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Abstract. This study explores rural Midwestern attitudes (N = 126) toward 21 government benefit programs. Findings indicated that there were substantial differences between male and female respondents with male respondents believing that means-tested government benefits were too generous by almost a full standard deviation (d = .90) in comparison with female respondents. Entitlement programs were also deemed too generous, but by a lesser effect (d = .67). No gender differences were noted for farm programs. Linear regression explained 23.3% of the variance in attitudes toward mean-tested programs, 20.8% for entitlement programs, but only 8.1% for farm-related programs. Findings are interpreted to suggest that rural males' psychological reactance to threats to farm autonomy may undergird male antipathy to government benefit programs, but that rural females may represent a potential constituency supportive of more socially just and compassionate social welfare programs.

Keywords: social welfare, rural attitudes, gender differences

The 1929-1930 wheat harvest in the American Midwest was the largest in history, but economic market failures led to widespread financial disasters for Midwestern farmers (Egan, 2006). By 1933, President Roosevelt observed that the free market was not rewarding the farmer, so the government became the American farmers' market through the Farm Bill (Egan, 2006). Renewed roughly every five years since then, the farm subsidies exceeded $139 billion to Midwestern farmers alone from 1995 to 2011 in support of corn, soy, wheat, dairy, livestock, and conservation/disaster relief (Dáil, 2015). Furthermore, the very existence of Midwestern farming was rooted in government largess demonstrated in a variety of Homestead Acts that ultimately ceded 420 million square miles of public land to 1.6 million individual claims at minimal cost to the claimants (Foner & Garraty, 1991). This study attempts to explore the irony of Midwestern farm opposition to government assistance programs.

Literature Review

Despite a history of advocacy for government action to improve food prices during the Progressive Era (Maclead, 2009), the American farmer has more consistently demonstrated anti-welfare attitudes (Butler & DePoy, 1996; Camasso & Moore, 1985; Davis, 1988; Leistritz & Ekstron, 1988; Sargent, McDermott, & Carlson, 1982). Rural residence in Pennsylvania was predictive of lower support for institutional welfare and a stronger support for residualist welfare - support for rural hospitals was the single exception - for a wide variety of government assistance programs (Camasso & Moore, 1985). Wyoming residents did not address residual/institutional paradigm, but did limit support for welfare assistance to levels below the minimum wage and based on need (Davis, 1988). A North Dakota study found somewhat modest support for financial assistance for farmers even among farmers (30-40%) with lower levels of support among non-farmer respondents (Leistritz & Ekstrom, 1988). Idaho residents reported a prevailing residualist attitude toward family assistance with a strong preference for tighter eligibility requirements and very little support for increasing benefits (Sargent et al., 1982). Even a low income, rural, and female sample from Maine who expressed support for increased government assistance for people in need, demonstrated a preference for informal rather than formal supports and were personally reluctant to seek government benefits (Butler & DePoy, 1996). In general, these older studies consistently found that lower income and higher debt were predictors of more pro-welfare attitudes with younger (below 30 years) and older (over 65 years) respondents also more likely to be pro-welfare. As Swank (2005) has more recently found, higher socioeconomic class and conservative ideology (Brooks & Manza, 2013) are the most consistent predictors of anti-welfare attitudes.

Continued evidence of rural antipathy for welfare assistance was determined by Askelson et al. (2017) who found parental attitudes were quite negative relative to child receipt of free or reduced lunches. Receipt was associated with parental neglect and the stigma of poverty. Even when the receipt of government assistance meets personal need, rural residents attempt to avoid receipt of that assistance (Butler & DePoy, 1996) or do so in a manner to hides that receipt from friends and neighbors (Sherman, 2009). This rural reluctance to be the personal recipient of government assistance is somewhat mitigated by social network (Newman & Vickrey, 2017) and state level analyses (Kam & Nam, 2008) that suggest a more pro-welfare attitude when economic hardship affects ones' social network or inflation undermines economic confidence in general. These pro-welfare forces, however, are countered by increasing economic inequality. As wealth becomes more concentrated at the top, state-level assistance benefits tend to fall (Scruggs & Hayes, 2017).

This study explores Midwestern attitudes toward specific government benefit programs by asking respondents to indicate their opinions regarding the generosity of a variety of government benefit programs. Participants who indicated that a benefit is too low in a specific program are presumed to be more supportive of that program; indication that a benefit it too high is presumed to be less supportive of that program. Age, biological sex, hometown population, source of household income, and prior receipt of government benefits are used to explore respondents' attitudes toward means-tested, non-farm entitlement, and farm-related programs.

Method

Procedures and Participants

After IRB approval, four student researchers solicited a cross-sectional, non-probability sample of respondents who anonymously completed an online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey or a paper questionnaire. In order to increase the number of responses from farm households, one student recruited respondents face-to-face while shadowing her father who provides services directly to farmers in the Midwest. Data (N = 126) were collected between February 1, 2013 and March 28, 2013 and included age, biological sex (0 – *female,* 1 – *male*), approximate population of the respondent's hometown, identification of the number of government benefit programs the respondent or family have received, identification of the major source of household income (1 – *agriculture*, 0 - *other*), and completion of a Likert-type instrument designed for this study described more fully below. Respondents were almost equally divided by sex, were middle aged (M = 47.0, SD = 14.13), and had rural backgrounds (only 15% reported a hometown population over 25,000). Personal or family use of government benefit programs were rarely reported (M = 2.85, SD = 3.44). Demographics and other summary data are provided on Table 1. Response rates cannot be calculated from this sampling method.

Table 1

Demographics and Summary Data from Respondents

	Male				Female			
Variable	*N*	%	*M*	*SD*	*N*	%	*M*	*SD*
Age*	61	--	50.0	15.0	63	--	44.1	12.6
Hometown population[ns]								
Less than 2,500	40	64.5			24	39.3		
2,501 to 25,000	16	25.8			24	39.3		
Over 25,000	6	9.7			13	21.3		
Number of government program benefits received[ns]	63	--	2.4	3.4	57	--	3.3	3.4
Major source of household income:[a]								
Agriculture	28	45.2			15	23.8		
Othe r	34	54.8			48	76.2		
Average adequacy of government benefits:								
Means-tested***	58	--	58.3	12.5	54	--	46.2	14.2
Entitlements**	59	--	24.9	5.9	53	--	20.8	6.3
Farm-related[ns]	63	--	9.1	3.6	58	--	8.0	3.3

Variation in frequencies is due to missing data. *t*-test results indicated as * - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$; *** - $p < .001$. [ns] – not significant. [a] - Chi square significant with $p < .5$

Instrumentation

A new rating scale was developed for this study listing 21 different government assistance programs (Table 2) for which the respondents could indicate their opinions of the *current level of assistance available* for each program on a 7-point scale (1 – *assistance is too small*, 4 – *assistance is about right*, 7 –*assistance is too large*). An eighth option was provided to allow the respondent to assert *I've never heard of this assistance program* to improve accuracy of the responses which were coded as non-responses.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 25. After assessing each variable for normality and despite the ordinal scale of measurement utilized to assess respondent opinions of the adequacy of assistance provided by government benefit programs, these responses were treated as an interval/ratio scale of measure because of the exploratory nature of this study and the nearly normal distribution of responses (skewness on the individual items ranged from -.68 to .25). One variable, hometown population was trimmed at 80,000 to reduce the skew to an acceptable level. Only five respondents' scores were trimmed. Summative scores were calculated for the 13 government benefit programs identified as means-tested, for the 6 programs considered to be entitlements, with the 2 farm-related benefit programs grouped separately (see Table 2). Because male and female were so often significantly different, demographic variables (Table 1) and respondent opinions (Table 2) are reported by biological sex. Additional correlational tests (Table 3) indicated variables potentially relevant to linear regressions (Table 4).

Results

Male respondents were significantly older that female respondents [$t(122) = -2.36$, $p = .02$, $\delta = .42$] and more likely to be living in a household relying on agricultural employment [$\chi^2 = 6.31$, $p = .012$] even though both sexes reported non-agriculture income as more important on average (54.8% for men, 76.2% for women). Sex was not statistically significant in reported hometown populations or the number of government program benefits received by the respondent or respondent's family (see Table 1).

Statistically differences were reported between male and female respondents on almost every government benefit program included on the 21-item instrument (see Table 2). Medicare was the single exception. Male respondents consistently reported that the level of assistance provided by each government program was *slightly too large, moderately too large,* or *too large* more often than female respondents. The effect sizes of these differences were assessed using Cohen's δ statistic that indicated that the effects were medium to large ranging from .38 for health care for the disabled to .78 for food stamps (SNAP) and .79 for transportation assistance for people with low incomes (Table 2). The summative scores for the 13 government programs identified as means-tested had a joint effect size of .90 indicating that male respondents rated means-tested programs as too generous to recipients by almost an entire standard deviation over female respondents. The summative scores for the 6 government benefits identified as entitlements, in comparison, had a joint effect size difference of only .67, and the summative

Table 2

Adequacy of Government Benefits by Biological Sex

	Male				Female				
Government Benefit	*N*	*M*	*SD*		*N*	*M*	*SD*		δ
Means-Tested:									
Food stamps (SNAP)***	62	5.76	1.35		62	4.63	1.55		.78
Medicaid (children)**	63	4.49	1.37		61	3.85	1.19		.50
Medicaid (nursing home)*	62	3.94	1.54		59	3.29	1.41		.44
Housing assistance**	62	4.89	1.47		59	4.03	1.43		.59
TANF*	60	4.47	1.38		53	3.89	1.55		.40
Child care assistance **	61	4.62	1.36		56	3.86	1.42		.55
CACFP**	60	4.78	1.38		49	4.00	1.44		.55
WIC**	61	4.87	1.26		59	4.14	1.53		.52
CHIP**	61	4.51	1.30		53	3.68	1.46		.60
Loans, grants, and scholarships for higher education**	62	3.90	1.38		60	3.18	1.56		.49
Food assistance, PWLI**	62	4.84	1.33		59	4.05	1.69		.52
Transportation assistance for PWLI***	60	4.65	1.49		56	3.52	1.37		.79
Job training**	60	4.07	1.59		59	3.15	1.37		.62
Entitlements:									
Medicare (elderly)[ns]	62	3.44	1.39		58	3.09	1.26		ns
Social Security**	63	3.41	1.41		58	2.66	1.31		.55
Health care for disabled*	63	3.79	1.35		56	3.29	1.30		.38
Disability benefits**	61	4.48	1.51		57	3.56	1.57		.60
Unemployment benefits**	62	5.00	1.73		60	4.17	1.51		.51
Workers' compensation**	63	4.65	1.39		59	3.98	1.25		.51
Farm-related:									
Farm subsidies*	58	4.97	1.64		56	4.20	1.72		.46
Crop insurance**	58	4.93	1.25		57	4.18	1.48		.55

Variation in frequencies is due to missing data. TANF – Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. CACFP – Child and Adult Care Food Program. WIC – Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. CHIP – Children's Health Insurance Program. PWLI – people with low incomes. * - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$; *** - $p < .001$; [ns] – not significant

scores on the 2 farm-related government benefits did not show a statistical difference based on sex groupings.

Additional bivariate tests indicated that older respondents were significantly more likely to come from a hometown with a smaller population and to significantly assess means-tested programs, entitlements, and even farm-related benefits as too generous. Respondents from hometowns with larger populations reported receipt of benefits from a significantly higher number of government programs, but those who reported receipt of benefits from more programs

reported that the benefits - whether means-tested, entitlements, or farm-related - were significantly less likely to be adequate (see Table 3).

Table 3

Bivariate Associations between Variables (Pearson r)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age		-.19*	.-.16	.33**	.21*	.28**
2. Hometown population			.20*	-.16	.04	-.18
3. Number of program benefits received by respondent/family			-.19*	-.21**	-.20*	
4. Means-tested benefits				.69***	.24*	
5. Entitlements					.25**	
6. Farm-related benefit						

* - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$; *** - $p < .001$. All other are not significant.

Table 4

Predictors of Adequacy of Government Benefits Scores (Higher is Too Generous)

	Means-tested		Entitlements		Farm-related	
Variable	*B*	95% CI	*B*	95% CI	*B*	95% CI
Constant	40.7***	[29.1,48.5]	19.1***	[14.4,23.3]	5.9***	[2.97,7.84]
Age	.2	[-.02,.38]	.0	[-.05,.13]	.01*	[.02. 11]
Hometown population (trimmed at 80,000)	.0	[.00, .00]	.0	[.00,.00]	.0	[.00,.00]
Source of HH income (0 – *other*, 1 – *agriculture*)	5.5	[-.59,11.6]	2.6	[-.07,5.2]	-.14	[-1.6,1.4]
Number of benefits received by respondent/family	-.3	[-1.0,.4]	-.5**	[-.87,-.16]	-.12	[-.31,.06]
Biological sex (0 – *female*, 1 – *male*)	9.0**	[3.6,14.3]	3.2**	[.84,5.54]	.83	[-.47,2.14]
Adjusted R^2	.233		.208		.081	
F	7.254***		6.342***		2.938*	

CI – confidence interval. HH – household. * - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$; *** - $p < .001$. All others are not significant.

All variables that were significantly related to the reported level of adequacy of government benefits (age, hometown population trimmed, source of household income, number of benefits received, and biological sex) were tested together as predictors to determine the proportion of variance explained in the summative scores for mean-tested, entitlement, and farm-related government benefits (Table 4). These predictor variables explained 23.3% of the variance in means-tested benefits with only biological sex remaining statistically significant. The explained variance in entitlements was less (20.8%) but the number of benefits received joined biological sex as a significant predictor with a higher number of benefits significantly reducing the perception of the generosity of government benefits. Only 8.1% of the variance in farm-related benefits was explained with age as the single statistically significant predictor indicating that older respondents tended to see farm subsidies and crop insurance as too generous.

Discussion

This study explored rural and farm attitudes toward the generosity of 21 different government assistance programs finding that the most significant explanation for opposition to government benefits was male sexual identity. The male disaffection with government benefits was somewhat muted for institutionalized welfare programs (i.e., entitlements) and by prior receipt of more government benefits. Only age was significant in explaining the perception that farm program benefits are too generous.

Earlier explanations for anti-welfare attitudes among rural populations were largely the result of research suggesting that rural America is under siege. Declining populations in rural areas (Wood, 2008), the threat of agribusiness to the family farm (Arbuckle & Kast, 2012; Hanson, 2001), the brain drain and resource depletion associated with the education and relocation of the best young, rural students (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), and an increase in ethnic and cultural diversity are frequent explanations for rural defensiveness (Hirschman & Massey, 2008). This is presumed to have resulted in rural America forming a cultural image of itself that is intentionally anti-urban and anti-welfare (Sherman, 2009). As intuitive as these explanations appear to be, it is unclear how these factors remain explanatory when gender differences predominate in this data set.

A more useful explanation for gender differences in attitudes toward government benefit programs may be rooted in Hogan, Scarr, Lockie, and Alston's (2012) theoretical perspective on suicide risk for male Australian farmers. They link isolation and unprofitable farming to increased risk for egoistic suicide and failure to meet goals and injustice to increased risk for anomic suicide. Hogan et al.'s theory fits well with Kindle's (2006) integration of symbolic interactionism and control balance theory in which behavior is predicted by the intersection of individual autonomy and social obligation. Famers have high levels of autonomy over their daily work (Wood, 2008), but virtually no control over governmental intrusions into agricultural markets which can vary rapidly due to geopolitical issues (e.g. Carter's embargo of wheat sales to the Soviet Union or Trump's tariffs affecting soy bean exports to China). If government caprice is understood by American farmers as a form of injustice, it could easily lead to anomie (Hogan et al., 2012) or victimhood (Kindle, 2006) requiring an antithesis against which to self-identify and leading to a reactive socialization among the rural males against those utilizing welfare in the inner cities (Frank, 2004; Sherman, 2009).

Rural American females are a rarely studied group. Pearson's (1979) qualitative study dichotomized rural females in Colorado into two groups, those who participated in farming and those who did not. Those who farmed mimicked the perceptions of male farmers, but this may or may not have extended to attitudes toward government benefit programs. Those who did not farm preferred more traditional gender roles such as childrearing or caregiving. Butler and DePoy's (1996) sample of rural females in Maine suggested a degree of compassion toward those in need that led to a pro-welfare orientation, an orientation which may also be rooted in the female expectation of a substantial caregiving role (Glauber, 2017). In this study, the larger dependence of household income on non-farm employment reported by female respondents may suggest less female reactivity to the threats to autonomy due to government control over agricultural markets.

Although the limitations of this study are extensive due to the sampling approach which preclude the generalizability of results, the findings suggest additional research may be warranted related to gender differences in attitudes toward government benefit programs. Rural women may be, as a group, more receptive to arguments in support of social welfare programs anchored in the degree of human need, the importance of a compassionate social response to that need, and the anticipation of their future role as caregivers for others. In comparison to the psychological barriers among rural males that likely hinder support for social welfare programs, rural women may represent fertile allies in building a more socially just and compassionate America.

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