

**Gender Differences in Central Appalachian Students' Attitudes towards  
Poverty, Welfare and Work**

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**Paper presented at the  
Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia Conference**

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**Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia**

**March 3-5**

**Marshall University**

**Huntington, West Virginia**

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## **Gender Differences in Central Appalachian college students' attitudes towards poverty, welfare and work.**

Nothing addresses the concerns of Americans more than employment. In the political sphere, Clinton's first platform was based on the slogan, "it is the economy, stupid". If political campaigns are anything to go by, voters also care about education, crime, punishment and moral behavior. But jobs, income and taxes drive an economy and no government will survive for long if these issues are not addressed. Certainly, welfare is a thorny issue because it is expensive to administer and there is a pervasive attitude that welfare recipients are lazy. Even though studies show that welfare provides barely enough income to support a family, citizens appear to resent this social safety net for supposedly wasting tax dollars on the unworthy poor. Thus, the question of welfare and anti-poverty programs have caused much controversy. To address such sentiments, several studies have sampled opinion amongst the general public.(Alston, J. & Dean, K., 1972; Kluegel, J., 1987; Schwartz, S., Robinson, M. , 1991; Griffin, W.E., Oheneba-sakyi , 1993 ) However, few studies have looked at the college student population and no studies have restricted their analysis to rural college students living in areas of high unemployment with an historical dependence on welfare. To counter this shortcoming, the study described below sought to analyze the attitudes of students attending an East Kentucky university in the later 1990s. and determine if there were any gender differences between students' responses.

The authors of a 1998 Report, *The Status of Women in Kentucky* noted that , "Kentucky women continue to face serious obstacles in achieving equality with men and with attaining standing equal to the average for women in the United States." (p. 5). Kentucky's women were earning just under 70 (69.2%) cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Kentucky ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> in the nation in terms of the ratio between women's to men's earnings for full-time, year-round work. The number of Kentucky's employed women in managerial or professional occupations was under 25% (24.2%) placing Kentucky 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation. Only 12.1% of the women in the state had four or more years of college, and women in Kentucky were in the "bottom 10" in every conceivable category relating to employment and earnings composite index. Kentucky was ranked 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation in relation to women's poverty. As Jenks (1998) notes, "the devastation of poverty inevitably reaches outward, dragging down a person's health, access to necessary good and a sense of self." (<http://www.lrc.state.ky.us/ltrpc/women>).

It is clear from *the Status of Women in Kentucky* report that some women in Kentucky are amongst the poorest educated and most poverty stricken in the nation. This study sought to determine, therefore, if the female students attending a regional university in East Kentucky held different attitudes toward social issues than male students. More specifically, this paper will report on whether females students held different views on issues such as poverty, welfare and work differently from their male counterparts . This paper will also report on whether both male and female students' views on a broad range of social issues differed from elsewhere in the country.

### **Background**

In July, 1996, a month before President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the welfare reform law - Kentucky had more than 71,000

families receiving monthly cash assistance. The new law ended the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) program and in Kentucky the Cabinet for Families and Children created a new program known as the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (KTAP). A five year limit was placed on individual's receipt of welfare and all unemployed adults were required to seek training or work.

As the study was being conducted, welfare rolls in Kentucky were declining rapidly. 2 ½ years after the law took effect welfare roles had declined by one third. (Kentucky Cabinet for Families and Children, Press Release, April, 1999). However, it is important to note that despite falling welfare rolls, Kentucky's poverty rate has remained stubbornly high. Low wages, coupled with a decline in the purchasing power of the dollar have left more than 80,000 working families living in poverty. Currently, less than 20% of poor families with children rely on welfare for the majority of their income and this figure is falling (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Kentucky Youth Advocates, Press Release, April, 1999). It was in a climate of radical welfare reform that students were surveyed as to their attitudes to poverty, welfare and work.

The university in which this study took place services 22 counties in Eastern Kentucky. 70% of the students attending this university live in the region, one of the poorest in the state as well as in the country as a whole. From one fourth to nearly one half of Kentucky's children currently live in poverty and this poverty is especially apparent in the university's service region (Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center, Executive Summary, 1998). For example, several of the university's adjacent counties have poverty rates that surpass the 40% level. As well, this region follows the national trend of a widening gap between the rich and the poor. . The average income of the poorest fifth of families fell by \$3,660 between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, from \$11,020 to \$7,360. The average income of the richest fifth of families increased by \$19,620 between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, from \$79,590 to \$99,210. Average incomes, therefore, are deceptive. Although the average family income in Kentucky is around \$24,000 this figure tends to hide the disproportionate spread of wealth between the rich and the poor. (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Press Release, September 4, 1999.)

Similarly, educational levels are also generally lower in Kentucky than in other parts of the country. (Only 13.6% of Kentuckians over the age of 25 have bachelors degrees compared with 20.3% across the country). Furthermore, at the time this study was undertaken, the results of statewide Core Battery Testing in Kentucky revealed that some of the ten lowest scoring schools in Kentucky were to be found in the university's service region. The now defunct KIRIS (Kentucky Instructional Results Information System) tests indicated a tight relationship between low scores and high poverty levels poverty levels (Cullen, 1999).

One of the more comprehensive studies undertaken in relation to welfare reform was conducted by five public policy organizations in 1993. The research consortium consisted of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Joint Center for Policy and Economic Studies, the National Council of La Raza and the Children's Defense Fund. Summarizing this research Garin, Molyneux and DiVall (1994) reported that in the main "voters accept a conservative diagnosis of the problem (*i.e. that lack of effort by individuals was the main cause of poverty*), but do not accept conservative prescriptions." For example, in this

study, the successful transition into work was the highest rated goal for welfare reform. The majority of voters surveyed believed that the welfare system was flawed because it failed to achieve this goal and because projected welfare reforms would harm some innocent victims of poverty.

Voters, therefore, held contradictory positions on a number of issues. Despite the fact that Americans appear to blame individual effort rather than circumstance for poverty, 88% of voters in this study believed that poor children could be hurt through no fault of their own if their parents were cut off welfare after a two year period. Furthermore, although 93% of respondents believed that welfare recipients should be obliged to work for their welfare, only 47% believed that mother of infants and 60% that mothers of pre-school children should be required to work. The authors concluded that, “ Americans want to see the system fixed, not recipients or their children punished.”

This study revealed a good deal about voter opinion. However, there have been few studies that have sought to address demographic differences in attitudes to social issue or students’ attitudes in poor regions of the country. The research described below was aimed at collecting such data.

Surveys were administered to undergraduate students in their respective classrooms during April, June and July of 1998. We went to classrooms in order to draw from a wide range of classes. A total of 390 surveys from an undergraduate population of approximately 6500 were collected. Approximately 45% of respondents identified education as their major. The remainder were drawn from across the university disciplines.

The survey consisted of 60 statements covering a wide range of social issues as well as 14 demographic questions. Using a 5 point Likert scale, Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1), we had 22 items that directly related to work, welfare and poverty. For our independent variables we measured gender and age and analyzed the data through the differing bi-variate calculations of the t-test and through correlations.

## **Results**

### **Sample characteristics**

This sample had a large female presence since almost twice as many females as males responded to the survey. 81% of respondents were under 25 and the over 35 year old age group represented just 5% of the sample making age comparisons difficult. With a white student base only 11% of respondents were minorities (5% amongst the general student population). Being a commuter school, 56% of students sampled came from the university’s service region of surrounding Eastern Kentucky counties. Again, the population was like most college settings since only 17% of respondents were married, 6% were separated, divorced or widowed. 17% also had children.

Just under one half of students reported that they did not work for pay during term time. However, around 70% of students at this university receive some form of financial aid - either grants or loans. The amount of hours worked by students was distributed evenly. 12% of

students worked 8 hours weekly for pay, 15% worked more than 20 hours a week and 10% worked more than 30 hours.

## **Student attitudes**

### **Gender Differences in attitudes towards social issues.**

The 60 questions on the survey covered 7 topics: 1)race 2) welfare, work and poverty 3) politics 4) sex 5) education6) religion 7) crime. The chart below shows the percentage of questions in each category with gender differences in responses. Proportionately, questions related to race showed the most discrepancy between gender closely followed by questions related to work, welfare and poverty. These are analyzed below. There were no discernable differences in responses between gender amongst the questions related to religion and crime

<b>type of question</b>	<b><i>percentage of</i> questions that showed a gender different response</b>
race	67
work	64
politics	50
sex	29
education	18
religion	0
crime	0

### **Work and Welfare**

A summary of the gender differences in responses to work related questions are given in the chart below:

Gender Differences in Responses to Work Related Questions	males	females
	likert	scale
men and women should receive equal pay for equal work	4.7348	4.9502
Mothers should stay at home with pre-school children	2.8561	2.4896
If African Americans failed to succeed it is their own fault	3.209	2.7479
It is the responsibility of the government to reduce income inequality	3.0075	3.5083
Learning Disabled will be on welfare most of their lives	2.9701	2.4711
Federal government should raise minimum wage	3.5896	4.0207
Women avoid promotion because they don't like responsibility	2.0048	1.4689
Poor people are lazier than everyone else	2.1418	1.7054
Women are discriminated in the work place	2.7444	3.1618

In first addressing the matter of payment for work rendered, 98% of students agreed that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. However, women (98.1%) women were more strongly in agreement than men (96.3% v. 81.8%;  $p=.000$ ). Although most students (86.2%) disagreed that women avoided promotion because they did not like responsibility, women felt more strongly about this than men (94.7 v 72.4%;  $p=.000$ ). Just over one quarter of students (25.9%) agreed that women were rarely found in top management positions because they got married and had children. There were no differences noted between gender but there was strong positive correlation between the questions related to promotion and management positions (.1866) suggesting that around one quarter of students believe there may be social or cultural barriers to female advancement in the work place.

79% of students believed that welfare recipients should be required to work for their income. This figure is considerably lower than the percentage reported in the Garin, Molyneux and DiVall (1994) study (93%). However, 76% of believed that the current system of welfare discourages people from working indicating a somewhat conservative perception that the welfare system is still in need of some overhaul. Not surprisingly, there was a strong positive correlation between these two questions on the survey. (.2374).

Students were generally much more sympathetic towards the working poor. 71% of students believed that that the government in Washington should raise the minimum wage and women were more likely to agree with this statement than men ((77.2% v 59%;  $p=.000$ ). Only 65% of students believed that there were plenty of jobs for welfare recipients who wanted to work and one in five (20%) disagreed. These two statements were negatively related (-0135) suggesting that those who believed in raising the minimum wage also believed there were not enough jobs for welfare recipients who really wanted to work. In fact less than one quarter (24%) of students agreed that most jobs in Kentucky paid enough to keep a family healthy and

these students were more likely support the raising of a minimum wage ( negatively correlated - - 0135).

Just over 20% of students thought that to get better pay workers should join trade unions and about the same number disagreed. Interestingly, more than half of the students who responded to this question gave a neutral response. Those students who agreed that the government should raise the minimum wage were *more* likely to believe that to get better pay workers should join a trade union (.2238) and less likely to agree that most jobs in Kentucky paid enough to keep a family health (-.1269).

70% of students believed that mothers on welfare should be provided with free childcare so that they could take a paid job. Students who agreed with this statement however, were also *more* likely to report that poor people were poor due to circumstances beyond their control (.1236) and that the government should raise the minimum wage (.1064). They were *less* likely to agree that mothers on welfare should be required to work even if their children were too young to attend school. (-.1343) , that there were plenty of jobs for welfare recipients who really wanted to work (-.1429) or that poor people are lazier than everyone else. (-.1046)

Just over half (56%) of students agreed that mothers should never put a career before their family responsibilities but only 21% felt that mothers should stay at home and raise their children until their they were old enough to attend school. There was a strong positive correlation between these two questions. Those students who agreed that mothers should put family before career were *more* likely to agree that mothers should stay at home and raise their children until school age. (.3140) and that the government should raise the minimum wage (.1058). Interestingly, In response to the statement that mothers should stay at home, men were more likely to agree than women (28% v 17.5%; p=.002).

42% of students believed that mothers on welfare should be required to work even if their children were too young to attend school and women were more likely to agree to this statement than men (50.2% v 28.4%; p=.000). Students who responded positively to this statement were *more* likely to agree that mothers on welfare should receive free childcare to enable them to work (.1343), that all welfare recipients should be required to work for their money (.3606), that the current system of welfare discourages people from working (.2054) and that the government in Washington should raise the minimum wage (.1057). There was a strong negative correlation between the statement that mothers should stay at home and raise their children until they were old enough to attend school and the statement that mothers on welfare should be required to work even if their children were too young to attend school. (-.3327). 20% supported the first statement, 40% supported the second. It would appear that respondents were somewhat sympathetic to the notion of women caring for children until school going age, but less so if this meant mothers would be supported by the state.

These results indicate that compared with the national study there was more support for mothers to stay at home with children rather than work. The Garin, Molyneux and DiVall study (1994) reported that 60% of voters believed that mothers of pre-school children should be required to work. The number in this study was 51% .

## Poverty

Just under half (49%) of students believed that in the United States everyone had the same opportunity to succeed in school. However, 48.4% believed that poverty was no excuse for low achievement in school. There was a positive correlation between these two questions (.2848). Just over one third of students (35%) agreed that most people were poor due to circumstances beyond their control but only 6% of students overall believed that poor people were lazier than anyone else. However, men were more likely to agree with this statement than women (11.9% v 2%;  $p=.000$ ). These two statements were negatively correlated (-.1774).

Alston & Dean(1971) noted that there were differences regarding attribution of poverty between socioeconomic classes. The students in this study were not representative of the population of East Kentucky as a whole. Attendance at this university would automatically place respondents in the top two percentiles academically in the region. According to Nilson,(1981) people were more likely to blame individuals for being poor if they were exposed to a common view that poverty was brought about by lack of effort. Only two thirds of students in this study blamed individuals and a tiny minority (6%) believed that the poor are lazier than everyone else. Thus, despite being members of an educational elite, one third of students still believed that poverty could be attributed to external factors other than individual lack of effort.

More than half of the students (51.6%) believed that it was the responsibility of the government to reduce income inequality in the United States but women were much more likely to agree with this statement than men (57% v 41.1%;  $p=.000$ ). Only 40% of students thought the government in Washington should reduce income inequality by raising the taxes of wealthy families. However, those who believed it was the government's responsibility also agreed that the government should raise the taxes of the wealthy (.2771).

## Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that students drawn from a region of socioeconomic deprivation have a high resistance to welfare as a means of supporting poor families. Overall, there does seem to be considerable support for the government's efforts to move welfare recipients from welfare to work, but there is skepticism about the availability of jobs and the remuneration received. More than half the students surveyed believed that the government does have a role in alleviating suffering in this region and 4 out of 10 believe that the government should increase the taxes of the wealthy. Women were generally more sympathetic to the plight of the poor in this study and were more likely to seek some form of government intervention to alleviate poverty. Interestingly, some females felt strongly that mothers should work even when they had young children to raise. However, students were concerned that welfare policies should not adversely affect children and for this reason there was significant support for mothers to remain on welfare if their children were not of school going age. In this respect the students in this university appear to hold similar views to the general public.

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