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The Relationship between Empathy and Attitudes toward Government Intervention

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Throughout history, government policy and programs have played integral roles in shaping social services. This article reports the findings of a study that explored the relationship between interpersonal empathy and attitudes toward government intervention among college students. Findings suggest that increased levels of empathy are associated with more positive attitudes toward government intervention. This relationship is even stronger for participants from marginalized identity groups. Nurturing empathy among those engaged in social welfare policy-making may support government efforts that are in the best interest of communities they are intended to help.

Key words: empathy, government intervention, marginalized voices, social empathy, social well-being

Since the founding of this nation, government has been viewed as central to people's social well-being. The pledge of government has been to uphold "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all" through a just form of governing that derives its power from the people. If such government fails to provide for safety and happiness, then it is the right of the people to decide the course of government (Declaration of Independence, 1776). Thus, the expectation that government will ensure social well-being, accompanied by the watchful eye of the governed, dates from the earliest history of the United States. Today's discussions concerning the role of government

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follow in a long tradition, and reflect strong sentiments for and against government intervention in our lives, as well as varying definitions of what that intervention should look like.

For some, government has been the champion of human rights. For example, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery and empowered Congress to enforce it. The Fifteenth Amendment established that "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of Servitude." These Constitutional amendments are examples of federal government intervention over localities to ensure human rights.

For others, particularly in recent years, government has become the problem. Setting the modern tone for concern over government intervention was former President Ronald Reagan, who famously stated in his 1981 inaugural address that "government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." During the presidential campaign of 2000, George W. Bush made famous the goal of serving as "compassionate conservatives" in response to social need. That ideology called for sympathetic responses by government through the efforts of nonpublic groups such as faith-based organizations and informal social supports with less reliance on government interventions (Olasky, 2000). More recently, former vice presidential candidate and federal Representative Paul D. Ryan, in his *Roadmap for America*, warned that:

the heavily government-centered ideology now prevailing in Washington, which pursues a relentless expansion of government, creates a growing culture of dependency, *and in the process worsens a status quo that already threatens to overwhelm the budget and smother the economy.* (2010, p. iii)

Attitudes of the public in the U.S. towards government intervention are mixed. In 2009, the National Constitution Center released data collected through an Associated Press poll indicating that the majority of Americans oppose government intervention in private enterprise, even if it is intended to benefit the economy, such as saving jobs (GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media, 2009). The Pew Research Center (2012) found

conflicting values. While 59% of adults believed it is the responsibility of government to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves, this was down from 69% in 2007; and 71% of adults felt that poor people are too dependent on government assistance programs. The data also revealed differences between generations in attitudes toward government intervention. Among young voters ages 18 to 29, 56% reported believing that government should have a more active role in addressing the country's problems, compared to 35% of voters ages 65 and older who were supportive of greater government involvement.

As social workers, our roles in relation to government intervention are critical, as we are often part of government efforts or supported by government resources to secure people's well-being and promote social justice. Our client groups are often those who rely on government support, and who represent diverse communities. Therefore, it is imperative that we consider what government intervention means to our profession, our clients and our communities.

Empathy and Its Relationship with the Role of Government

Given the important role of government intervention in forming the U.S. social welfare system, it is our position that it is important to identify and foster factors that contribute to positive attitudes toward government intervention. This exploratory study examined the relationship between empathy and attitudes toward government intervention. For the purposes of this study, the phrase *government intervention* is used to refer to government-initiated and/or -funded actions that are intended to support the welfare or well-being of the people who live within its bounds. Although there are several levels of government, this paper is primarily concerned with federal government intervention. The rationale for this is that major social welfare policies and funding originate from the federal government, and much of the role of state, tribal and local governments is as implementers and facilitators of federal policies and programs.

Empathy, the ability to mirror and interpret the actions of others (Iacoboni, 2008) has now been identified through

biophysical components found in our brains (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006). These components include affective or unconscious physiological responses coupled with cognitive processing (Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Overall, empathy reflects “the processes whereby one person can come to know the internal state of another and be motivated to respond with sensitive care...” (Batson, 2011, p. 11). Thus, interpersonal empathy may contribute to a person’s support for collective action through government. Those who have higher levels of empathy have greater abilities to see and understand the circumstances of other people’s lives, and therefore may support public policies that address the social welfare and well-being of others. This relationship is the focus of this research.

Although no previous evidence exists to document that empathy is a specific predictor of a person’s feelings about the role of government, many of the key aspects of empathic abilities suggest a link. Stronger empathic insights into the experiences of others can lead to greater interest in and work towards improving the welfare of others (Morrell, 2010; Pinker, 2011). Those with higher levels of empathy are likely to consider the involvement of a larger governing body to ensure social well-being as worthwhile (Hoffman, 2011). These factors suggest there may be a relationship between empathy and support of government intervention. Thus, although empathy has been examined for its influence on interpersonal relationships and social interactions, its potential impact on the policymaking process has been largely overlooked. This research is a start towards examining that relationship.

Review of the Literature

Empathy and Social Relationships

The degree to which a person prefers collective social arrangements versus individualism may be related to empathic abilities. For example, individuals who are highly empathic prefer egalitarian social relations—that is relationships and policies that reduce group-based hierarchy and intergroup separation rather than hierarchal social relations (Chiao, 2010). Hierarchal social relations are held by high social dominance-oriented people. In research conducted by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle (1994),

high dominance-oriented people expressed less concern for others than did low dominance oriented people... [and] people who are highly empathic (specifically, concerned with others' well-being) and to a lesser extent, those who feel interdependent or communal with others, tend to prefer egalitarian relationships among groups. (p. 757)

The relationship between high socially-dominant people and lower levels of empathy was recently measured through brain imaging technology:

Individuals who indicated a greater desire for social dominance hierarchy showed less response when perceiving pain in others within fronto-insular regions [of the brain] critical to the ability to share and feel concern for the emotional salience of another person's misfortune. (Chiao, Mathur, Harada, & Lipke, 2009, p. 180)

Although those who favor hierarchical social relations may not be opposed to government intervention, they would be more likely to consider appropriate intervention to follow enforcement of the status quo rather than intervention that promotes equality (Cheon et al., 2011).

Empathy may also be a key variable in tolerance of social differences. For example, feeling empathy for a person who is a member of a stigmatized group can then be generalized to the group as a whole (Batson et al., 1997). This transference of empathic insight from individual cases to larger groups allows for greater understanding of commonalities and reduces preference or tolerance for social inequality (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; Stephan & Finlay, 1999).

The social groups that one identifies with may also impact empathy. Research has shown that increases in feelings of power impact the brain's ability to mirror responses of others (Hogeveen, Inzlicht, & Obhi, 2013). On the flip side, a sense of powerlessness was associated with a greater ability for the brain to mirror the responses of others, an important aspect of the physiological component of empathy. This may explain important differences found in polls of Americans' attitudes

toward government intervention. For example, if a community has limited access to social power, could this increase its members' ability to feel empathic toward groups needing access to assistance from the government? Might this outside status increase positive attitudes toward government intervention, because government has the power to reduce the perceived inequality?

Empathy and Its Impact on Society

Because empathy can lead to resonance with the experiences of others, "the ability to act on behalf of the greater good can not only improve our personal health and our relationships with others—it can practically or symbolically promote peace in our society and between cultures" (Keltner, Marsh, & Smith, 2010, p. 177). The result is that empathy can influence the making of laws that reflect social justice (Hoffman, 2011).

Government intervention has been at the forefront of making laws that promote social justice, or create a greater level of fairness. Fairness is not just a social goal and a potential outcome of greater empathy, but can have the effect of improving empathy. While we often turn to government to ensure fairness in society, and greater empathy leads to egalitarian or "fairness" policy orientations, there is also an inverse relationship. People tend to have more empathy for others if those others are viewed as behaving fairly in social interactions, while the perception of selfishness diminishes empathy for others (Singer et al., 2006).

Thus, empathy promotes social justice, and in turn, greater social justice improves empathy. This cyclical relationship reinforces the desirability of embedding empathy within our social policies and social institutions (Morrell, 2010). This research argues that by encouraging policies of fairness, empathy can be nourished. Who better to enact, enforce and ensure the continuation of social justice for all than our government? However, the debate and controversy over the role of government presents a challenge for the social work profession.

Unpacking the Debate over Government Intervention: A Values Perspective

As previously introduced, the debate over the role of the

U.S. government in the welfare of its citizenry is longstanding. It is important to tease out the underlying values within this debate in order to better understand why empathy may have value as a tool for enhancing the responsiveness of our social welfare state. Examination of government intervention in social welfare raises a number of questions. Who does government help and is that help fair? Does government support create dependency? And does government intervention protect people's rights or impinge on civil liberties? These concerns often dominate debate on whether to support government involvement in social welfare and, in turn, question the role of social work.

Who Does Government Help and is That Help Fair?

While public perception may suggest that only the "needy" get government help, the reality is that most Americans are beneficiaries of social welfare policies and programs. Mettler and Koch (2012) analyzed pollster data from the Cornell Survey Research Institute on the broad question: "Some people, when they think through their life experiences, report that they have at some point used a government social program." The majority, 57 percent, responded that they had never used a government social program. Later in the survey, the same respondents were asked about their personal use of any of 21 specific government programs. In response to this question, 96 percent had used at least one program, with two thirds of the respondents having used four or more of these programs. Mettler (2011) argues that some of these programs are less visible to people and therefore submerged and not counted as government support. This perception often fuels the sense that government money is disproportionately spent.

Based on actual spending (Congressional Budget Office, 2012), 20 percent of the nation's annual budget covers Social Security, another 20 percent is spent on national defense, Medicare spending is 13 percent, Medicaid is 8 percent, and the interest on the debt (which keeps the U.S. from defaulting on its loans) is 6 percent. Taken together, these five items cover two-thirds of government spending. The other third is left for everything else government does, including education, employment services, international affairs, science, space,

technology, veterans, agriculture, regulation, transportation, postal services, and the countless other programs and services that involve the federal government.

The cost of this “submerged state” is significant. In addition to the portions of the federal budget dedicated to these major programs is the lost revenue due to the more invisible government intervention policies. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (2013), exclusions from taxable income—such as deductions for employer-sponsored health insurance, mortgage interest paid, and charitable contributions as well as tax credits and preferential tax rates on capital gains—cost more than \$900 billion, or almost 6 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product. This amount would pay for all of our national defense and interest on the public debt or wipe out ten percent of our overall cumulative national debt in any given year.

Not everything the government does can be quantified by the annual budget or tax revenue. The federal government covers homeland security, the safety of driving on the roads and flying in the air, and the enforcement of the Constitution, such as protection from racial discrimination and hate crimes. The federal government also monitors the safety of food coming into our country and regulates the information across the airwaves. In modern times, it is impossible to find much in our lives that is not touched by the federal government.

Does Government Support Create Dependency?

Once we acknowledge that we are all receiving government support, the question of dependency becomes less relevant. In a nation with so much diversity, government is one shared aspect of life. Through the election process, some voters win and some voters lose, but in the end after an election, everyone shares the outcome. When we hold government as a part of us, we can build a sense of community. And a sense of community can promote numerous prosocial behaviors, including finding solutions to social problems (Omoto, Snyder, & Hackett, 2010) and building trust among citizens (Putnam, 1995). In fact, greater collectivism in societies has been found to have a significant impact on individuals’ well-being, including lower levels of anxiety and depressive disorders (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010). By definition, collectivist cultures “endorse

thinking of people as highly interconnected to one another” (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010, p. 529).

Conversely, when we hold government as the problem and distance ourselves from it, we lack that shared sense of community. Research on childhood experience demonstrates that children who grow up in more communal societies and families are more inclined to invest in community social welfare than children who grow up in compartmentalized and separate communities (Perry, 2002).

Does Government Intervention Protect People’s Rights or Impinge on Civil Liberties?

One current perspective holds that government intervention, particularly in securing civil rights and protecting people from discrimination, leads to a loss of individual liberties, but this perspective is not borne out by history:

There is no record, however, of any oppressive regime having taken power by advancing on the social welfare front. Lenin and Stalin, Mussolini, Mao Tse-tung, Fidel Castro, and Chile’s Pinochet did not consolidate power by gradually increasing social welfare programs, taxes, and regulation of the environment or workplace ... Hitler did not become the supreme ruler of the Nazi state by first taking over the health department. (Neiman, 2000, pp. 160-161)

In fact, countries that protect minority rights are more democratic and promote trust among their citizens. Research on 46 countries over 10 years demonstrates that governments that protect voting rights and maintain antidiscrimination policies “produce more trusting citizens” (Smith & Paxton, 2010, p. 211). Such government intervention facilitates trust between individuals from different groups (Tilly, 2004). Pinker (2010, 2011) argues that violence subsided and civilization came to be because of a confluence of several reasons, including the evolution of an organized state government; a realization that cooperation is more beneficial than killing; and growth in empathy. He also believes that our innate empathic tendencies, especially to those with whom we share characteristics or familiarity, has widened. Thus, Pinker draws together government and empathy as a path for greater civilization.

Social Work Practice and Government Intervention

Direct government employment of social workers numbers in the tens of thousands (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). For example, the Social Security Administration employs more than 26,000 social workers, while the Veterans Administration employs over 9,000 (NASW, 2011). The services of the Department of Health and Human Services are so varied that it is impossible to get a true count of the number of social workers employed under that federal agency. These numbers do not reflect those who work in NGO's that receive federal government financial support for programs and local and state agencies. Given the significant involvement of social workers in government programs and in implementing government policies, it is surprising that little research exists on the connection between government and social work.

Social work is a pivot point between the economic market and the government. On one hand, as Ng (2010) points out, a professional conflict has been created for the social work profession promoting altruism in a capitalist system. Ng argues that social services do not fit well in a market system. On the other hand, it is only through government intervention that serious challenges to the profession can be addressed (Ng, 2010). Not only are social workers intricately connected to government intervention through their clients, but also through their own well-being. However, social workers are often hesitant to pursue policy change that may be perceived as self-serving or to engage in this larger debate overall. This may be due, in part, to the capitalist ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency, and minimizing government dependence.

To further complicate the role of social workers in advocating for government intervention, the profession has been characterized as serving as agents of social control. Government intervention has been seen as a means of controlling populations that have traditionally been marginalized in U.S. society (Abramovitz, 1998). From this perspective, government intervention is regarded as a form of surveillance and control, and social workers are the agents of the state who implement the will of those in political and economic power. This reflects a long-standing professional debate about whether the role of social workers is to challenge the status quo and work for

systemic change, or to provide support to help marginalized communities and populations learn how to adapt to and cope with the status quo (Abramovitz, 1998). For example, Stojkovic (2008), in an analysis of the U.S. Patriot Act, raised the issue that government policies risk involving social workers in practices that are antithetical to the profession. Some of these policies, such as detention of noncitizens and treatment of immigrants, can place social workers as agents of government control and not as advocates for social justice.

With globalization has come a rise in a climate that promotes individual responsibility. Alston (2002) argues that social workers have an obligation to promote and advocate for a collective responsibility that can be modeled by the government in a market that has repeatedly failed to ensure the health and well-being of individuals. Alston argues that it is important that social workers turn to professional values such as empowerment to engage in the social debate around government intervention.

Curiously, U.S. social work scholars rarely discuss these existing debates and conflicts around government intervention. In other parts of the world, research has been conducted on people's attitudes toward government support for those in poverty. As Ng and Koh (2012) state, evidence should be collected so that policies can reflect the wishes and desires of the general public, rather than those holding the most political, social and/or financial power. Structurally, what further complicates the position of social workers in the debates around government intervention in the U.S. and beyond is the limited control that both service recipients and service providers have in dictating how social welfare policies are shaped and implemented, particularly with regard to spending cuts (Beresford, & Croft, 2004). The lack of engagement of those most directly impacted by social welfare policy decisions can have detrimental effects (Fawcett & Hanlon, 2009). The marginalization of both the profession and our clients underscores the necessity for investigation and analysis of attitudes towards the role of government in promoting social well-being.

Empathy and Social Work

There is no question that empathy plays a significant role in the social work profession. Social work educators train

students to become empathic professionals—in tune with their own emotional processes, and able to relate to and understand those of their clients. As existing research knowledge of empathy grows, it is clear that the components of empathy can be taught. Neural pathways have elasticity, and cognitive processes can be developed and enhanced (Long, 2006; Schwartz & Begley, 2003). Given the role that government intervention has played in the development of the U.S. social welfare system, it is appropriate that social workers are at the forefront of exploring the connection between empathy and the government policies and structures that increase the well-being of client groups and communities.

Current Study

This review of government intervention grew out of a larger study that focused on the development of an instrument to measure social empathy. Social empathy is a key contributor to the establishment of social welfare policies that promote social well-being and social justice. One key part of social empathy is the role of government as a facilitator and provider of civil rights and social services. This research analyzes whether interpersonal empathy is a significant predictor of people's attitudes about social rights and the role of government. Further analysis considered whether support for government intervention differed by race, class and gender. More specifically, we hypothesized that:

H1: Higher levels of interpersonal empathy, as measured by the Empathy Assessment Index, are associated with more positive attitudes toward government intervention with regard to social welfare.

H2: Members of populations that face marginalization and exclusion, including women, people from poor or working class families, and people who identify as members of racial or ethnic groups other than those of Anglo/White descent, have more positive attitudes towards government intervention even after controlling for interpersonal empathy level.

Methods

Sample

A convenience sample of students from a large southwestern university were invited to participate in the study through eight *Introduction to Social Work* courses (5 in-person course sections and 3 online sections) in the spring semester of 2012. Students were recruited in a non-randomized fashion. Extra credit for participation was given to some students at the discretion of the instructor. Students were emailed a link to the survey, which was administered through Qualtrics, and were asked to complete the survey within a week. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The sample pool was selected for the larger study purpose of validating a measure of social empathy.

A total of 490 students participated. Seventeen students (3.5%) were eliminated due to missing data. The final sample for this study consisted of 473 participants ranging in age from 18 to 55 years ($M = 21.8$, $SD = 5.1$), 70% of whom were between the ages of 18 and 21. The sample was 59.3% female. Twenty-six percent were freshman ($n = 121$), 30.5% were sophomores ($n = 142$), 24.5% were juniors ($n = 114$), 18.5% were seniors ($n = 86$), and less than 1% were masters level students ($n = 3$). Participants identified more than 40 different academic areas of primary study, including 5.1% ($n = 24$) who reported an undecided major.

Of those who reported their race/ethnicity, 56.3% were Caucasian ($n = 261$), 14.9% were Latino ($n = 69$), 7.3% were Asian ($n = 34$), 6.3% were multiracial ($n = 29$), and 3.4% were African American ($n = 16$). Almost 11% of the participants ($n = 50$) identified "other" as their racial or ethnic identity. When asked to specify, the predominant groups reported included Arab and Middle Eastern ($n = 39$; 8.4%). Twenty-five percent of the participants reported having lived outside of the United States at one point in their lives. Participants were asked to identify the class background for their families of origin. Answer options included poor ($n = 16$; 3.5%), working class ($n = 98$; 21.3%), middle class ($n = 182$; 39.5%), upper middle class ($n = 136$; 29.5%), and wealthy ($n = 29$; 6.3%).

Measures: The Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and Government Intervention Scale

The EAI is a validated self-report measure of interpersonal empathy that includes a total of 20 items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *frequently*, 5 = *almost always*, 6 = *always*) (Lietz et al., 2011). Total scores for the EAI range from 20 to 120 with higher scores indicating greater levels of interpersonal empathy ($\alpha = .84$). The EAI is made up of four components, each with 5 items. The four components include affective response, self-other awareness, perspective-taking, and emotion regulation, and are based on a neuroscience approach to understanding the dynamics of the human empathic response.

Affective response is the physiological response that is triggered in us when we view the emotional responses of others, and includes items such as, "Hearing laughter makes me smile." Self-other awareness refers to the cognitive ability to separate another's emotions from one's own, and includes items such as "I can tell the difference between my friend's feelings and my own." Perspective-taking is the component of empathy most associated with our understanding of empathic responses and refers to an understanding of another's experiences that may be causing or creating an individual to emotionally respond in a specific way. An example of a perspective-taking item is "I can imagine what it's like to be in someone else's shoes." Finally, emotion regulation is the cognitive ability to regulate one's affective responses to others' emotions, and includes items such as "When I am upset or unhappy, I get over it quickly." Taken together, the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) items are a valid tool for measuring interpersonal empathy.

The government intervention scale consists of four, self-report items intended to measure attitudes toward the government intervening in issues around social welfare and well-being. The items (see Table 1) use the same 6-point Likert scale described above for the EAI, and as a scale have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$). Scale scores range from 4 to 24 with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude toward government intervention around issues of social welfare and civil rights.

Table 1. Descriptives for Government Intervention Items and Scale

Item	Mean	SD
I think the government needs to be a part of leveling the playing field for people from different racial groups.	3.83	1.34
I believe government should protect the rights of minorities.	4.57	1.26
I think it is the right of all citizens to have their basic needs met.	4.79	1.25
I believe the role of government is to act as a referee, making decisions that promote the quality of life and well-being of the people.	4.37	1.24
Government intervention scale ($\alpha = .79$)	17.55	3.99

Demographic Variables

Because of the substantial number of participants who identified "other" as their racial or ethnic identity, and the small subsamples of racial/ethnic groups such as African American and American Indian, the participants were divided into dominant and non-dominant racial categories. Those identifying as white/Caucasian or of Anglo descent were categorized as dominant. Those identifying as a member of any of the other racial/ethnic groups, or who identified as "other" and specified as a member of an identity group other than white/Anglo, were categorized as non-dominant. A dummy variable was created with "dominant racial group identity" as the reference.

A small number of participants listed "other" as their family class background ($n = 4$). When asked to specify, the participants listed responses including; "single parent" and "working middle class." For the purposes of this analysis, these responses were coded as missing in order to develop an ordinal scale for the control variable of family class background using the answer options provided (1 = poor, 2 = working class, 3 = middle class, 4 = upper middle class, and 5 = wealthy).

Analysis

Regression was used to analyze two models. The first model was a bivariate regression analysis with government

intervention scale score as the dependent variable, and the Empathy Assessment Index total score as the independent variable. A second model used multiple regression to analyze the predictive value of the EAI score and added control variables for gender, class background of family of origin, and racial identity regressed on government intervention score.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Model Summary for Predicting Attitudes Towards Government Intervention (N = 473)

Model	R ² (adj)	B (SE)	β	<i>sr</i> ²
1. Empathy	.100 (.097)***			
EAI		.124 (.018)	.315	
2. Empathy w/controls	.193 (.185)***			
EAI		.126 (.017)	.321	.100***
Gender (male)		1.21 (.368)	.147	.020**
Family of origin class		-.638 (.193)	-.148	.020**
Race (dominant)		1.671 (.365)	.205	.039***

Note: *** = $p \leq .001$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .05$

Results

The dependent variable, attitudes toward government intervention, was correlated with the independent variable, interpersonal empathy ($r^2 = .317$, $p < .01$). As summarized in Table 2, interpersonal empathy alone accounted for 9% of the variance in attitudes toward government intervention. When the control variables for gender, race, and family of origin class background were added into the model, the total variance in government intervention attitudes that was accounted for increased to 18%. All three of the control variables had distinct contributions toward the overall model, as evidenced by the semi-partial correlations. Interpersonal empathy accounted for 10% of the variance in attitudes toward government intervention when controlling for gender, family class background, and racial identity. Each of the identity predictors contributed an additional 2% (gender and family class background) to just under 4% (race) over and above that of interpersonal empathy.

Because the control variables are statistically significant, the second model suggests that attitudes toward government

intervention are more positive for women, participants from lower class families, and people of color, even after controlling for empathy level. This suggests that these groups have some experience or perspective that has shaped their attitudes toward government intervention that does not solely draw on interpersonal empathy.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that interpersonal empathy plays a significant role in people's attitudes toward government intervention. What is not known from this study is the directionality of the relationship. Does interpersonal empathy create more positive attitudes toward government intervention, or does a positive attitude about government intervention increase one's empathy? Given that previous research has suggested a bi-directional relationship (Singer et al., 2006), future research should explore this as well as whether this relationship exists in other populations.

The relationship between empathy and attitudes toward government intervention suggest that empathic insight into the experiences of others may support peoples' attitudes toward making an effort to create policies that support the welfare and well-being of others. While this may seem obvious, it is important to reflect on the fact that empathy can be taught and enhanced. It is not a static characteristic. One way that empathy can be nurtured is through the cultivation of meaningful interactions and relationships between people from different aspects of society. Some may argue that policymakers will rarely sit and have a meaningful conversation with those for whom they are making important decisions. However, we can use our understanding of empathy to share empathy-building skills and strategies with not only policymakers but with community members across our nation. Empathic decision-making power lies not only in the hands of the elected, but also in the hands of those who vote or who are engaged at any level in making their communities better.

In addition to the relationship found between empathy and attitudes toward government intervention, most striking in the findings of this study is the fact that the variance explained doubled when the demographic variables were

included in the second model. Although previous studies suggest that powerlessness is associated with an increased ability for the brain to mirror the experiences of others—the physiological underpinnings of empathy—the findings of this study suggest that experiences of being in groups with less access to social power have important implications, even after holding empathy levels constant. This finding suggests that those who belong to marginalized groups may have unique experiences and knowledge that impacts their perceptions of government intervention. Much more research is needed to further explain this relationship, but given many non-dominant social groups' negative histories with government intervention, it is important to understand and assess the favorable attitudes and to understand the kind of interventions that these groups would find beneficial. At a minimum, social workers and other human service providers can work to include the voices of people from marginalized communities at the tables of decision making bodies and to use their perspectives to help shape government intervention efforts.

Making these findings publicly known and allowing research such as this study to be entered into the public debate would benefit social workers as well as those the profession serves. Such research evidence supports the inclusion of voices in the dialogue about government intervention in ways that may support the development of more empathic policy-making. The findings also provide some direction for social workers, who often feel unsure about how to impact policy debates about government intervention. Building empathy, particularly self–other awareness and perspective taking, is something that social workers can do—among one another, in our constituent groups, and with elected officials. Supporting greater understanding across differences enhances the sense that “we are all in this together” and government is an extension of ourselves. It belongs to us all.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of this exploratory study. The sample from which the data was collected is limited in its generalizability. It was a convenience sample of students taking social work courses at one institution in the southwestern United States. Future research should explore whether the

relationships found between variables exists in other, broader populations, as well as outside of a university setting.

In addition, due to the low numbers of participants within some of the racial and ethnic groups represented within the sample, the researchers made a decision to not eliminate those cases but rather to include them by collapsing the sample into a dichotomous group of dominant and non-dominant based on the racial structure that exists within U.S. society. The researchers acknowledge that this is problematic in some ways, and an oversimplification of the racial and ethnic experience in the U.S. However, the researchers were guided by previous research in the area of perceived racial and ethnic discrimination that ties the experiences of people to the social group with which they most identify (Hernandez, 2005; Michelson & Pallares, 2001). Future research should seek samples that include racial and ethnic groups of participants large enough to separate. Indeed, such research may find distinct differences in the relationships between variables as compared to other non-dominant racial groups.

Finally, a limitation of this study is the scale items that were used to assess people's attitudes toward government intervention around issues of social welfare. These items have not been validated as a scale beyond the Cronbach's alpha score that was identified for this sample. In addition, the response patterns for the items were skewed positively. This could be a reflection of the items, or of the sample. Future research should further validate the measure, including testing it in other populations.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the United States' social welfare system, government intervention has played a significant and pervasive role. Interpersonal empathy contributes to attitudes toward government intervention. In addition to empathy, identification as female, poor or working class family background, and as a member of a non-dominant racial or ethnic group have a positive relationship with people's attitudes toward government intervention related to social well-being. Further research is needed to explore all of the factors that impact people's attitudes and behaviors related to supporting government intervention, as well as the relationships between

factors. It is particularly important that social workers and human service providers understand both the dominant and non-dominant narratives that shape the attitudes of policy makers, voters and community members at large. One way to do this is to engage in efforts to increase empathic insight.

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