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MEASURING ATTITUDES TOWARD POVERTY: A NEW SCALE

Social work researchers need a dependable measure of attitudes toward poverty and the poor population. In addition to research applications, social workers could use a dependable scale to identify pertinent issues in professional workshops that deal with attitudes toward poverty and poor people. Social work educators could use the scale to assess student attitudes toward the poor population when they are addressing value questions associated with poverty. In this article, the authors offer a scale that shows reliability and validity.

BEGINNING STEPS

The development of a scale to measure attitudes toward poverty and the poor population was occasioned by the renewed emphasis on poverty during the past several years. With the emotional nature of attitudes toward poverty in mind, the authors assembled more than 100 statements that reflected both positive and negative attitudes toward poor people. The statements were carefully examined for ambiguity. Unclear items and duplicates were discarded. The list of statements was reduced to 50, which were then converted into Likert-type attitude items.

INITIAL TRIAL

Because several of the authors are college teachers, it was convenient to use students as subjects in the initial development of the scale. Although students are a special population, ample precedent exists for using them as trial subjects when developing an instrument (Erwin, 1983; Taylor, 1953; Unger, Draper, & Pendergrass, 1986). Also, we wanted to use a population that we believed was sympathetic to poor people in order to have a clear basis for comparison with other groups. Several classes in sociology and social work at three universities were asked to respond to the initial 50-item draft of the instrument. The sociology course included students from other majors who took the class as part of a general education requirement. The social work courses were among those open to non-social work majors. Because non-social work majors were in the classes, the sample would still be fairly representative of all students. Ninety-nine students responded. Ninety-five instruments were usable immediately; three others had only one answer missing, so the authors replaced the missing values with the mean item score for the remaining items on each instrument, a standard procedure. One instrument had a number of missing values and was excluded from any calculations. Because of the preliminary nature of the task, no demographic information was collected. Demographic data would not have been helpful because the students had a very narrow age range and did not vary greatly in educational attainment or social class. There was no attempt to ascertain the college majors of all the students because any subsamples would be too small for meaningful analysis.

ITEM ANALYSIS

The first evaluation of the instrument involved routine item analysis. We used two standard approaches: (1) The item-to-total correlation coefficient was calculated for the 50 items, and (2) the discriminant power (DP) was calculated for each item. The DP, an older approach that was used frequently before the availability of computers, is calculated by comparing the weighted average of the scores of the top quarter of the subjects with the weighted average of the bottom quarter (Goode & Hatt, 1952). Generally, the higher the DP, the better the item sorts those who have the attribute from those who do not. As a general rule, items with a DP of .5 or less are discarded. To shorten the instrument, only items that had an item-to-total correlation of .30 and above and a DP of .8 and above were kept. This left 37 items (Table 1). The scale was scored so that the higher the score, the more favorable the attitude toward the poor population. Thus, the minimum score is 37 and the maximum is 185.

INITIAL RESULTS

The 98 respondents' scores on the 37 final items ranged from 79 to 177. The mean score was 119.65, with a standard deviation of 21.97. The median score was 114, and the distribution was fairly normal and only slightly skewed in a positive direction.

Reliability

Cronbach's alpha for the 37-item version was .93. The split-half (odd versus even) reliability was .87. Split-half reliability coefficients are usually lower than those obtained by other methods of calculating reliability because the split-half approach compares what effectively are two shorter instruments.

Factor Analysis

To see if identifiable factors existed in attitudes toward poverty and the poor population, we performed a factor analysis of the instrument (Table 2). Initial principal component factor analysis resulted in 10 factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0. All 37 items loaded high (.33 or more) on factor 1, which had an eigenvalue of 11.4. With the large scree plot decline between factor I and factor 2 (from 11.4 to 2.8), there was little justification for rotating the matrix, and the authors concluded that the instrument was a single-factor scale.

Validity

A standard way of testing construct validity is to give the instrument to a sample that could reasonably be believed to differ in attitude. The consensus among the researchers was that business students would be a good comparison, because it is likely that they would not ordinarily be sympathetic to poor people and social welfare programs. Accordingly, the finished scale was administered to a large management class in the college of business administration at a large state university. The average score for the business students was 110.43 (N = 113, SD = 14.69). Cronbach's alpha for the business students on the full scale was .89, reaffirming the internal consistency of the instrument.

Although neither the social work and sociology students nor the business students were randomly selected, the authors needed an indication of the magnitude of the difference in the means. We used Student's t, but because the samples were not random, the results can only be considered suggestive and are not generalizable [t(209) = 3.600,p < .0005]. This high level of statistical significance suggests that had these been random samples, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

As expected, given the high reliability of the scale, the social work and sociology students scored more positively toward the poor population on almost every item on the instrument. There were four incidences in which the business students expressed a more favorable attitude toward poor people, but the differences on two of these incidences were minuscule.

NEXT STEPS

Of course, one trial will not establish the worth of the instrument. A great deal of work still needs to be done. It is necessary to determine differences in scores for common demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, income, and urban or rural residence. The convenience samples did not have enough variation in these characteristics to be meaningful. Also, further work needs to be done on differences by other important variables: for example, ethnicity, political orientation, and occupation. Although it is premature to make any extraordinary claim for the scale, the authors think that the reliability figures are encouraging. The significant difference in mean scores between the social work and sociology students and the business students lends support for the construct validity of the instrument. The authors would appreciate it if colleagues would use the scale in their research (particularly in samples with wide variation in the standard demographic characteristics) and share their results.

At the time this article was written, all authors were at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

TABLE 1. Attitudes about Poverty and Poor People

If you strongly agree, please circle SA.
If you agree, please circle A.
If you are neutral on the item, please circle N.
If you disagree, please circle D.
If you strongly disagree, please circle SD.

1. A person receiving welfare should not
   have a nicer car than I do.               SA   A   N   D   SD

2. Poor people will remain poor regardless
   what's done for them.                     SA   A   N   D   SD

3. Welfare makes people lazy.                SA   A   N   D   SD
4. Any person can get ahead in this
   country.                                  SA   A   N   D   SD

5. Poor people are satisfied receiving
   welfare.                                  SA   A   N   D   SD
6. Welfare recipients should be able to
   spend their money as they choose.(a)      SA   A   N   D   SD
7. An able-bodied person using food stamps
   is ripping off the system.                SA   A   N   D   SD

8. Poor people are dishonest.                SA   A   N   D   SD

9. If poor people worked harder, they
  could escape poverty.                      SA   A   N   D   SD

10. Most people are members of a minority
   group.                                    SA   A   N   D   SD

11. People are poor due to circumstances
   beyond their control.(a)                  SA   A   N   D   SD

12. Society has the responsibility to help
   poor people.(a)                           SA   A   N   D   SD

13. People in welfare should be made to
   work for their benefits.                  SA   A   N   D   SD

14. Unemployed poor people could find jobs
   if they tried harder.                     SA   A   N   D   SD

15. Poor people are different from the
   rest of society.                          SA   A   N   D   SD

16. Being poor is a choice.                  SA   A   N   D   SD

17. Most poor people are satisfied with
   their standard of living.                 SA   A   N   D   SD

18. Poor people think they deserve to be
   supported.                                SA   A   N   D   SD

19. Welfare mothers have babies to get
   more money.                               SA   A   N   D   SD

20. Children raised on welfare will never
   amount to anything.                       SA   A   N   D   SD

21. Poor people act differently.             SA   A   N   D   SD

22. Poor people are discriminated
   against.(a)                               SA   A   N   D   SD

23. Most poor people are dirty.              SA   A   N   D   SD
24. People who are poor should not be
   blamed for their misfortune.(a)           SA   A   N   D   SD

25. If I were poor, I would accept welfare
   benefits.(a)                              SA   A   N   D   SD

26. Out-of-work people ought to have to
   take the first job that is offered.       SA   A   N   D   SD
27. The government spends too much money
   on poverty programs.                      SA   A   N   D   SD

28. Some "poor" people live better than
   I do, considering all their benefits.     SA   A   N   D   SD

29. There is a lot of fraud among welfare
   recipients.                               SA   A   N   D   SD

30. Benefits for poor people consume a
   major part of the federal budget.         SA   A   N   D   SD

31. Poor people use food stamps wisely.(a)   SA   A   N   D   SD

32. Poor people generally have lower
   intelligence than nonpoor people.         SA   A   N   D   SD

33. Poor people should be more closely
   supervised.                               SA   A   N   D   SD

34. I believe poor people have a different
   set of values than do other people.       SA   A   N   D   SD

35. I believe poor people create their own
   difficulties.                             SA   A   N   D   SD

36. I believe I could trust a poor person
   in my employ.(a)                          SA   A   N   D   SD

37. I would support a program that resulted
   in higher taxes to support social
   programs for poor people.(a)              SA   A   N   D   SD

NOTE: Scoring is SA = 1, A = 2, N = 3, D = 4, SD = 5.

(a) This item should be reverse scored.

Table 2. Item-to-Total Correlations
and Discriminant Power of the 37
Retained Items

Item    r      p       DP

1      .46   >.001    1.775
2      .39   >.001    1.000
3      .72   >.001    2.840
4      .41   >.001    1.720
5      .66   >.001    1.900
6      .47   >.001    1.640
7      .60   >.001    2.120
8      .48   >.001     .960
9      .63   >.001    1.880
10     .39   >.001    1.200
11     .42   >.001    1.120
12     .38   >.001     .880
13     .43   >.001    1.240
14     .55   >.001    1.480
15     .42   >.001     .880
16     .45   >.001    1.240
17     .44   >.001    1.320
18     .62   >.001    1.640
19     .68   >.001    2.480
20     .48   >.001    1.200
21     .38   >.001     .920
22     .44   >.001    1.320
23     .48   >.001    1.120
24     .33    .001     .840
25     .50   >.001    1.720
26     .55   >.001    1.560
27     .70   >.001    2.520
28     .51   >.001    1.520
29     .70   >.001    2.160
30     .63   >.001    1.840
31     .34    .001    1.160
32     .35    .001    1.088
33     .48   >.001    1.720
34     .50   >.001    1.160
35     .65   >.001    1.680
36     .41   >.001     .920
37     .45   >.001    1.520

NOTE: DP = discriminant power. Split-half
reliability: r = .87. Alpha = .93.

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