The Real Story: What Australians Think About Poverty

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Never before has Australia been so prosperous.

Never before have we had so many resources and opportunities to reduce poverty.

And never before has so much thought been dedicated to understanding the problems facing those in need.

Yet many people have not enjoyed the benefits of prosperity. And debates continue to rage about whether inequality is a real problem. Even dedicated advocates don't have a strategy to persuade and motivate the public about the need for change. There is a clear need to understand public attitudes to poverty. Understanding these attitudes, and the values that underlie them, is critical to changing the conversation.

Our research question
That's why Anglicare Australia embarked on a landmark study to understand: How does public discourse influence Australian attitudes to poverty and welfare?

Our methodology
As part of the study, Anglicare Australia conducted:
- A review of the literature on international and Australian attitudes to poverty and welfare, and the factors that shape these attitudes
- A nationally representative survey of Australians to gauge attitudes
- A language analysis using public communications from the Anglicare Australia Network.

The survey
To conduct this research, Ipsos was commissioned by Anglicare Australia to develop a quantitative survey with a representative national sample. The data collection for the Anglicare Australia-Ipsos survey was conducted from 20 to 24 June 2018, with a total sample of 1,236 Australian respondents. The sample has been weighted to be representative of the Australian population by age, gender and location. The breakdown of the number of participants in each State and Territory, as well as age, gender and regional demographics are outlined below in Table 1.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with particular statements on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Except where there are significant trends, I'll be referring to results according a net 'agree' (combined 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses) and net 'disagree' (combined 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses). Respondents were also asked about their own recent experiences of hardship through questions about scenarios where they couldn't afford essentials (such as rent, food, electricity bills, medical expenses, etc.).

The language analysis
To conduct our language analysis, we analysed public communications developed and used by the Anglicare Australia Network. We employed a variety of techniques from cognitive linguistics, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, to explore what our communications convey about poverty and income inequality. A key tool in this process is metaphor analysis, which catalogues common non-literal phrases used in discourse and analyses the patterns in these expressions.

What we found
People are sympathetic
All of the groups we surveyed showed high levels of compassion towards people in poverty, and a belief that nobody should live in poverty. All demographic groups believed that we needed to do more to support people on government benefits, and that Australia should be a country that looks after people in need. Only a small minority disagreed with the idea that people experiencing poverty are the same as them.

Our study found that only a small minority of people (10 per cent) agreed with the notion that those who rely on government support deserve to live in poverty. A strong majority (78 per cent) rejected the statement. A greater number (79 per cent) agreed that anybody could find themselves experiencing poverty, with only 8 per cent disagreeing. This tells us that people understand the impact of circumstance, and believe that those who need help still deserve to live a dignified life.

Benefits become less popular as they become more targeted
We found that benefits become less popular as they become more targeted. Australia has one of the most targeted welfare systems in the world, and this plays a role in how we see the people who use it. The most popular aspects of Australia's safety net are Medicare and the age pension. The least are Newstart and Youth Allowance, although we nevertheless found strong support to increase the rates of these payments.

People are influenced by their perceptions of what other people think
As part of our study we investigated Common Cause, a framework based on compassionate and selfish values. Research based on this framework shows that compassionate values are much more widely held. But the same research also shows that most people wrongly believe that their fellow citizens hold selfish values.

This helps explain some of the results we encountered through the Anglicare Australia-Ipsos survey. Only half of those surveyed by Anglicare Australia agreed that Australians are sympathetic to those experiencing poverty, which underestimates the strong level of sympathy we found in the same survey.

Language reflects public consensus. That consensus is both a symptom and a cause when it comes to attitudes.

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What this means

So why have we not seen demands for action? And why, if public attitudes are so sympathetic, do so many of us believe that our fellow Australians as apathetic or even hostile to people in need?

Perceptions shape reality

To understand this, we need to return to our finding that people influenced by our perceptions of what others think. The gulf between perceptions and reality can have major implications – the same studies cited by Common Cause found that people who hold the inaccurate belief that other people are selfish are much less likely to act on their own compassionate values.

This myth influences how we relate to other people. How many of us have told our friends or family that we're volunteering because it would be good for our career, perhaps thinking they wouldn't understand our real motivations? Or explained moving into a more rewarding, lower-paid job by saying it will help us gain experience? This is probably driven by our false perception that other people are not as compassionate as we are. And it is this same perception that drives some anti-poverty activists to crouch their campaigns in the language of economics and self-interest instead of care and support. This only perpetuates the false notion that people are selfish.

For anti-poverty advocates, this means that we need to break this cycle if we're going to campaign and win. People are much less likely volunteer, sign a petition, make a donation, or even cast a vote if they believe that nobody is listening – or that nobody else cares. Seen in this light, the tendency to blame the public for casting a 'bad' vote or failing to demand action is wrong. Worse, it's harmful. Anyone who hears this line is actually less likely to act on their compassionate values.

The design of our welfare system, which works against the people who depend on it most

The second factor shaping public debate is the design of our welfare system, which works against the people who depend on it most. We found that benefits become less popular as they become more targeted. Australia has one of the most targeted welfare systems in the world, and this plays a role in how we see the people who use it.

The most popular aspects of Australia's safety net are Medicare and the age pension. They are also the most universal. Everyone is eligible for a Medicare rebate, and all but the wealthiest retirees receive a pension. These have proven to be some of the hardest benefits to cut – the short-lived Medicare freeze was loathed by the public and has now been reversed. Proposals to raise the pension age were dumped after a public backlash, and the pension had a major boost in 2009.

Meanwhile targeted payments, like Newstart and Youth Allowance, have stagnated. There has been a trend to push people off payments for single parents and people with disabilities. And Centrelink services are being automated in a way that is both extreme and sloppy, forcing people to correct robotised errors and lumping them with thousands of dollars in fake debt.

Put simply, it is easier to get away with this if you're targeting a small group. Medicare users would never face this kind of treatment. There are just too many of us.

This shows us that universalism guards against stigma. As Ben Spies-Butcher has argued, when more people get a benefit it becomes normalised, and that constituency becomes more politically powerful. Importantly, universalism also makes it harder to divide groups. People who use Medicare can't be pitted against taxpayers because most of us are both. Former Treasurer Joe Hockey tested this approach and was punished for it.

These findings highlight a major tension for anti-poverty activists. Government rhetoric about scarcity has pushed much of the welfare sector away from supporting universal programs and towards benefits that are targeted to people at the margins of society. This may seem like a rational move – it makes sense to focus on those in greatest need. But the further we go down this road, the more vulnerable these people become to cuts and scapegoating.

Language reflects consensus.
That brings us to the third factor that shapes debate, and one that's just as important – language. Looking closely at how we use language can tell us a lot about how the debate on welfare has evolved. It also points us to how it can change.

As part of our study, we looked at the history of welfare crackdowns in Australia and overseas. We wanted to understand how people felt about the welfare state when it has been under attack, and language that the thought leaders of the day were using. Conventional wisdom tells us that these crackdowns must have been a response to public opinion – politicians demonising people on benefits because it was popular. But it turns out that this narrative is false.

In the UK, the welfare state was popular throughout the eighties and early nineties. This is in spite of the fact that the British Government spent much of that time trying and failing to dismantle the safety net. It turns out that these early attacks on benefits were not popular – the British Social Attitudes Survey and research from Ipsos-MORI shows that attitudes didn't harden until the late nineties.

So what happened? [An analysis of parliamentary speeches](#) by political scientist Tom O'Grady found a clear pattern: once the Labour Party under Tony Blair changed its rhetoric on welfare, the public changed its mind. From the mid-nineties and on, Labour spent less and less time talking about the benefits of the safety net and more time talking about problems with the system. This was the critical factor that swayed public opinion.

Unfortunately this kind of research hasn't been done in Australia. We don't know much about Australian attitudes towards welfare before the 2000s. But we do know that the Australian consensus on mutual obligation and welfare between both sides of politics was forged in the late nineties, around the same as Blair's ascension in the UK.

There are many ways to interpret what this means. Perhaps it tells us that labour parties and other progressive actors are more influential in debates on income and welfare than their conservative counterparts. But it also shows us that governments cannot shape attitudes on their own without a political consensus. This consensus is critical. It is the sum of all of the language we use – what we say on purpose, and what we imply by omission.

Strangely, many anti-poverty advocates don't see themselves as part of this process. Instead they see themselves as passive forces, reacting to shifts in opinion instead of shaping them. The consensus is one of mutual obligation and scarcity, they reason, and many accept it as inevitable. But there is almost no evidence that the current 'consensus' is popular with the public. Its existence depends on the fact it has not been challenged.

Our belief in this consensus comes through in our language. As part of our study of social attitudes, we conducted an in-depth language analysis that looked at how we as advocates communicate with the public. We found that we spend more time repeating opposing arguments instead of making our own. We saw this when we studied statements like '*Let's not replay the same old inaccurate story – that Australia's young unemployed people are lazy and don't want to work*'.

These examples stem from the idea that the public doesn't agree with us about poverty and welfare. That idea was debunked by our own study and by countless others. But it also stems from the idea that we need to mention an opposing argument in order to rebut it. This is at odds with research showing that drawing attention to opposing arguments makes people more likely to accept them. [George Lakoff has shown](#) how this can backfire – when Richard Nixon famously said that 'I am not a crook', it only drew attention to his corruption.

When we accept an opposing position as our starting point, and then repeat it, we are adding to the false consensus. We should be doing everything we can to avoid repeating the messages that we don't agree with.

A worrying finding from our research is that we speak about people in a way that is totally at odds with how they see themselves. We asked Anglicare clients to describe their own lives and experiences. They told us that they do not want to be victimised, or spoken about as though they are objects. This is a challenge for our sector. We want to show how poverty can break bodies and destroy lives. So we end up speaking about people in such a grim and disempowering way that they cease to be people at all. They have no agency, no

individuality, we couldn't possibly imagine ourselves in their position. All of this makes it harder to build support for change. It also paves the way for government control over people's lives.

Think instead of how we speak about regional communities, especially farmers. We do not talk about them as poverty-stricken, disaster-ridden, and dependent. We would never dream of telling them how to spend their money or live their lives, even though they are much more likely to get government payments than other groups. Instead they are resilient and resourceful. Everybody else living in poverty deserves the same respect. Their own resourcefulness and sacrifice is often the only thing keeping them afloat. They should get credit for managing an impossible situation.

Turning people into objects is only part of the problem. We also found that we speak about people in a way that is defensive and qualified. We tend to focus on those who are sick, incapacitated, or already in paid work. We single out these groups and emphasise that they should not live in poverty. But this buys into the idea of a 'deserving poor' by equivocating about who deserves help.

We do not need to do this. The evidence shows that Australians are already sympathetic to people in poverty. It also shows us that equivocation doesn't work. Of all the value statements in our national Ipsos survey, the one that got the most support was the statement that *nobody* deserves to live in poverty (86 per cent agreement). Statements that were more qualified or focused on specific groups attracted less support. This might seem like a surprising result – you may think the fact that someone is working or sick would make people more sympathetic to their plight. Instead, the clearer value statement proved to be much more powerful.

It's a strange contradiction that so many of us, including professional communicators and campaigners, are taught to qualify our statements to attract support. This is a mistake. We should not shy away from simply and clearly communicating our beliefs.

The alternative is to accept a fake consensus – that Australians are selfish, that they don't care about people who need help, and that our safety net can never be restored. Our study found that none of these things are true. Poverty is a structural crisis, not an individual one, and Australians know it. It is a diabolical problem that so many of us have accepted a narrative that so few of us believe.

For too long advocates have viewed the public as a problem to solve. We can see this in some of the unedifying reactions to this weekend's election result. But the public, and public opinion, should not be treated as an obstacle. Instead the public must be seen as allies.

Our challenge now is to develop a language that embraces and engages them.

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