War Widows and Welfare Queens:
The Semiotics of Deservingness in the U.S. Welfare System*

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The social issue of poverty has been a persistent source of debate in the American system of policy development, influenced by conceptual distinctions between the "haves" and "have-nots," "working moms" and "unemployed dads," and the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor." Although there is a wealth of literature discussing the ideological underpinnings of stratification systems, these discussions often focus on categorical distinctions between the poor and the non-poor, with much less discussion of distinctions made within the poor. Moreover, while scholars of culture and policy have long referenced the importance of cultural categories of worthiness in policy development, the theoretical significance of these distinctions has been largely understudied. I expand the discourse on the relationship between cultural representations of worth and social welfare policy by exploring how these categories are conceptualized. Drawing on analytical tools from a sociology of perception framework, I create a model that examines deservingness along continuums of morality and eligibility to highlight the taken-for-granted cultural subtleties that shape perceptions of the poor. I focus on social filters created by norms of poverty, welfare, and the family to explore how the deserving are differentiated from the undeserving.

Few social problems have triggered more visceral and persistent debate than poverty in the United States, making this social issue a site for a particularly salient symbolic system in American culture. Contrasts occur at multiple levels across this symbolic system – between the "haves" and the "have-nots," "working moms" and "unemployed dads," and the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor." These distinctions are strongly attached to shared norms around poverty and are reflected broadly in descriptions and symbols of the "poor."[i] There is a breadth of literature examining categorical distinctions related to stratification more broadly; however, the cognitive relationship between "deservingness" and "undeservingness" merits more sociological attention. While most people have some sense of what it is to be normatively deserving or undeserving, there is less understanding of the constitutive processes that created and reinforced this conceptual distinction. I use a sociocognitive approach, drawing on analytical tools from a sociology of perception framework, to examine the normative social organization of deservingness in the American welfare system. I focus on social filters created by norms of poverty, welfare, and the family to explore how the deserving are differentiated from the undeserving. Using this theoretical framework, I create a conceptual model focusing on two dimensions of worth – morality and eligibility – by which deservingness is conceptualized along a continuum.

**THE CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF DESERVINGNESS AND UNDESERVINGNESS: POVERTY AND WELFARE IN THE U.S.**

Because of the attention on means-tested programs like TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamps program), and to a lesser extent on entitlement programs like unemployment and disability insurance, there are several other government-sponsored programs that qualify as "welfare" but

are often overlooked. In its definition, welfare refers to "financial or other assistance to an individual or family from a city, state, or national government" (Dictionary.com). In this way, because U.S. Department of Agriculture and Federal Housing Administration mortgage assistance, public education, and tax subsidies provide financial and in-kind assistance, they are also relevant when discussing deservingness; therefore, I use this broader definition of welfare.

Although there is a wealth of literature discussing the ideological underpinnings of stratification systems (Huber and Form 1973, Tilly 1998, Massey 2008), these discussions often focus on categorical distinctions between the poor and the non-poor, with much less discussion of distinctions made *within* the poor. The literature which examines deservingness as it relates to poverty also does not fully consider *how* these distinctions are made, often only referencing societal perceptions of the poor and their impact on policy (Appelbaum 2001, Reeskens and van Oorschot 2012, Aarøe and Petersen 2014). Other scholars have examined related concepts like "dependency" (Fraser and Gordon 1994), "welfare dependency" (O'Connor 2001), and the "underclass" (Gans 1995). In *The Undeserving Poor*, Michael Katz (1989, 2013) presents one of the most well-known and thorough histories of the categorization of the undeserving poor, but the discussion lacks a nuanced treatment of the sociocognitive dimensions of deservingness. Herbert J. Gans (1995) provides a detailed discussion of the development of deservingness, connecting the concept to the term "underclass," focusing on how the poor have been labeled over time. However, like Katz, Gans does not examine the sociocognitive dimensions of this social construct. Martin Gilens (1999) discusses Americans' perceptions of deservingness as a consequence of stereotypes held about Blacks. Although this discussion provides context for the dynamics of deservingness, this analysis also lacks a treatment of this concept as a significant sociocultural phenomenon.

While important work on the development of social policy has often explicitly referenced or alluded to the significance of moral categories of worthiness (Skocpol 1992, Schneider and Ingram 2005), much less often have scholars grappled with the influence of culture as a fundamental focus of their theoretical framing in studying policy development. John Mohr's (1994) examination of early 20th century responses to poverty provides one valuable example analytically demonstrating the significance of cultural categories of deservingness in policies addressing poverty. Examining the categorical descriptions of clients in the 1907 New York City Charity Directory, Mohr (1994) conducts a blockmodel analysis to test the relationship between discourse roles and the treatment of the social identities included in the directory. In this analysis, Mohr (1994) grapples with questions of gender, perceived morality, and the achievement versus the ascription of statuses to investigate the services provided to different identities, including soldiers, mothers, working boys, immigrants, and the disabled. Mohr (1994) argues that these conceptual issues – morality, identity, role, and gender – were significant in the creation of a moral order governing the services offered to different categories of the poor.

Brian Steensland (2006) provides another prominent example of the impact of culture on policy outcomes, demonstrating that cultural categories of worthiness impact policy development through schematic, discursive, and institutional mechanisms. Analyzing archival and media records of the debates around the guaranteed annual income proposals in the 1960s and 1970s, Steensland (2006) argues that cultural categories of worth were significant in the political failure of these proposals. This project fills important gaps in the theoretical framing of policy development by addressing the import of culture in explaining policy-making processes. Steensland (2006) ultimately calls for "further exploring the constitutive nature of cultural categories rather than their particular contents" (1320). I attempt to respond to Steensland's call

by investigating the cognitive mechanics of the conceptualization of deservingness and undeservingness. I build on these earlier works by exploring *how* these categories are constructed, creating a model that examines deservingness along a continuum to highlight the taken-for-granted cultural subtleties that shape perceptions of the poor.

## RELEVANCE, FOCUS, AND FILTERS:

## SOCIOCOGNITION IN THE STUDY OF DESERVINGNESS

A sociology of perception framework is useful for examining how deservingness is conceptualized. From a sociocognitive standpoint, perception refers to social influences on the way that individuals perceive the world (Zerubavel 1997), both in sensory perception and thought. The sociology of perception is concerned with "the interpretive dimension of perception, since what we experience through our senses is normally 'filtered' through various interpretive frameworks" (Zerubavel 1997:23-4). In the study of public policy, perception is useful for examining the ways in which social issues are packaged. For example, Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) discusses the "'optical significance' of scientific revolutions," stating that "[t]hey are primarily cognitive upheavals that radically transform the way we 'look' at the world" and "[w]hile they may not always involve the discovery of any new facts, they do offer us new *mental lenses* through which old ones may be seen in a new way" (25-6). Similarly, the packaging of social issues may be used by politicians, the media, or the public to influence legislative agendas and secure support for policy changes by encouraging a new "look" at issues without necessarily presenting any new facts. In this way, examining the "mental lenses" related to deservingness is important in understanding how perceptions contribute to its conceptualization. This theoretical framework offers several analytical tools which are useful for examining the conceptualization of deservingness, including relevance (Zerubavel 2015), focus

(Zerubavel 1997), and filters (Friedman 2013). Ultimately, in this analysis these tools help to reveal cultural interpretations related to issues of poverty, welfare, and the family, rather than the "objective reality" of these issues.

The sociocognitive underpinnings of cultural relevance, through attention and inattention, are valuable for the study of deservingness, because "not only does our social environment affect how we perceive the world; it also helps determine what actually 'enters' our minds in the first place" (Zerubavel 1997:35). Specifically, "[*a*]*ttending* something in a focused manner entails mentally disengaging it (as a 'figure') from its surrounding 'ground,' which we essentially ignore" (Zerubavel 1997:15). In this way, *mental focusing* helps to differentiate between the relevant and irrelevant by indicating what should be attended, as well as what should be disattended or deliberately ignored (Zerubavel 2015). Patterns of attention are shaped by morality, creating processes of *moral focusing* by demarcating the boundaries of "moral horizons" in that "any object we perceive as lying 'outside' this circle…is essentially considered morally irrelevant and, as such, does not even arouse our moral concerns" (Zerubavel 1997:39). As it relates to the study of deservingness, moral focusing around poverty, welfare, and the family is used to examine how some social issues and demographic characteristics are focused on while others are explicitly or implicitly ignored.

As a sociocognitive analytical tool, the *filter* (Friedman 2013) further helps to elucidate the impact of (dis)attention, focusing, and relevance on perception. The filter functions conceptually as a "mental strainer" or "sieve" that "let[s] in culturally meaningful details while sifting out the culturally irrelevant" (Friedman 2013:29). This tool "highlights what is seen *and what is ignored because its metaphorical blockages and holes explicitly represent the dialectical relationship between attention and disattention" (Friedman 2013:29). As the filter is reflective of

social norms (Friedman 2013), it is useful for exploring how culture impacts the development of social statuses. I use the filter to highlight how norms of poverty, welfare, and the family function to sift through culturally relevant and irrelevant factors to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving. *Mental weighing* (Mullaney 1999) is also critical for understanding how determinations are made in cases of disproportionate levels of morality and eligibility, the two dimensions of deservingness. In cases where one dimension is more outwardly weighty, the cultural relevance of the dimension can serve as a mental weight to balance out or reverse the relationship between the dimensions, contributing to the perceived deservingness or undeservingness of any given case or example. The use of these analytical tools elucidates the ways in which cognitive processes are at play in constructing categories of deservingness and undeservingness.

## A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF DESERVINGNESS

Deservingness has been the subject of diverse social scientific analysis, including examining perceptions of the deservingness of heart transplant recipients (O'Brien et al. 2014), of post-Hurricane Katrina FEMA aid recipients (Reid 2013), and of victims of violent crime (Lodewijkx, de Kwaadsteniet, and Nijstad 2005). Some scholars have addressed deservingness related to poverty, examining how the media responds to Supplemental Security Income policy changes ending eligibility for elderly immigrants (Yoo 2001), how deservingness impacts the public's decisions about providing aid to the poor (Appelbaum 2001, Gilens 1999, Will 1993), how electoral competition impacts discretionary welfare spending (Barrilleaux and Bernick 2003), and under what conditions perceptions of particular groups translate into public policy (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2005). However, this work does not fully address the cognitive nuances that frame how distinctions are made between the deserving and the undeserving. In the

context of the American welfare system, I suggest deservingness is not only an individual's eligibility to secure welfare benefits, but also includes the individual's perceived worthiness of empathy, respect, care, and compassion or conversely of blame and guilt. Importantly, when discussing conceptualizations of deservingness, I focus on *normative perspectives* in the U.S., as they are instrumental in legitimating the country's policy responses to poverty.

I present a conceptual model of deservingness which includes two dimensions, legality and morality, and highlights three filters, poverty, welfare, and the family. I explore perceptions of deservingness constructed through these dimensions and filters using descriptors and symbols (i.e. cases) of the poor. These cases represent cultural symbols of the poor, such as the "welfare queen," the "dependent poor," and "illegal aliens," as well as descriptive terms related to particular groups of the poor, such as the elderly, children, and students. I chose cases which are both frequently referenced in discourse around poverty, welfare, and the family, and those which are not in order to illustrate the attention and focus on particular groups and issues, as well as the inattention to others.

To distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving, this symbolic system rests upon formal legal criteria and informal norms of moral considerations. In this model, deservingness is a continuum along which cases are plotted. Essentially, legality and morality represent an x-y grid where the latter is plotted along the x (or horizontal) axis and the former is plotted along the y (or vertical) axis (See Figure). The positive values of both axes are conceptualized as "moral" and "legal" respectively, and the negative values as "immoral" and "illegal." The center of the model, representing the neutrality of both dimensions, is conceptualized as "amoral" (neither moral nor immoral) and "alegal" (either not explicitly legal or illegal, or fitting some criteria and not others). Higher levels of legality and morality represent

higher levels of deservingness. The top right quadrant, where both components are high (highly moral and legal), represents extreme deservingness. Conversely, the bottom left quadrant represents extreme undeservingness, where both components are low (highly immoral and illegal). Importantly, in this model, deservingness does not represent a simple dichotomy – descriptors and symbols of the poor may be more or less deserving based on their relative levels of legality and morality. [Put Figure about here]

I position these cases in my conceptual model using multicontextual data, including federal and state legislation, political rhetoric, media coverage, popular culture, public opinion data, and academic research. This conceptual formal analytic approach allows for the exploration of general social patterns across diverse contexts (Zerubavel 2007). It is in the genericity of the patterns that this examination draws its analytical power in demonstrating the breadth and depth of deservingness as a sociological concept. These data were selected in a theme-driven (Zerubavel 2007) process of data collection, analytically focusing on the conceptualizations of worthiness and deservingness in my reading and analysis of varied pieces of multicontextual data. In this case, the diversity of these data allows for an examination of how values, mores, and norms around poverty, welfare, and the family across a wide range of contexts influence a collective understanding of legal and moral considerations.

Several concepts are relevant when determining an individual or symbol's perceived level of morality, including family structure, employment, financial and social responsibility, and demographic factors. The examination of legality is drawn directly from welfare legislation, which outlines who may receive different benefits and under what conditions. Legal criteria for entitlement programs (e.g. Social Security and unemployment insurance) are notably different from means-tested programs (e.g. TANF and SNAP). The most obvious difference is highlighted

by the names of the respective programs in that the former represent assistance that individuals are entitled to, based on employment or other criteria, while the latter represent aid that may or may not be disbursed based on the financial circumstances of the individual and the state. For example, to be legally eligible to secure a VA home loan, an individual needs only to have been discharged from the armed services under a condition other than dishonorable and meet length of service requirements. However, to obtain TANF benefits, an individual must demonstrate financial hardship at a level determined by the state.

On its face, legality may appear to be a relatively objective measure; however, extensive changes to the eligibility criteria over time, and the diverse procedures of different states and municipalities, are indication of its subjectivity. For example, in 1913, a Wisconsin state statute mandating eligibility requirements for children receiving Aid to Dependent Children benefits said that the father had to be absent from the household and that the mother had to be of "*good moral character* and the proper person to have the custody and care" of the child (Wisconsin 1920). Today "good moral character" would never be explicitly mentioned as a formal legal criterion, but the influence of this construct is nevertheless present in legal criteria related to the conceptualization of deservingness.

The relationship between legality and morality is also an important consideration in this analysis. In some instances, legality is more heavily mentally weighed (Mullaney 1999) than morality, while in other cases the reverse is true. Specifically, when both dimensions are either extremely high or extremely low, legality and morality interact to create intense levels of deservingness and undeservingness respectively. However, when legality is extremely low and morality is relatively high, the former dimension is more salient and outweighs or overrides the latter, increasing the symbol's undeservingness. Similarly, when morality is extremely low and

legality is relatively high, the former dimension is more salient also increasing undeservingness. Moderate levels on both dimensions result in higher relative deservingness.

This conceptual model of deservingness provides a more general framework for examining how cultural filters and weighing are used to delineate cultural worth and non-worth. These processes of sociocognitive politics create diverse conceptual categories which reinforce the assumed value of some groups over others. While the present analysis is examining distinctions made among groups of the poor in the U.S., the conceptual tools employed here might also be utilized to develop models of worthiness in other contexts.

**FROM WAR WIDOWS TO WELFARE QUEENS:**

**DISTINGUISHING THE DESERVING FROM THE UNDESERVING**

In the discussion that follows, I explore *how* distinctions are made in the American welfare system between the deserving and the undeserving. Ultimately, I suggest this system of classification rests on sociocognitive processes. While symbols are largely used to indicate deservingness and undeservingness, simple descriptive terms are also central to this discussion. I use both descriptors and symbols (identified using quotation marks to indicate their collective meaning) as cases of deservingness and undeservingness.

*Poverty Filter*

Norms related to poverty are central to the conceptualization of deservingness, particularly through ideas about dependency, work, and personal responsibility, which create a *poverty filter* separating the culturally relevant from the irrelevant to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving.  The concept of "dependency" is central to the poverty filter. Over time, dependence has shifted from being perceived as an unfortunate temporary position of the poor to a measure of the social ills associated with poverty. As Fraser and Gordon (1994)

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note, postindustrial dependency has been individualized, pathologized, and stigmatized. Prior to this time, poverty was a relatively expected condition, as most individuals were without great means of financial support. As higher income became more accessible and stable through factory work, poverty began to be viewed more as the result of individual characteristics, such as laziness, insolence, and vice, and less the result of structural conditions which prevented individuals from earning a living wage. This perspective has resulted in a stigma associated with being poor, so much so in fact that individuals now rarely describe themselves as poor, even when they in fact meet the criteria to be considered in poverty. In a 2012 Pew report, only 7% of respondents identified as belonging to the "lower class," despite the fact that nearly 16% of Americans were living in poverty in that year (Morin and Motel 2012, Bishaw 2013). The stigma associated with poverty makes seeking the financial assistance of the government more shameful. Therefore, when an individual or group is perceived as being part of the "dependent poor" (i.e. welfare-dependent) and not taking responsibility for their own well-being, their perceived deservingness is significantly impacted. By informing perceptions of poverty and the poor, stigma and shaming thus act as significant social influences on the cognitive mechanisms of deservingness, placing those who are stigmatized lower on the deservingness continuum.

Dependency, though criticized in adults, is viewed as "normal in the child" (Moynihan 1973:17) and therefore does not deem them undeserving. Poor children are perhaps perceived as the most deserving members of society, as the presumed innocence and associated morality of children are essentially universally agreed-upon. While it is true that poor children are sometimes denied assistance by default when their parents are denied, it is unlikely that a child would be directly deemed undeserving. In fact, children are often legally eligible for benefits for which their parents are not, and the shift from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to

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TANF has actually resulted in an increase in "child-only" welfare cases where members of the same family are perceived differently in terms of their deservingness (Moffitt 2003). In these instances, the mental distance between the parent and child is inflated to underscore the difference in deservingness between the two. While parent and child is one of the closest relationships individuals can have, here the two are perceived as separate units to be viewed and treated distinctly when it comes to their worthiness of aid.

Furthermore, the emotive function of the symbolism of the poor child is demonstrated by the frequency with which children are used in media campaigns to fundraise for organizations supporting the poor, which are intended to elicit strong feelings of concern, sympathy, compassion, guilt, and a desire to help. Through processes of moral focusing, where the hardships of poor children receive more collective attention via the frequent use of sentimental images to represent poverty, this group's perceived deservingness is sociocognitively influenced. Using this group of the poor to encourage sympathetic responses is an example of the packaging of this social issue and it impacts the sociocognitive lens through which poverty is perceived and deservingness is conceptualized. Accordingly, in a Google search of 'campaigns for the poor,' of the eight pages featuring actual campaigns in the top ten search results,[ii] only two pages which had pictures on their homepage did not feature images of children. The Frontline documentary, "Poor Kids," provides further context for the perceived deservingness of children. The documentary, which narrates the stories of several impoverished children, demonstrates the emotional strength of the symbolism connecting deserving poverty and children, as one *New York Daily News* review states, "Every so often the images in a TV show stay with you after the show ends. That happens with 'Poor Kids'…" (Hinckley 2012). Moreover, it is the perceived deservingness of children, placing them at the top right of the continuum, that influences the

much broader spectrum of welfare benefits provided nearly universally to children and not

adults, including nutritional assistance, healthcare, and public education. It is not just the need

for nutrition, healthcare, or education that is culturally relevant, but it is *who* has the need that is

important.

Like the concept of dependency, the cultural construct of "work," is central to

understanding how the poverty filter impacts the conceptualization of deservingness. In his 1996

remarks at the signing of welfare reform legislation, Clinton (1996) states, "More important, this

Act is tough on work. Not only does it include firm but fair work requirements, it provides $4

billion more in child care than the vetoed bills – so that parents can end their dependence on

welfare and go to work…." In these remarks, a tough stance is taken to prevent parents from

becoming dependent, defined as receiving welfare benefits for an extended period of time

without contributing some level of work. The notion of not allowing welfare recipients to get

something for nothing is so strongly valued that Clinton applauds spending *$4 billion* to provide

child care so that welfare recipients with young children can go to work for their benefits.

Poverty is packaged to encourage the perception that individuals may end their dependency

through work, ignoring the fact that even individuals who work may not earn enough to be

financially independent, influencing the mental lens through which individuals understand the

issue of poverty.

Because of the focus on work, the "working poor" symbol is one representation of

deservingness connected to poverty norms. The adjective "working" is important in indicating

this cluster of the poor is not expecting something for nothing, but rather attempting to support

themselves through paid work, but nevertheless requiring some government assistance. As work

is tightly intertwined with morality (Weber [1905] 2002), it is clear how describing a category of

the poor as "working" underscores their moral posture, and moves them higher on the deservingness continuum. Insomuch that work provides financial stability and individuals are able to be responsible at least in part for their own well-being, the deservingness of the "working poor" reflects a cultural message about the importance of personal responsibility. The salience of work and independence inflates the cognitive distance between the "working poor" and just the "poor." Moreover, these factors push the "working poor" and the "dependent poor" further apart on the deservingness continuum, inflating the mental divide between those who exhibit "personal responsibility" and those who are "dependent." The perception that those who work are more responsible and independent, and are therefore more moral, is perceived as more relevant than the fact that both meet many of the legal criteria for means-tested benefits. While both the "working poor" and the just poor individuals face financial hardship, the former's participation in paid labor is more culturally relevant for their deservingness than the characteristics that both groups share or characteristics not considered at all, such as whether one resides in an urban or rural location.

In the case of the "working poor," the moral focus is on the contributions (i.e. work) this group makes, not on the assistance they need. While they may in fact be "dependent" on government aid to make ends meet, they are not considered "dependent" because of their paid labor. The perceived deservingness of the "working poor" is evidenced in the use of images of this group in the media to elicit sympathetic responses to poverty (Gilens 1999) and the moral boundaries that working-class men use to separate themselves from their unemployed counterparts (Lamont 2000). This perception of deservingness is also demonstrated by organizations focused on providing opportunities for the "working poor," such as The Working Poor Families Project. The initiative, funded by major philanthropic organizations, states on their

website, "The goal of economic self-sufficiency remains an elusive dream for far too many working families" signifying that more must be done to help "working poor" families achieve financial stability. This moral focus indicates the salience of supporting the deserving "working poor" in pursuing personal responsibility and independence. *Paid* work is the culturally relevant factor separated from any other "form" of work including full-time education or training, or unpaid labor in the home. Post-1996 welfare reform, many states, rather than allow recipients to pursue education or training as an alternative to work, adopted "work-first" approaches which pushed beneficiaries to take any job that was available, making full-time students not legally eligible to access most welfare benefits despite the presumed morality of pursuing higher education or advanced training. Through the poverty filter, forms of work are sorted, only allowing paid work to pass through as relevant to one's deservingness and effecting the position of particular cases on the deservingness continuum.

The description of one group of the poor as "working" puts this subset closer to the "middle class," a group almost always identified as deserving because of their perceived strong commitment to work and self-sufficiency. One of the most consistently supported and favorably depicted groups in political rhetoric, media, popular culture, and public opinion, the "middle class" is a symbolic representation of the deserving. During election cycles, politicians from the right and left frequently reference the work they have done and are doing on behalf of the "middle class," work that is rarely if ever controversial in intent for the general public. While the "middle class" is typically not eligible for assistance traditionally viewed as welfare, they do benefit from many other programs that are included under a broader definition of welfare assistance, like mortgage subsidies and public education. And many benefits previously reserved for the poorest families have been expanded to be a "safety net" for more middle-income

Americans, particularly during periods of economic recession, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, demonstrating that the legal criteria for welfare eligibility are expanding so that this group's deservingness now not only rests on moral considerations but also on legal ones.

The elderly are an additional example of the salience of poverty norms in perceptions of deservingness, highlighted by the system of entitlements that serves more than 38 million retirees and their families (The White House). Early distinctions between the able poor and the impotent poor, as well as the "relatives' responsibility" custom, underscore that the elderly have traditionally not been required to exhibit "personal responsibility" and have been viewed as deserving of assistance due to their inability to work and financially support themselves. In much the same way as the deservingness of children is constructed, dependency among the elderly is viewed as normal and expected, thereby not constituting a threat to their perceived morality and placing them high on the continuum of deservingness. Entitlement benefits for the elderly are often not even viewed as welfare, despite meeting the definition of the term. Even among Republicans, whose views on welfare are notoriously harsh, these entitlements are typically viewed as a right of deserving people. In the first Republican presidential debate of the 2016 election cycle, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie stated, "Social Security is meant to be — to make sure that no one who's worked hard, and played by the rules, and paid into the system, grows old in poverty in America" (Washington Post Staff 2015). In these remarks, entitlements are packaged as a right for those who have "done the right thing" and lived morally. Essentially, receiving an entitlement benefit is not viewed as the same as receiving a means-tested benefit, causing those who receive the former (i.e. entitlement beneficiaries) to be perceived as more deserving because they are not the recipients of "government hand-outs," like means-tested beneficiaries. In this way, seniors receiving Social Security Insurance benefits are perceived as

deserving, even by those most critical of the welfare system. This divergence in the packaging of entitlement benefits as compared to means-tested benefits is an important cognitive mechanism for conceptualizing deservingness by providing a catalyst for differential perceptions of recipients of welfare.

*Welfare Filter*

Norms around the functions of welfare are also significant to the conceptualization of deservingness, specifically in the appropriate usage of welfare benefits, the ability to secure benefits, and the embodied practices of applying for and receiving benefits, creating a *welfare filter* that acts as a "mental strainer" to separate relevant from irrelevant factors and distinguish the deserving from the undeserving. The "welfare queen" is perhaps the most widely-known symbol of the undeserving poor, used frequently in political rhetoric, media depictions, and popular culture, even having a Wikipedia page devoted to her. The term, made popular by then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan as an argument in support of welfare reform, was based on a highly exaggerated story of a young Black woman purported to be defrauding the welfare system. The moral focus on the immorality of the "welfare queen," not only in defrauding the welfare system (which makes her receipt of benefits "illegal"), but also in her lifestyle – being an unmarried, unemployed mother dependent on the government – influences her nearly universally agreed-upon undeservingness. Like the poor child, the "welfare queen" elicits a similarly visceral response from the larger public. This emotional response – of disdain, contempt, and even hatred – is a result of the perceived immorality manifested through the assumed laziness, promiscuity, dishonesty, and irresponsibility of this symbol, rooted in notions of the pathology of poverty (a la Daniel Moynihan's 1965 "culture of poverty" argument) and is evidenced by the widespread pejorative references to the "welfare queen" in popular culture. In fact, the "welfare queen" is

such a prevailing symbol that when interviewed on the fairness of the welfare system, poor women, "whom many would describe as welfare queens," separated themselves, "by asserting their positive roles as mothers," from the deviant "welfare queens" abusing the system (Gustafson 2011:152).

The embodied practices associated with applying for welfare benefits are also evidence of the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. In most states, to apply for TANF benefits, individuals are required to visit their local social services office, and in-person interviews with case workers are required in eight states, processes that can require several hours of wait time (Carroll 2014, Saul and Fox 2012). Excessive wait times for individuals seeking means-tested benefits highlight the low value placed on the lives of these welfare recipients, a process that has been described as "temporal domination" as a means of punishing the undeserving poor (Reid 2013). Comparatively, to access other benefits, many of which are not typically characterized as welfare, such as public education and mortgage assistance, individuals need only complete online forms or wait briefly for an appointment. In this way, "temporal domination," and effectively punishing one group in their attempts to secure welfare benefits, serves as a social influence on the conceptualization of deservingness by sending cultural cues about the worth and value of some groups of welfare recipients (i.e. means-tested beneficiaries) compared to other recipients (i.e. entitlement beneficiaries and recipients of non-traditional types of welfare).

Like that associated with poverty itself, the shame and stigma attached to the receipt of benefits also demonstrate how welfare norms are related to perceptions of deservingness. Importantly, the beneficiaries of means-tested aid are more often explicitly and implicitly required to identify themselves as recipients of welfare than are those receiving entitlement

benefits. For example, several types of means-tested welfare benefits are used publicly, like

SNAP benefits in which food is purchased using an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card or

the use of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) coupons. Others require individuals to explicitly

identify themselves as recipients, like in the case of Section 8 housing subsidy beneficiaries who

must notify potential landlords of their status. Conversely, recipients of FHA mortgage loans or

tax credits do not have to make public their receipt of these benefits.

The stigma of welfare is also demonstrated in the popular belief that the government

spends too much on it. According to the General Social Survey, in 2014 half of Americans

believed that the country spent too much on welfare (Smith et al. 2015). Conversely, more than

70% of Americans believed the government was spending too little to improve the nation's

education system (Smith et al. 2015). This disparity indicates the perceptions of those benefits

typically considered welfare compared to those that qualify as a government subsidy but are

viewed as a right of Americans. Welfare is in fact so stigmatized that even those receiving

benefits are critical of the system. *The New York Times* covers one individual that, despite

receiving welfare benefits, "says that too many Americans lean on taxpayers rather than living

within their means…[He also] supports politicians who promise to cut government

spending…[and] printed T-shirts for the Tea Party campaign of a neighbor" (Appelbaum and

Gebeloff 2012). In this way, moral judgments of worthiness related to government expenditures

inform the conceptualization of deservingness and impact the placement of these cases on the

continuum of deservingness.

Moreover, the recipients of means-tested benefits face many rules and sanctions which

regulate their lives. This approach to welfare includes "family cap" policies, which prevent

children born to parents already receiving aid from becoming beneficiaries, and requirements

that parents prove their children's immunizations are current. Single mothers are also required to name the father of their children and participate in the process of establishing paternity, in addition to signing over their child support payments to their home state as reimbursement for the aid they receive. Recipients additionally face sanctions for missing deadlines or appointments with case workers. Punitive regulations and sanctions are important social influences on the conceptualization of deservingness in providing additional mechanisms for reinforcing mental distinctions between groups of the poor. When some groups face sanctions, stigma, and temporal domination, while others do not, the cognitive lens though which poverty and welfare is normatively perceived and responded to is undoubtedly impacted. Essentially these processes not only influence the cognitive distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, but also act as functional differences in the actual treatment of the two groups. In this way, deservingness is not just semiotically conceptualized, but behaviorally enacted as well, and thus reflected on the deservingness continuum.

Those groups deemed explicitly ineligible to receive welfare benefits (i.e. illegal) are also indicative of the salience of welfare norms to perceptions of deservingness. The undeservingness of those groups deemed completely ineligible to receive welfare benefits is so culturally taken-for-granted that they do not even come up in debates about welfare. For example, welfare reform in 1996 classified two categories of immigrants: 1) qualified immigrants, including lawful permanent residents, refugees, and other protected immigration statuses, who in most cases must wait five years before being eligible for benefits; and 2) nonqualified immigrants, including those in the country unlawfully, and some groups in the country lawfully, such as students and tourists, who are not legally permitted to receive benefits (Fortuny and Chaudry 2012). The discourse around immigration and the rights of immigrants has been a central feature of

American political debate. While liberals and conservatives often disagree on whether immigrants lawfully in the country should receive welfare, there is less ambiguity around other groups of non-citizens' perceived deservingness. For example, "illegal aliens" are widely perceived as undeserving, not only due to their legislative illegality, but also because of their perceived immorality. By entering the country without documentation, "illegal aliens" are frequently assumed to be immoral or even criminal. In this way, "illegal aliens," or those presumed to be in the country unlawfully, are strong symbolic representations of the undeserving.

Tourists and international students are also examples of the importance of welfare norms in conceptualizing deservingness. While the morality of tourists and international students is generally not in question, they are explicitly barred from accessing the welfare system. Though tourists may be elderly and international students may be widowed mothers, other groups typically deemed deserving, their lack of U.S. citizenship ultimately overrides these and any other similarities, and deems them undeserving of assistance. In this way, the welfare filter separates the culturally relevant factors, citizenship or permanent residency, from all other irrelevant factors, such as marital status or age, for placement on the deservingness continuum for those groups. Importantly, it is unlikely that any significant attention would be placed on providing welfare benefits to these groups. Neither tourists nor international students enter into any debates around the expansion *or* reduction of the welfare system, indicating that their place as undeserving is so culturally normative as to not be focused on at all.

*Family Filter*

Norms around family structure are a significant influence on the conceptualization of deservingness. Factors such as marital status, the circumstances of child birth, living

arrangements, and gender roles related to care-giving and breadwinning are central components of both the legality and morality dimensions. American "family values" still place greater worth on "traditional" family dynamics, which include a heterosexual married couple living under the same roof as their children with a husband/father breadwinner and a wife/mother caregiver, making each of these factors important moral considerations. In addition, many legal criteria for means-tested welfare benefits are more favorable for parents living with their children, evidenced in the name Temporary Aid to Needy *Families*, not individuals. Moreover, welfare reform legislation states among its goals reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies and increasing the number of two-parent households. These factors form a *family filter* which separates culturally relevant familial factors from the irrelevant to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving.

Because of the strong symbolism of the poor child's deservingness, an adult's connection to children through parenthood often increases their own perceived deservingness. This point is underscored by Theda Skocpol's (1992) conceptualization of the "maternal" welfare state highlighting that the focus was not on women, but rather on mothers; because children are deserving, the deservingness of women is in part defined through their roles as mothers. In a sense, the deservingness of the child is transferrable to the parent and elevates them on the deservingness continuum. Single men or women struggling financially are essentially promoted in their deservingness when they become fathers or mothers struggling to provide for themselves *and* their child. In this situation, the parental status of the individual is a more culturally relevant feature of their familial identity than others, like whether they have siblings or elderly parents, even if they are helping to financially support these other family members.

However, the value of parental status is also tied to other factors, including the marital

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status of the parent. For example, widowed mothers are typically considered the deserving poor, while unmarried mothers are typically considered less deserving. While both groups are technically "single mothers," the former group's perceived sexual chastity and personal responsibility means their motherhood is viewed as more legitimate and thereby more moral than the latter, distinguishing them as deserving. Inflating the mental distance between these two groups is a result of strong messages about the immorality of bearing children out-of-wedlock, as well as the compassion which should be felt for women whose male partners have died. The moral focus is placed on the circumstances of the birth of the child and on the relationship between the parents, indicating that these attributes are more culturally relevant than the poverty of the parent or simply being a parent. Focusing on these attributes over others inflates the cognitive distance between unmarried mothers and widowed mothers so that the latter are elevated on the deservingness continuum, while the former are classified as undeserving.

To extend this example, take the symbolic "war widow." Specifically, deservingness associated with the fact that the woman's husband died "serving" the country results from the cultural values of honor and patriotism, particularly related to the burden of poverty. The "war widow" is likely to be hailed as a heroine for supporting her husband's service and bearing the sacrifice of poverty as a result of his death. The "war widow" has been described as "a living symbol of patriotism. A reminder of the ultimate sacrifice of service" (Murphy 2015). Conversely, a woman whose gang-affiliated husband had been the victim of a drive-by shooting would very likely receive a fraction of the sympathy offered to the "war widow." This contrast highlights the complexity of the sociocognitive politics of deservingness and the hierarchies of cultural worth that are at play among the poor. Here, additional boundaries are created between groups that appear to be similar based on a dynamic set of cultural assumptions, creating a

hierarchy within a hierarchy. In both instances, the male partner dies, contributing to the financial instability of the family; however, cultural norms contribute to very different responses to these two scenarios. Attentional precedence is placed on the moral conditions of the man's death, not marital status or meeting legal criteria (wherein both the "war widow" and "drive-by widow" are comparable). In much the same way that deservingness is transferable from child to parent, here the deservingness or undeservingness of the deceased partner is transferred to the woman. In the case of the "war widow," the woman benefits from the perceived morality of her husband's service, while in the case of the "drive-by widow," the woman suffers from the perceived immorality of her husband's gang affiliation. The moral condition of death is weighed more heavily than family structure (or any other factor) so much so that a woman who is the girlfriend or fiancé of a man killed in military service might still be classified as deserving despite not being legally eligible due to her marital status. In this way, the family filter separates the culturally relevant conditions and contexts of family life from the irrelevant to deem the "war widow" deserving and the "drive-by widow" undeserving.

The "war widow" might also be contrasted with the "deadbeat dad." The honor associated with the poverty of the former, and the blame associated with the poverty of the latter, is a result of cultural values of worthiness. The gender distinction between the female widow and the male dad highlight gendered notions of moral and acceptable need based on cultural messages about the desirability of the traditional male breadwinner and female caregiver family structure. Because hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) is in part defined by work and earning a living wage, men who are poor do not fit with cultural ideas about normative poverty and family structure. As women are "expected" to be secondary income-earners to their male partners, dominant ideologies around poverty are more tolerant of women who are poor. When

women are not able to depend on the financial contributions of men, their poverty is seen as unavoidable. While the context of the absence of a male partner is quite important for their classification as deserving or undeserving, compassionate responses to poor women are more likely than to poor men, elevating their placement on the deservingness continuum.

Moreover, the legality and perceived morality, and thereby deservingness, of the "war widow" contrasted with that of the "deadbeat dad" is impacted by their relationship to parenthood. The "deadbeat dad" without custody of his children falls lower on the legality continuum because his relationship to parenthood does not involve the financial support of children in his household, and a single man would not constitute the "needy family" typically covered by TANF. While the "deadbeat dad" may qualify for some means-tested aid or other benefits such as the earned income tax credit, his benefit level would be lower than that of the poor "war widow" or even the "drive-by widow" who support their children in their homes. More importantly in this comparison, the perceived immorality and associated shame with being a "deadbeat" and not supporting one's children greatly impacts the "deadbeat dad's" deservingness. Not only is not supporting one's children viewed as immoral, it is also a criminal offense through child support enforcement legislation and considered a cause of the poverty of single mothers, demonstrated in part by the Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act passed in 1998 argued to be a means to keep single women and children from suffering from poverty. This legislation packages the poverty and hardship of single moms and children as directly related to fathers' financial shortcomings, instead of being the result of other economic or structural factors, influencing the perception of the deservingness of single moms and children, and also impacting the perception of the undeservingness of the "deadbeat dad." The financial hardships

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the "deadbeat dad" might be facing are culturally irrelevant to his perceived worth of compassion or assistance.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars of culture and policy have created an important foundation demonstrating the significance of cultural categories of worth in the development of social welfare policy (Mohr 1994, Schneider and Ingram 2005, Steensland 2006). I build on these earlier works by exploring *how* these categories are conceptualized, offering a model of deservingness to highlight the taken-for-granted cultural subtleties that shape perceptions of the poor. Through sociocognitive processes of perception, relevance, focusing, and filtering, mental distinctions are created and mental distances are inflated between those considered deserving and those considered undeserving. Norms around poverty, welfare, and the family are central to understanding how the dimensions of deservingness – morality and legality – are socially constructed. These processes and norms function as the cognitive mechanisms necessary for the development and maintenance of this conceptual model of deservingness.

The distinction between deservingness and undeservingness is influenced by the cultural constructs of race, gender, and socioeconomic status; however, the conceptualization of deservingness has been able to persist over time precisely because is not explicitly about these factors, but rather coded through norms around legality and morality. Certainly race, gender, and socioeconomic disparities work in service of these symbols, evident in the fact that there is no equivalent "welfare king" to the "welfare queen" or that homeless women receive many more services than homeless men (HCH 2001) or that poor elderly minorities are less often depicted in media coverage of poverty than their white counterparts (Gilens 1999). However, in many instances other factors of morality and legality override racial, gender, and socioeconomic

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differences. For example, the "war widow" could be of any race and still be considered deserving as the perceived morality of patriotism and sacrifice is weighed more heavily than demographic characteristics. Similarly, while the "welfare queen" symbol was originally racialized through its attachment to the story of a Black woman, it is now used more broadly to signify women who are perceived as immoral and defrauding the welfare system. Although racism, sexism, and classism are relevant to constructions of deservingness and undeservingness, these perspectives are more often manifested through sociocognitive processes that do not explicitly reference race, gender, or socioeconomic constructs. Racialized, gendered, and classed disparities in perceived deservingness typically align with perceptions of morality based on related stereotypes or bias. In this way, elucidating moral and legal considerations (regardless of their foundation) allows for a fuller and more accurate conceptualization of deservingness and undeservingness.

Potential variance in the determinations of particular cases as deserving or undeserving is another important consideration. While I examine *normative perspectives* about poverty, welfare, and the family, it is likely that there is divergence in perceptions of deservingness among particular groups of individuals. However, even among groups that do not perceive particular cases as deserving or undeserving, the model of deservingness built on conceptualizations of morality and legality is still effective for explaining their perceptions. For example, as a group, Catholics may not perceive the "dependent poor" as undeserving. This difference in perception is grounded in a divergence in norms of morality in that Catholic religious beliefs do not attach stigma and shame to poverty and extreme need. In fact, in the Catholic Church, poverty has been linked to being Christ-like. Pope Francis says, "And this is our poverty: the poverty of the flesh of Christ, the poverty that the Son of God brought us with His Incarnation" (Gregg 2013). In this

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way, the divergence in perceptions of deservingness originates in a poverty filter that does not perceive the poor through a sociocognitive lens of shame and stigma, but instead focuses on the morality of poverty. Similarly, some fathers' rights groups may not view "deadbeat dads" as immoral and therefore undeserving, or some family planning organizations may not view the out-of-wedlock parenthood of unmarried moms as immoral. In these cases, there is again a difference in moral focusing and relevance leading to a difference in the determinations of deservingness. In this way, the two dimensions of deservingness – morality and legality – are still applicable in distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving in these cases. Ultimately, this conceptual model of deservingness highlights the ways this social construct is structured, maintained, and promulgated in order to better understand how some are perceived as worthy and others as unworthy. Moreover, this model allows for a broader understanding of how other conceptual categories of cultural worth and non-worth are created. Specifically, moral focusing, cultural filters, and mental weighing can be used to explore the sociocognitive dimensions of varied contexts of worth. This set of analytical tools and the conceptual model might be used to explore how worthiness and deservingness are conceptualized and then applied in diverse settings of decision-making and evaluation, such as promotion processes, award selections, and political nominations and elections. Ultimately, elucidating the cognitive underpinnings of morality and eligibility related to the cultural conceptualization of deservingness highlights the importance of understanding the cultural construction of categories and offers a framework for further exploration of the development of these categories and others in policy-making processes.

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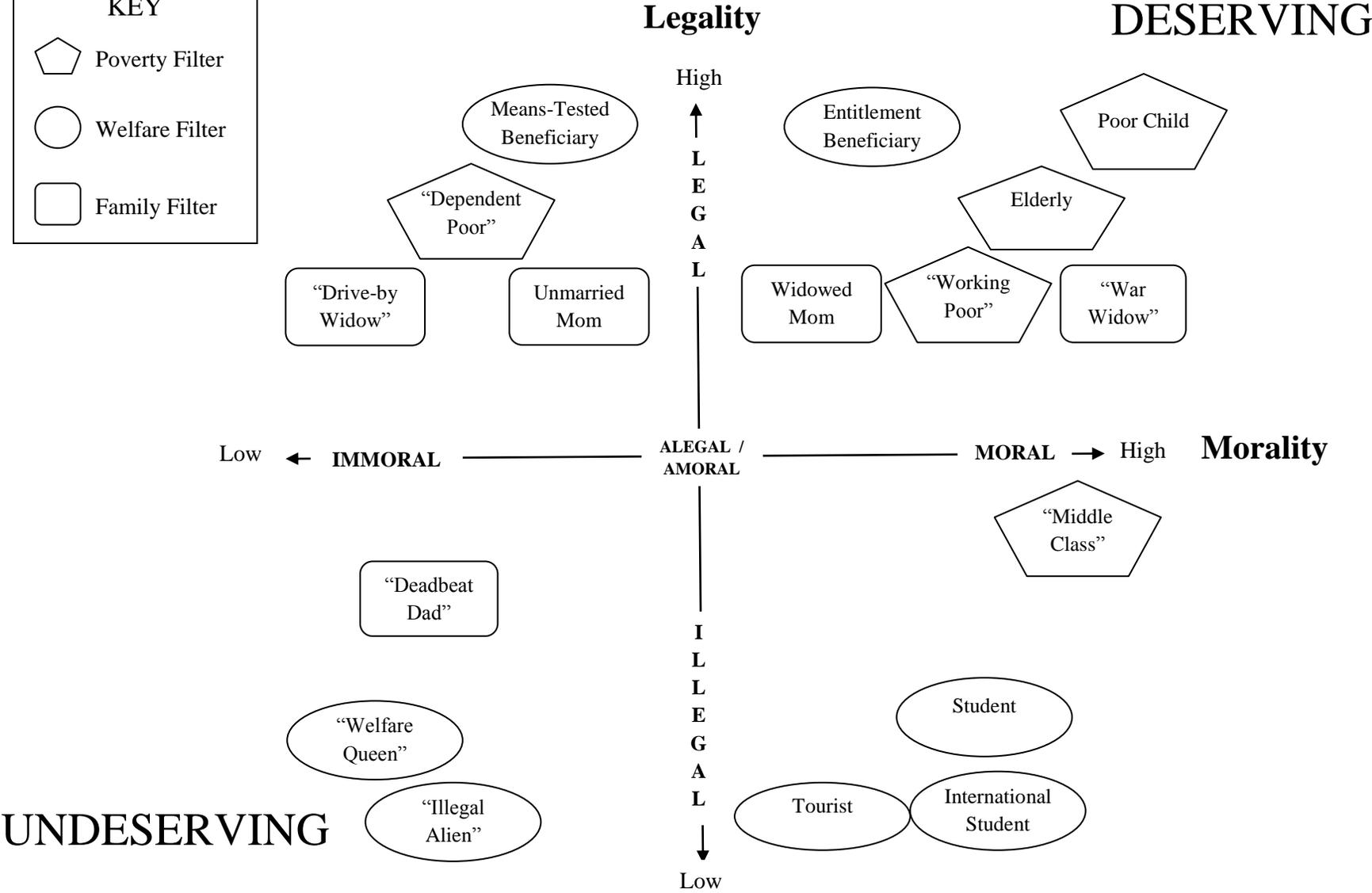
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# FIGURE: CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF DESERVINGNESS



**KEY**

⬠ Poverty Filter

◯ Welfare Filter

▭ Family Filter

**Legality**

**DESERVING**

High

L E G A L

Means-Tested Beneficiary

"Dependent Poor"

"Drive-by Widow"

Unmarried Mom

Entitlement Beneficiary

Poor Child

Elderly

Widowed Mom

"Working Poor"

"War Widow"

Low ← **IMMORAL** — ALEGAL / AMORAL — **MORAL** → High **Morality**

"Middle Class"

"Deadbeat Dad"

I L L E G A L

"Welfare Queen"

"Illegal Alien"

**UNDESERVING**

Student

Tourist

International Student

Low

NOTES

[i] The terms "the poor" or "poor" are problematic for a number of reasons. In their contemporary usage, they have become, in many instances, pejorative terms used to demean low socioeconomic status individuals. Nevertheless, I have decided to use the terms in this chapter because of their historical and symbolic accuracy in capturing normative American approaches to poverty and welfare.

[ii] One top ten result was a Wikipedia page and one was an encyclopedia entry, both on Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign. The search was conducted on November 5, 2015 and returned a total of 98,700,000 results.