses to the post-Katrina migration is also important in reaffirming that racial contexts are especially influential.

Elsewhere, this author has provided detailed information about the post-Katrina migration and its potential as an exogenous shock (Hopkins 2008). This analysis extends that research by analyzing the post-Katrina migration's impact on attitudes toward poverty. Houston and Baton Rouge were two receiving points for evacuees fleeing Hurricane Katrina, with initial estimates placing the number of evacuees in Houston and Baton Rouge at over 150,000. Beginning in January of 2006, four months after Hurricane Katrina, the SCCBS surveyed Baton Rouge and Houston residents, asking 400 respondents in each place a question that was asked in the 2001 Poverty in America Survey: "In your opinion, which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?"

To understand Katrina's impact on these attitudes, we need to know how our respondents would have replied prior to the influx of evacuees. In the terms of experimentation, we need a pre-treatment baseline. Of course, we cannot directly compare the 2006 sample of Houston and Baton Rouge respondents with the 2001 sample, even if we restrict the 2001 sample to include only the 739 southerners. Any raw differences could be attributed to the fact that the samples differ geographically. However, we can use statistical models to account for the differences in background characteristics across the two samples. The approach below relies on the more plausible assumption that the mapping from demographic characteristics to attitudes toward poverty is the same in Houston and Baton Rouge as in the South overall.

Specifically, the analysis first models the responses of southern respondents to the 2001 survey, using covariates similar to those in model one from the original paper.<sup>ii</sup> The coefficients from this model indicate how a southerner with a given set of background characteristics would respond in that year. We then use these coefficients, along with the observed 2006 values for each respondent, to predict what the 2006 respondents would have said in 2001. On average, this procedure indicates that people with the same background characteristics as the 2006 sample would have said that poverty was caused by circumstances beyond the poor's control 46.7% of the time.

Using a second logistic regression fit to the 2006 data, we can calculate each respondent's probability of giving the structural answer in 2006. The model indicates that Houston and Baton Rouge residents give structural answers 40.3% of the time. On average, the change from 2001 is -6.4 percentage points, and is statistically significant with a 95% confidence interval from -0.4 percentage points to -12.5 percentage points. In other words, residents of Houston and Baton Rouge grew notably less likely to attribute poverty to structural factors in 2006. With the arrival of thousands of evacuees, many of them poor and African American, long-time residents' attitudes appear to have hardened toward the poor. An exogenous shock helps confirm that local contexts can shape attitudes—and that living in a city that took in many Katrina evacuees induced less structural attributions for poverty.

There are, of course, clear limitations to this analysis. Ideally, we would have baseline measurements just before the exogenous shock in question, and from the same individuals. We would also like to have a post-Katrina control group in other parts of the South, allowing us to rule out regional or national attitude shifts. But using longitudinal variation, this analysis reinforces the original finding that people become more negative toward the poor when living in communities with increasing populations of poor African Americans. That is true even under extraordinary circumstances, when the poor group in question was clearly the victim of circumstances beyond its control. It also underscores that although there are many different groups among the poor, the African American poor are an especially politicized group. Attitudes toward poverty are multi-dimensional, but racial contexts appear to have a particular power in shaping them.

## References

- Achen, Christopher H. 1977. "Measuring Representation: Perils of the Correlation Coefficient." *American Journal of Political Science* 21(4):805-815.
- Clawson, Rosalee A. and Rakuya Trice. 2000. "Poverty As We Know It: Media Portrayals of the Poor." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64(1): 53-64.
- Cook, Fay Lomax and Edith J. Barrett. 1992. *Support for the American Welfare State*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.
- Hochschild, Jennifer. 1981. *What's Fair? American Beliefs About Distributive Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hopkins, Daniel J. 2008. "Politicized Places: How Local Reactions to the Post-Katrina Migrants were Shaped by the Media." Draft.
- Kellstedt, Paul M. 2003. *The Mass Media and the Dynamics of American Racial Attitudes*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Gary. 1987. "How Not to Lie with Statistics: Avoiding Common Mistakes in Quantitative Political Science." *American Journal of Political Science*. 667-687.
- King, Gary, James Honaker, Anne Joseph and Kenneth Scheve. 2001. "Analyzing Incomplete Political Science Data: An Alternative Algorithm for Multiple Imputation." *American Political Science Review* 95(1):49-69.
- Lee, Barret A., Sue Hinze Jones, and David W. Lewis. 1990. "Public Beliefs About the Causes of Homelessness." *Social Forces* 69(1):253-265.
- Rodgers, Harrell R. Jr. 2009. "The Multidimensionality of Public Opinion about Poverty and Welfare Populations." *Social Science Quarterly*, Forthcoming.
- Rubin, Donald B. 1987. *Multiple Imputation for Nonresponse in Surveys*. New York: Wiley.
- Rubin, Donald B. 2007. "The design versus the analysis of observational studies for causal effects: Parallels with the design of randomized experiments." *Statistics in Medicine* 26:20-36.
- Schafer, Joseph L. 1997. *Analysis of Incomplete Multivariate Data*. London, UK: Chapman and Hall.

Taylor, Marylee C. 1998. "How White Attitudes Vary with the Racial Composition of Local Populations: Numbers Count." *American Sociological Review* 63:512–535.

Wilson, George. 1996. "Toward a Revised Framework for Examining Beliefs about the Causes of Poverty." *The Sociological Quarterly* 37(3):413-428.

---

<sup>i</sup> For prominent media-driven arguments, see Kellstedt (2003), Clawson and Trice (2000), and Gilens (1999).

<sup>ii</sup> Specifically, the models condition on each respondent's age, race, education, Hispanic ethnicity, ideology, income, sex, whether the respondent is poor, whether she is Protestant, and her partisan identification. At the county level, the models include measures of the county's income per capita, its share voting for Bush in 2000, and its percent black. For this procedure to work, it is critical that all survey questions be identical and identically coded in the 2001 and 2006 surveys. Multiple imputation is used to deal with missing values (Rubin 1987, Schafer 1997, King et al. 2001).