

**Where You Stand Depends on What You See: Connections Among
Values, Perceptions, and Prescriptions**

Jennifer Hochschild
Princeton University

January 1995

Prepared for conference on the study of values in the National Election Study, Phoenix, Arizona, February 15-16, 1995. DRAFT: do not quote or cite without permission. Comments welcomed.

Assuming that everyone reading this memo agrees that we should, in some fashion, seek to study values in public opinion surveys, I seek here to persuade readers to add another element to surveys that include questions on values -- respondents' perceptions of facts.

Social scientists have long pointed out that many Americans do not know basic political facts such as the name of the vice president or what the Bill of Rights is.¹ That phenomenon is important politically and normatively. But it does not in itself invalidate the importance of values in shaping public opinion; one can be a strong individualist and support freedom of speech even for disliked opinions without being able to identify the Fifth Amendment. Ignorance of political facts is, nevertheless, troubling to democratic theorists and should be carefully considered in analyzing the role of values in shaping public opinion.

However, some perceptions of fact probably do play a central role in shaping individuals' values or in translating general values into particular views or policy preferences. "The average American thinks America is 32% black, 21% Hispanic and 18% Jewish."² More crucially, over half of Americans think that the nation is at least 30% black, and a seventh of Americans think

¹ In 1952, 1989, and 1994, at least one-fourth of Americans could not correctly name the vice-president (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991: 591; The Polling Report 1994: 4). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991, forthcoming 1995) survey the literature and report new results on other aspects of political knowledge.

² Gallup and Newport 1990: 2

that the nation is at least half black.³ Americans systematically overestimate the rate of unemployment likely to obtain in the near future, although they are no more likely to overestimate than to underestimate the up-coming rate of inflation.⁴ In 1985, over 60% of Americans thought that at least 20% of Americans lived below the poverty line, and a quarter of Americans thought that at least four in ten Americans were poor.⁵

These findings are more than fodder for either the school of thought that proclaims, pace V. O. Key, that voters really are fools,⁶ or the school that deplores the American educational system. They are crucial for understanding what values mean to people. Colloquially, "where you stand depends on what you see;" more formally, I hypothesize that perceptions of fact both help to shape values and help to transform general values into particular views.⁷

³ A quarter think the nation is at least 30% Hispanic and 40% think the nation is at least 20% Jewish. An additional 10 to 15% gave no estimate in each case (Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993: 335).

⁴ Dua and Smyth 1993: 568, 571

⁵ An additional 15% gave no answer (Los Angeles Times 1985: ques. 81).

⁶ Key 1966: 7

⁷ How much one finds that perceptions of fact shape values depends in part on how one defines values. If they are defined as deep-seated predispositions or fundamental constructs that stem from childhood socialization, community ties, or searing personal experiences, a long line of psychological research tells us that values are more likely to create than to be created by perceptions. (The research perhaps starts with Festinger,

Consider, for example, the perception that a fifth or more of Americans are poor. If one believes that, one might then come to believe that "the government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens and it has an obligation to take care of them" (as a quarter of the Los Angeles Times respondents do) because with so many in poverty, they cannot all help themselves and their condition is probably not their fault anyway. Conversely, if one believes that a fifth or more of Americans are poor, one might come to believe that "people are responsible for their own well-being and they have an obligation to take care of themselves" (as two-thirds of the Times respondents do)⁸ because governmental resources of money and personnel would be swamped trying to care for so many. Thus perceptions may cause or induce changes in values.

Alternatively, values may interact with perceptions to create policy prescriptions. Suppose that one both believes that government has an obligation to care for the poor and thinks that over a fifth of Americans are poor. One might well then conclude that "the government should spend a great deal more money on

Riecken, and Schacter (1956) and continues at least through Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock [1991]).

Conversely, if values are defined as "broad statements of principle -- often mutually contradictory -- about how to prioritize interests," they will be operationalized and measured differently, and probably will be more amenable to change through changes in perceptions. My thanks to Matthew Burbank of University of Utah and Mark Lindeman of Columbia University (from whom the quotation comes) for helping me to clarify this issue.

⁸ Los Angeles Times 1985: ques. 70

poverty programs" (as 14% of the Los Angeles Times respondents do), or that "workfare" is a bad idea (presumably because the labor market cannot absorb so many new workers at once) as 9% of those willing to venture a recommendation did. Conversely, if one believes that people are obliged to care for themselves, and one thinks that over a fifth of Americans are poor, one might conclude both that "the problem of poverty can be handled mainly by volunteer efforts" (14% agreement) and that "poverty... will always be a major problem for our society" (89% agreement).⁹ Agreement with both of those latter statements might look contradictory, but the contradiction dissolves in light of a particular combination of values and perceptions.

There is plenty of work to be done in sorting out the simple causal relationships among values, perceptions of facts, policy prescriptions, and descriptions of particular social or political institutions. But the picture becomes even more complicated, and more interesting, when one adds other perceptual dimensions.

Consider, for example, people's understanding of their own location in the social structure. In almost every year between 1972 and 1991, one and a half times as many Americans thought that their family income was below average as thought it was above average. Half of the population thinks their family income is average.¹⁰ It would be very interesting to find out which

⁹ Los Angeles Times 1985: ques. 67, 69, 72, 75

¹⁰ Calculations from Davis and Smith 1982: 149; 1987: 221; 1991: 238

kinds of people overestimate, underestimate, and accurately locate their own position, but that is not my direct concern here. My concern is the implications of the aggregate underestimation of one's location in the social structure for the study of values in public opinion. Given that context, strong individualists who think their income is above average might be especially inclined to feel gratification about their own lives and warmth toward the nation in which they and others like them have thrived. Strong individualists who think that their income is below average may feel humility or bitterness, and might in the latter case castigate the nation that apparently promotes individualism but actually denies rewards to deserving citizens like themselves.¹¹ A society which harbors more individualists who feel poor than who feel rich, as the U.S. apparently does, will be partly driven by a politics of resentment.

Or consider the importance of definitions. In the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, it became clear that men and women defined sexual harassment differently, and therefore their understanding of how much it occurred and how it ought to be dealt with also differed.¹² So their definitions affected their perceptions, which affected their prescriptions. But their values probably were involved in the process of definition as well. On the one hand, men who saw women as

¹¹ For examples of gratified and embittered individualists, see Hochschild 1981: 30-31, 126-129.

¹² ABC News/Washington Post 1992

inferior or different probably defined sexual harassment more stringently than did men who saw women as equal or in relevant ways identical to themselves. On the other hand, men who came to realize how much sexual harassment there is from a woman's perspective may well have increased their respect for and appreciation of women, at least women in the workplace. Thus values shaped definitions, and new definitions changed values. Or so I hypothesize; we need new sets of survey questions (and qualitative interviews) to determine if these hypotheses hold up.

Or consider the effects of people's perceptions of others' perceptions. The proportion of people who hold a given opinion on an issue covaries over time with their perception of how many other people hold the same opinion.¹³ Possibly the holding of values, or the strength with which one is willing to espouse values, similarly varies with one's perception of how many other people hold those values. (The nature of the variation could itself be affected by values; for conformists, the correlation would be positive; for contrarians, it would be negative.) This point suggests that change over time in perceptions, both at the individual and aggregate levels, should be a crucial component of any study of the relationships among perceptions, values, and policy prescriptions or political preferences.

¹³ Noelle-Neumann 1984; Glynn and McLeod 1984; Glynn 1989. My thanks to Frank Rusciano of Rider College for reminding me of this feature of perceptions, and to Matthew Burbank of the University of Utah for some very provocative comments on the point.

In our eagerness to study the new issue of values we should not throw out the old issue of demographics. This statement is more than an exhortation to be all-encompassing; as the example of defining sexual harassment shows, not only does where you stand depend on what you see, but also what you see sometimes depends on who you are. Thus not only do people who see widespread sexual harassment probably value women more highly than do people who see infrequent sexual harassment. In addition, women probably see more sexual harassment than do men. Similarly, whites' perceptions of blacks' perceptions of whites differs in intelligible and important ways from blacks' perceptions of whites' perceptions of blacks.¹⁴ Those perceptions combine with values to affect how members of each race think about various political and policy issues; on this issue at least, one could make no sense of values without beginning from demographic characteristics.

The association between demographic characteristics, perceptions, and values is complicated in several ways. The first is the familiar complexity of interacting independent variables. For example, although "Africans Americans were somewhat more likely to overestimate the size of their own group, this relationship dropped to insignificance in a multivariate context."¹⁵ The second is more specific to the study of values. Blacks' overestimate of the number of African Americans in the

¹⁴ Glaser 1992

¹⁵ Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993: 336

U.S. is likely to mean something very different to them than whites' overestimate of the number of African Americans means to them. Blacks will be inappropriately gratified, whites inappropriately threatened.¹⁶ More precisely, individualistic blacks may be inappropriately gratified that, with so many others like themselves, some who work hard enough are sure to succeed; individualistic whites may be inappropriately concerned that, with so many blacks seeking to benefit from affirmative action, people like themselves have less than a fair chance to succeed no matter how hard they work. Once again, this is all hypothetical;¹⁷ my point is not the particular argument but rather the claim that we must attend to the connections among demographic traits, perceptions, and values in order to study the causes and effects of values themselves.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993: 340-343

¹⁷ The connections I posit are hypothetical; however, although fewer than 10% of whites claim to have lost a job or promotion due to affirmative action, up to two-thirds believe it likely that a white person will suffer such a loss. One-third of whites think affirmative action programs frequently "deprive someone... of their rights," and two-tenths think "blacks have more of a chance to get good jobs and education than whites" (General Social Survey 1990-91: var. 399; Los Angeles Times 1991: ques. 50, 71, 76). A combination of individualistic values and overestimations of the number of blacks might explain these apparently inconsistent views.

¹⁸ Just to complicate matters a bit further, unlike in the case of estimating the number of blacks, poor people (especially men) are less likely to overestimate the number of Americans living in poverty than are non-poor people (especially blacks and men) [Los Angeles Times 1985: ques. 81]. That finding presumably ramifies in a different way through values and policy prescriptions.

One survey not only compares women's and men's views on

An Illustration: Race, Class, and Beliefs About the American Dream: Let me conclude by demonstrating through one extended case how important perceptions, themselves mediated by demographic traits, are in mediating the effects of values on opinions and possibly in creating values in the first place. African Americans share the ideology of the American dream almost as strongly as do white Americans.¹⁹ For example, blacks endorse "self reliance" almost as strongly as do whites; seventy percent of black, and 80% of white, Californians agree that "trying to get ahead" is very important in "making someone a true American."²⁰ As many blacks as whites (up to 90%) agree that a good education, ambition, and hard work are crucial to getting ahead; more blacks than whites add ability to the list.²¹ These

which gender actually takes most responsibility for child care, whether women actually have equal job influence, and so on; it includes parallel questions about whether gender equality should obtain. It would be a fertile field for exploring many of the questions I am raising in this essay (Kane and Macaulay 1993).

¹⁹ The next few paragraphs come from Hochschild 1995: chaps. 3 and 4. I define the American dream as a combination of four tenets, answering the questions: Who may pursue the American dream? In what does the pursuit consist? How does one successfully pursue the dream? Why is the pursuit worthy of our deepest commitment?

The answer to "who" in the standard ideology is "everyone, regardless of ascriptive traits, family background, or personal history." The answer to "what" is "the reasonable anticipation, though not the promise, of success, however it is defined." The answer to "how" is "through actions and traits under one's own control." The answer to "why" is "true success is associated with virtue" (see Hochschild 1995: chap. 1 for more detail).

²⁰ Markus 1995; Citrin et al. 1990: 1132

²¹ General Social Survey 1987: vars. 507C-F

views are, if possible, even more strongly and uniformly expressed now than four decades ago.²²

And yet African Americans are much more embittered about the past, and pessimistic about the future, practice of the American dream than are whites. For example, whites are increasingly convinced that racial equality is growing in the United States, while blacks are increasingly convinced of the reverse. In the mid-1960s, 30 to 45 percent of whites (depending on the year and question wording) felt that the nation was making progress in solving its racial problems; by the 1970s, 50 to 70 percent concurred, and by 1988, fully 87 percent of whites believed that "in the past 25 years, the country has moved closer to equal opportunity among the races." The same trajectory holds for predictions about the future. The proportion of blacks who see increasing racial equality has declined from between 50 and 80 percent in the mid-1960s to between 20 and 45 percent in the 1980s. In some surveys, up to half claim that the situation of blacks has worsened since some referent point in the past, and two-thirds deny that "racial equality [will] be achieved in America" during their lifetimes or ever.²³

²² Schlozman and Verba 1979: 145, 166-169; McClosky and Zaller 1984: 64-100, 116; Kluegel and Smith 1986: 112-113; Verba and Orren 1985: 72; People for the American Way 1992: 57-59

²³ Hochschild and Herk 1990: notes 23, 29, 30; Hochschild 1995: Chap. 3, notes 20-25; Dawson 1994: 7. Racial disparities are as stark on particular issues as on general evaluations. During the summer of 1994, for example, blacks were much more certain than were whites that O.J. Simpson had been set up -- whether by policemen or "someone else" -- and much more critical of his treatment compared with that of white murder suspects

These increasing racial disparities are driven largely by growing disillusionment among middle class African Americans. On balance, the poorest third of blacks believe that the American dream is a workable recipe for success in the United States as much as their counterparts did in the 1960s when first polled. It is the best-off third of blacks who have lost faith, not in the ideology itself, but in its applicability to American society. In the 1960s, to cite only one example, blacks with less than a high school education were more likely than blacks with at least some college education to agree that "most white people... want to keep blacks down;" by the 1980s, the reverse was the case, mainly because middle-class African Americans had become much more embittered about whites' racial motivations.²⁴

Many factors explain the growing gap among blacks (especially the affluent) between values and descriptions of or predictions about American society; the one I wish to focus on here is perceptions. Up to 20% of middle-class blacks mistakenly describe their family incomes as below average (compared with about 5% of middle-class whites). Conversely, about 30% of poor blacks make the pathetic overestimate that their family incomes are average or above average. (More poor whites make the same mistake, but the gap between their income and the median family

(Newsweek Poll in Alter 1994: 18).

²⁴ Hochschild 1995: table 4.1; see more generally chap. 4

income is only half as great.)²⁵ Poor African Americans are about as likely as all Americans to agree that "the percentage of blacks living in poverty has been increasing from year to year;" middle class blacks are one-and-a-half times more likely than all Americans to agree to that claim.²⁶

And so on. In many ways blacks see a different world than do whites, and for complicated reasons the best-off blacks see the world even more differently from whites than do the worst-off blacks. These disparate views include and are wrapped up in different perceptions of reality much more than in different underlying values.²⁷ The combination of shared values, divergent perceptions of fact, different descriptions of American society, and varying policy prescriptions is so frustrating that it itself is driving many blacks to question, and perhaps even to change, their underlying values. Thus in the most recent national survey of African Americans, blacks demonstrated much more nationalism than they had even five years earlier. In addition, a small majority agreed that "political rights are useless unless accompanied by economic rights" -- a dramatic change from the emphasis on political and legal rights expressed by the civil

²⁵ Calculations from General Social Survey (various years): var. 149, 1972-1982; var. 188, 1983-1991

²⁶ Similarly, poor blacks overestimate the proportion of the poor who are black at the same rate as all other Americans; non-poor blacks are considerably more likely to overestimate that figure (Los Angeles Times 1985: ques. 83, 85).

²⁷ See Hochschild (1995) for qualitative as well as quantitative evidence on this point.

rights movement of the early 1960s.²⁸

We come, then, full circle. We need to study values much more systematically than we have in the past, and we need to ensure that values do not become stand-ins for old concepts of political ideology or policy preferences. At the same time, we need to connect values to traditional measures, such as political ideology, party preferences, and demographics. Finally, we need to add the study of perceptions to the study of values so that we develop a clearer sense of what people think they are talking about when they evaluate it. That work will keep us all happily occupied for a long time to come.

²⁸ Dawson 1994: 7

Bibliography

- ABC News/Washington Post (1992), untitled survey, Dec. 11-14.
- Alter, Jonathan (1994) "Black and White and Read All Over," Newsweek, August 1: 18-21
- Citrin, Jack, Beth Reingold, and Donald Green (1990) "American Identity and the Politics of Ethnic Change," J. of Politics 52, No. 4: 1124-1154
- Davis, James and Tom Smith (1982) General Social Surveys 1972-1982: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center)
- Davis, James and Tom Smith (1987) General Social Surveys 1972-1987: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center)
- Davis, James and Tom Smith (1991) General Social Surveys 1972-1991: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center)
- Dawson, Michael (1994a) "African American Political Discontent," Polling Report 10, No. 8: 1, 6.
- Delli Carpini, Michael and Scott Keeter (1991) "Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics," Public Opinion Quarterly 55, No. 4: 583-612
- Delli Carpini, Michael and Scott Keeter (forthcoming 1995) Information and Empowerment: What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Dua, Pami and David Smyth (1993) "Survey Evidence on Excessive Public Pessimism about the Future Behavior of Unemployment," Public Opinion Quarterly 57, No. 4: 566-574
- Festinger, Leon, H.W. Riecken, and S. Schacter (1956) When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World (New York: Harper)
- Gallup, George Jr. and Frank Newport (1990) "Americans Ignorant of Basic Census Facts," Gallup Poll Monthly, No. 294: 2-5.
- General Social Survey (various years), directed by James Davis and Tom Smith (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center), unpublished tabulations in possession of author

Glaser, James (1992) "What People Think Other People Think: Racial Differences in the Attribution of Issue Positions," Paper for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Sept. 3-6

Glynn, Carroll (1989) XXXX -- from M. Burbank, U. of Utah

Glynn, Carroll and Jack McLeod (1984) "Public Opinion du Jour: An Examination of the Spiral of Silence," Public Opinion Quarterly 48, No. 4: 731-740

Hochschild, Jennifer (1981) What's Fair? American Beliefs About Distributive Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)

Hochschild, Jennifer (forthcoming 1995) Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Hochschild, Jennifer and Monica Herk (1990) "Yes, but...": Principles and Caveats in American Racial Attitudes," in John Chapman and Alan Wertheimer, eds. Nomos XXXII: Majorities and Minorities (New York: New York University Press): 308-335

Kane, Emily and Laura Macaulay (1993) "Interviewer Gender and Gender Attitudes," Public Opinion Quarterly 57, No. 1: 1-28

Key, V. O. (1966) The Responsible Electorate (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)

Kluegel, James and Eliot Smith (1986) Beliefs about Inequality: Americans' Views of What Is and What Ought to Be (New York: Aldine de Gruyter)

Los Angeles Times (1985) "The Poverty Poll - No. 96," April 1985

Los Angeles Times (1991) untitled poll, June 28-30

Markus, Gregory (forthcoming 1995) "American Individualism Reconsidered," in James Kuklinski ed., Political Psychology and Public Opinion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

McClosky, Herbert and John Zaller (1984) The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Nadeau, Richard, Richard Niemi, and Jeffrey Levine (1993) "Innumeracy About Minority Populations," Public Opinion Quarterly 57, No. 3: 332-247

Noelle-Neumann, Elizabeth (1984) The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion -- Our Social Skin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

People for the American Way (1992) Democracy's Next Generation II: A Study of American Youth on Race (Washington D.C.: People for the American Way)

The Polling Report (1994) "The Incredible Shrinking Vice President," 10, No. 19: 4

Schlozman, Kay and Sidney Verba (1979) Injury to Insult: Unemployment, Class, and Political Response (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)

Verba, Sidney and Gary Orren (1985) Equality in America: The View From the Top (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)