

# The Poverty of Socio-Economic Explanation

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## Abstract

Measures of absolute and relative poverty are usually constructed around levels of deprivation, destitution and distress experienced by people with respect to money, goods or means of subsistence. These measures rely, almost exclusively, upon cognitive bias and limited life experience to legitimise discrimination and disadvantage. As (Treloar, in Henwood, 2021) has observed, in spite of widespread interest in the relationship between socio-economics and poverty reduction, confusion reigns as to what exactly predisposes politicians and bureaucrats to consider the implications of the ways in which they think about people in poverty. This paper explores different habits of mind determining the range of socio-economic models impacting Australian Government approaches to Age Pensions and Jobkeeper policy since the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Progressing beyond quantitative analytics to extend our understanding of socio-economic definitions of poverty, insights into alternative ways of thinking are considered in view of innovative applications of financial independence in response to poverty management. Recognising the contrast between traditional political and bureaucratic responses to poverty across the Australian population and more recent recognition of the centrality of the recipients of social welfare, in whatever form it is delivered, the paper provides an analysis of the differences in background and thinking patterns of policy developers and welfare recipients. In consequence of this analysis, the paper identifies a significant, albeit largely unconscious, cognitive bias among policy developers and proposes the need for a substantial change in the way social welfare is conceptualised at a political level.

## Keywords

Australian Constitution, Age Pension, Deprivation, Destitution, Inequality, Poverty, Social Benefit, Social Policy, Thinking, Unconscious Bias

## 1. Poverty and Constitutional Conflict

The differences between approaches to programs addressing poverty in Australia

since 1946 are outlined in the Australian Constitution. (Section 51) which gives the Federal Parliament power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth.

The original 1901 Constitution provided Section 435 (xxiii) authorising “*Invalid and old-age pensions*” but provided no specific power to address poverty in Australia.

With the support of a majority of people in all states and across the nation, the [Commonwealth of Australia \(1946\)](#) added a new authority (xxiiiA). “*The provision of maternity allowances, widows’ pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefit, medical and dental services (but not so as to authorise any form of civil conscription), benefits to students and family allowances*”.

Federal legislation already existed on a number of these issues. Despite the lack of a clear constitutional basis, child endowment payments were introduced in 1941, widow’s pensions in 1942, and unemployment benefits in 1945. These payments were based on spending power—as determined under Constitutional provisions (s81).

The amendments were intended to clarify and enshrine the existence of a power that was already being exercised and which received bipartisan support. A “no” vote could have ended welfare programs from which voters were benefiting.

Significantly, in the absence of any specific reference to poverty in these amendments, a continuing difference remains between pensions, benefits and allowances that the Commonwealth Government is authorised to distribute for the “*peace, order and good government of the nation*”.

The High Court, in *General Practitioners Society v Commonwealth* ([Barwick, Gibbs et al., 1980](#)), confirmed authority for the “*regulation of the manner in which a service is performed*” if the benefit is to be obtained”. Again there was no poverty reference.

## 2. A Socio-Economic Approach to Poverty

Socio-economic issues invariably influence peoples’ capacity to meet their own needs, wants, hopes and expectations and poverty is internationally accepted as a fundamental socio-economic issue ([Manshor, Abdullah, & Hamed, 2020](#)).

Socio-economic explanations of poverty identify factors that have negative influence on an individuals’ economic activity including gender, lack of education, cultural and religious discrimination; and social conditions arising from overpopulation, unemployment, chronic illness and corruption. The breadth of the issue is highlighted in the range of definitions in current use at both national and global levels.

The UN Statement on Poverty signed in June 1998 by the heads of all UN agencies says “*It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one’s food*

*or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation”.*

The National Association of Elementary School Principals states, “*Actually, poverty is about access, or lack of access, to nine resources, financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, support systems, relationships/role models, knowledge of hidden rules, physical and language*”.

Vision Australia (Kahneman & Tversky, 1996) defines poverty as “*the severe lack of certain positions, which significantly reduce the quality of a person's life. People affected by poverty may also lack social, economic, political or material income and resources*”.

The Macquarie Dictionary extends the meaning to include:

- 1) *The condition of being poor with respect to money, goods, or means of subsistence.*
- 2) *Deficiency or lack of something specified: e.g. poverty of ideas.*
- 3) *Deficiency of desirable ingredients, qualities, e.g. poverty of soil.*
- 4) *Scantiness, scarcity amount.*

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS, 2020) report on poverty observes that “*people are in poverty when their household's disposable income (after accounting for tax and housing costs) falls below a level considered adequate to achieve an acceptable standard of living*”.

Almost invariably, definitions of poverty identify lack of, inadequacy or total absence of elements that are uncritically accepted as essential to the maintenance of “an acceptable standard of living”. What this standard requires remains unchallenged though it varies widely and remains largely undocumented at an individual level.

Poverty in Somalia, Bangladesh, Columbia and America have little obvious connection with poverty in Australia and it is unlikely that any policy developed in Australia would address the key elements of poverty as it is observed in any of those countries.

In equal measure, it is argued, policy developed by blanket organisations such as ACOSS is unlikely to satisfy the needs of indigenous communities, whether in inner Melbourne and outback Queensland.

Globally, poverty remains a crucial social issue for which typically proposed solutions are almost invariably presumed to stem from lack of disposable income at individual and family level which, therefore, can be addressed with increased financial outlay.

### **3. An Alternative Approach**

Adopting the perspective of the person who experiences a denial of choices and opportunities and a violation of human dignity, Dr Payne (2013) presents an alternative approach, in which:

*“...the reality is that financial resources, while very important, do not explain the differences in the success with which some individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty. The ability to leave poverty is more dependent on other resources than it is on financial resources. Each of these resources plays a vital role in the success of an individual.”*

Payne’s approach focuses on the limited capacity of the individual to participate effectively in a society. Instead, she proposes experiential, situational and subjective explanations of poverty relating to the adjustment and capacity of individuals and communities coping with the challenges of engagement in family, community and social life.

By addressing differences in their power over relationships, resources, information and decision-making to address changes and choices in their life in the face of adversity, anxiety and differential access to freedom of choice, Payne’s subjective perspective identifies how individuals deal with the challenge of poverty.

The approaches and applications proposed by Payne operate from the assumption that poverty is an outcome, rather than a condition, of differential lack of power over resources, relationships, information and decision-making. Instead, they offer an open-systems approach that reduces social isolation.

#### **4. Tackling Poverty Head On**

Despite its being recognised as a *wealthy country*, the struggle to afford basic daily needs remains a serious problem for many people in Australia, both indigenous and recent and long-established immigrants regardless of origins and there appear to be no comparative studies of the extent or complexity of poverty as it is experienced in those poorer countries whose refugees seek haven, or even recognition, in the countries to which they flee.

Professor Concetta Benn introduced a community approach to attacking poverty through participation in a report of an innovative experimental Brotherhood of St Laurence Family Centre Project (Benn, 1981). The Project began with a group of families with no power over the resources that were offered to them. The cycles of structured activities and programs established a developmental model that began with the introduction of personal power over resources (a guaranteed income) and ultimately moved to power over decision-making with managerial direction.

Benn’s pioneering approach was revised in 2018 when ACOSS and UNSW established a five-year partnership to tackle poverty and equality in Australia “head on”.

The interdisciplinary collaboration intended to focus national attention on poverty and inequality over time, explore drivers, and develop solutions to sharpen the focus and stimulate action to tackle these entrenched societal problems through high quality research, policy development and advocacy to effect change.

In Part 1 of the ACOSS report on Poverty in Australia (Davidson, Saunders et al.,

2020), the socio-economic approach is adopted, indicating that “*people are in poverty when their household’s disposable income (after accounting for tax and housing costs) falls below a level considered adequate to achieve an acceptable standard of living. Rather than measure living standards directly (for example, by asking people whether they have to go without necessities), we set a benchmark for the adequacy of household incomes of one-half (50%) of the median or ‘middle’ household disposable income. This is the ‘poverty line’*”.

The ACOSS REPORT identifies a “poverty gap” (the average gap between the incomes of people in poverty and the poverty line), as \$AUD 282pw, below the line, after adjusting for housing costs, 42% of the (after-housing) poverty line. It is important to measure poverty gaps, because even if the rate of poverty is reduced, this may still leave many people well below the poverty line.

Similarly, the average figure computed by ACOSS is not adjusted for household size, so it is boosted by the larger poverty gaps of people in larger households. The average poverty gap for single people living in poverty is significantly less, which leads to differential payments for single beneficiaries and families with dependent children in the household and further complicates the issue of providing a balanced approach to poverty management.

## 5. The Other Poverty Gap

While household size complicates poverty calculations and potential approaches, a further significant gap in social security income distribution arises from the effect of varying interpretations of different sections of the Constitution, such as between Age and Invalid Pensioners (Section (xxiii) and other income allowances and benefit (xxiiiA)).

In March 2018 (ACOSS, 2018), maximum pension payments sat \$2pw below the poverty line for couples and \$10pw below it for singles. According to more recent research by ACOSS (2020), recipients of the Age Pension who rent their homes face a greater risk of poverty, on average, than those who own their homes outright.

In March 2018, Newstart and Youth Allowances were well over \$100pw below the poverty line. For example, maximum single rates of Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance were \$117pw and \$168pw, respectively, below the line. Newstart and Youth Allowances are set and administered by different government departments at a federal level.

In a similar vein, unemployment payments in Australia have continued to fall behind minimum wages, as well as falling well behind the growth in median incomes. The outcome of this process presents an increasing gap between Aged Pensions and Jobseeker payments and a challenge for policy makers, regardless of their political persuasion.

Professor Carla Treloar (Treloar, in Henwood, 2021) Director of the Social Policy Research Centre and the Centre for Social Research in Health at UNSW has submitted that, “Research poses serious questions about Australia’s income support system. If it’s good enough for the Age Pension to keep pace with

broader income growth, we need to ask why the same principle does not apply to support for the unemployed and sole parents.” (Treloar, in [Henwood, 2021](#)).

Treloar reveals a fundamental concern: in spite of widespread interest in the relationship between socioeconomics and poverty reduction, confusion reigns as to what exactly predisposes politicians and bureaucrats to think that the politics of cognitive conditioning psychophysical theories of thinking should be accepted at the expense of people in poverty.

Treloar raises critical questions about the thinking that reinforces differences between Aged Pensions and Jobkeeper payments during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, she challenges the vastly different thinking of people making decisions about levels of pensions and benefits compared with the patterns of thinking of the rest of the nation, from those experiencing unhelpful forms of anti-poverty programs to those who are denied access to any of this myriad of programs. Amongst others, these questions tend to achieve limited media attention and the largely unconscious opprobrium of those who are gainfully employed or comfortably supported.

## 6. Consideration of Cognitive Bias

The [Queensland Government \(2022\)](#) website on Covid-19 describes unconscious biases as “attitudes beyond our regular perceptions of ourselves and others, reinforced by our environment and experience and the basis for a great deal of our patterns of behaviour about diversity”.

It is observed on the government-managed website that where there is bias (conscious or unconscious) in the workplace, we continue to recruit, promote, allocate work, and manage performance with filters on our thinking.

Comparisons of differences in the thinking patterns of decision makers in respect of Pensioners (Section xxiii) and Beneficiaries (Section xxiii), for example, presents a potential source of discrimination against those seeking work compared to those who have a job or who have retired from paid employment.

Treloar’s recognition of the “serious questions about Australia’s income support system” highlights an overarching pattern of differences between the people who are tasked with making decisions about social policies, and other members of their community, including the beneficiaries. Her research suggests that evidence is available for potential unconscious bias in favour of policies that are directed towards welfare of employed families with children, living lifestyles that are similar to their own.

Significant differences between policy decision-makers in the ACT and social security income recipients in widely differing regions of Australia represents a potential source of cognitive bias with a focus upon economic quantitative measures driving an interpretation of the requirements of “order and good government of the Commonwealth” that justifies funded empathy over guaranteed income systems.

An implicit stereotype is the unconscious attribution of particular qualities to

the members of specific social groups. Implicit stereotypes are influenced by experience, and are based on learned associations between various qualities and social categories.

The existence of a distinction between Pensioners (Section xxiii) and Beneficiaries (Section xxiii) without a specific reference to poverty or criteria for the determination of necessary and sufficient policy guidelines invites the application of implicit stereotypes of what constitutes “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

*Diversity Australia (2022)* asserts that individuals’ perceptions and behaviours can be affected by implicit stereotypes, even without the individuals’ intention or awareness... Implicit stereotypes are influenced by experience, and are based on learned associations between various qualities and social categories.

According to *Kahneman & Tversky (1996)*, cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment.

Individuals create their own “subjective reality” from their perception of the input. An individual’s construction of reality, [rather than any] objective input, may dictate their behaviour in the world. Thus, cognitive biases may sometimes lead to perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgment, illogical interpretation, or what is broadly called “irrationality”.

For Kahneman and Tversky, the notion of cognitive biases grew out of their experience of people’s innumeracy or inability to make rational decisions when the magnitude of choices was large. This situation seems relevant when applied to Public Servants required to make policy decisions about large numbers of pensioners and beneficiaries across diverse social settings.

The Australian Capital Territory (Canberra), like the national capital of the USA, provides an opportunity to consider the patterns of thinking of public servants where there are no State Public Servants included in the national census or the surveys conducted into public opinion by Roy Morgan Research national probability sample. This is colloquially referred to as “the Canberra bubble”.

Addressing the origins of differences between the thinking of policy makers making distinctions between Pensions payments and the Unemployment Benefits available to eligible Jobseekers suggests the urgent need for a theory of thinking to disentangle the potential for unconscious bias of policy makers, general public and beneficiaries.

It is useful to ask questions about theory proposed by *Whetten (1989)*. Whetten indicates that answers to the following four questions provide the necessary ingredients of a single theory, description and explanation:

WHO, WHEN & WHERE? These conditions place limitations on the propositions generated from a theoretical model.

WHAT? What factors or variables and constructs (concepts) should be logically considered as part of the explanation of the social or individual phenomena of interest?

HOW? How are they related?

WHY? In what way do the underlying psychological, economic or social dynamics justify the selection of factors and the proposed causal relationships

(Whetten, 1989: pp. 490-491)?

Answers to Whetten's questions can be found to demonstrate significant differences between the demographic profile of Public Servants in Canberra and that of the wider ACT population of resident non-public servants as measured in Socio-Economic (SES) quintiles, (20% assumption in each of five levels) compared with profiles of Aged Pensioners and Jobseekers in the Australian Capital Territory (See **Table 1**).

## 7. Who, When & Where?

Public Servants in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are more than twice as likely to be in the highest quintile of socio-economic status (measured in terms of age, education and income) compared to the national distribution of SES. ACT residents who are not public servants are half as represented in the lowest SES quintile.

Pensioners and JobKeeper beneficiaries are over-represented in households with employed members and under-represented in households with people who are not in the workforce or are looking for Work (See **Table 2**).

In itself, this does not provide an answer Treloar's question about why Australia's income support system does not operate from a single set of assumptions but it does provide evidence to suggest there may be very different patterns of thinking about provision of pensions and benefits for those at the bottom of the SES table.

Commonwealth Public Servants have the responsibility to assist the Government to implement the powers established by the nation in the Constitution that enable responses to poverty. The gap in socio-economic status between providers and recipients demonstrates a significant gap in the lived experience of these cohorts of the population but, as previously discussed, poverty is not a social issue addressed in the Australian constitution.

Comparison of the socio-economic status of ACT public servants, ACT non-public servants, Pensioners and Jobseekers demonstrates that there is as much difference between the Public Servants and ACT-non public servants as there is between Aged Pensioners and JobKeeper beneficiaries (See **Table 3**).

**Table 1.** Australian capital territory profile.

Quintiles	Total Australian population	ACT public servants	ACT non-public servants	Age pensions	Job seekers
n=	273,010	1663	3734	9756	3792
	household interviews	household interviews	household interviews	household interviews	household interviews
"AB" quintile	20	<b>61</b>	<b>28</b>	17	43
"C" quintile	20	24	24	52	71
"D" quintile	20	10	21	85	109
"E" quintile	20	4	17	119	126
"FG" quintile	20	1	10	<b>226</b>	<b>146</b>

October 2016-September 2021. Source: **Roy Morgan Research (2021)**.



**Table 2.** Australian capital territory households.

Employment	% total Australian population	% ACT public servants	% ACT non public servants	% age pension	% job seeker
n=	1389	452	937	10,028	2992
Employed	<b>70</b>	100	<b>53.8</b>	6.8	46.0
Looking for Full-time work	2.5	-	3.9	0.2	12.9
Looking for Part-time work	2.1	-	0.9	1.7	17.0
Home Duties	0.8	-	0.8	2.9	6.7
Retired	1.4	-	1.4	<b>45.7</b>	2.4
Workers in home					
1 Worker	22.7	20.1	24.1	13.2	31.5
2 Workers	36.9	<b>52.4</b>	28.2	4.7	23.7
3 Workers	14.9	18.5	13.0	1.0	10.2
4+ Workers	9.0	8.9	9.1	0.4	6.2
No Workers	1.2	-	1.2	34.6	6.3
Total Not Employed	30	-	<b>46.6</b>	<b>93.2</b>	<b>54.0</b>

October 2016-September 2021. Source: [Roy Morgan Research \(2021\)](#).

**Table 3.** Jung personality type profiles.

Quintiles	Total Australian population index = 100	ACT public servants index = 100	ACT non-public servants index = 100	Age pensions Index = 100	Job seekers Index = 100
I N F J	100	<b>274</b>	86	7	36
I N F P	100	<b>273</b>	<b>125</b>	85	94
I N T P	100	<b>251</b>	97	1	82
E N F J	100	<b>134</b>	71	15	<b>166</b>
E N T J	100	95	96	2	96
E N T P	100	59	80	19	<b>122</b>
I N T J	100	56	<b>164</b>	<b>284</b>	43
I S T J	100	52	95	95	<b>130</b>
E N F P	100	28	<b>102</b>	4	<b>162</b>
E S F J	100	21	80	6	<b>124</b>
E S F P	100	20	102	5	<b>162</b>
E S T J	100	17	42	<b>324</b>	85
I S F P	100	12	80	<b>253</b>	87
E S T P	100	10	100	6	<b>263</b>
I S T P	100	8	82	82	<b>323</b>
I S F J	100	1	100	<b>513</b>	39

October 2016-September 2021. Source: [Roy Morgan Research \(2021\)](#).

## 8. Different Thinking Patterns

Summarising differences in these patterns of thinking suggests a source of both conscious and unconscious bias of each of the cohorts of decision-makers in the national population (See **Table 4**).

These patterns suggest differences in thinking, and different goals in life that may lead to behaviour changes and variations in assumptions about the impact of alternative public policy initiatives.

These differences are further indicated by variations in subjective goals in life within the population of the Australian Capital Territory Public Servants compared with the remaining residents of the ACT (See **Table 5**). The comparison suggests that reference to the “Canberra Bubble” might be restricted to official decision makers rather than the general community sharing lower levels of poverty.

Morgan research data strongly suggests that differences between pensioners’ and beneficiaries’ goals in life do not provide justification for objective socio-economic assumptions about poverty directed towards achieving security for themselves and their families.

## 9. What Concepts Should Be Considered?

The **ACOSS (2020)** Report confirms that unemployment payments in Australia have continued to fall behind minimum wages, as well as falling well behind the

**Table 4.** Jung personality thinking pattern differences.

ACT public servants	ACT non public servants	Age pensioners	Jobseeker Beneficiaries
Imagining	Implementing	Judging	Engaging
Knowing	Verifying	Appraising	Experiencing
Driving	Establishing the value	Accounting	Enjoying

Beebe (2017).

**Table 5.** Variations in subjective goals in life.

Goals in life	Total Australian population index = 100	ACT public servants Index = 100	ACT non-public servants index = 100	Age pensions Index = 100	Job seekers Index = 100
Important Life	100	<b>184</b>	86	42	102
Prosperous Life	100	127	<b>125</b>	34	97
Family Life	100	96	71	45	109
Secure Life	100	91	96	116	98
Exciting Life	100	79	97	<b>129</b>	98
Undecided	100	63	80	84	<b>120</b>

October 2016-September 2021. Source: **Roy Morgan Research (2021)**.

growth in median incomes. It also identifies an increasing gap between Aged Pensions and Jobseeker payments. This outcome of years of conscious government differentiation between pensioners and beneficiaries has been presented as a concern with economic policies that are biased towards family members holding positions of paid full-time or part-time employment.

Treloar's question concerning thinking leading to differences between Aged Pensions and Jobkeeper payments highlights the vastly different thinking of the people tasked with making decisions about levels of pensions and benefits. In effect, it focuses on the very divergent patterns of thinking of the policy makers and the general community. Acknowledging and addressing this requires consideration of a theory of thinking that disentangles the extensive gap between policy makers, general public and beneficiaries.

ACOSS calls to provide greater subjective concern with family wellbeing and social justice in policy provisions authorised in the two relevant sections of the Constitution. In response, Canberra Public Servants place greater importance upon objective, measurable and variable approaches to income security provision that apparently adopt the government's stated concern with "unfunded empathy".

The difference set out in **Tables 1-4** indicates a large difference in the socio-economic status of the population of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)—the "Canberra Bubble". The findings present an even greater division between those with higher levels of education and income as measured in terms of socio-economic quintiles. This measurable and measured gap in the lived experience of the entire population of the Australian Capital Territory strongly suggests a source of unconscious assumptions about the aspirations and motivations of the remainder of the nation.

Differences are also reflected in the different experiences prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, lockdowns and loss of employment opportunities of the ACT population compared with the public servants who have secure incomes and employment. Business leaders were given access to means-test-free income supplements to maintain employment for their staff, with an increase in income security provisions for those on pensions or having some form of employment.

Expectations for the post-pandemic economic and social recovery after the mass distribution of vaccines retain these significant differences. For those on pensions and benefit, these programs have increased awareness of differentials between sections of the community reflecting differences in both socio-economic status, lived experience and goals in life impacted by the same changes that are resulting from a global health crisis.

Studies of household incomes before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia show that the economic conditions and corporate reconstruction have, generally, been beneficial. Less positively, however, they have increased the gap between those that have access to programs instituted by the Canberra policy makers. Income recipients receiving unjustified income payments are legally forced to repay these provisions whilst employers are entitled to pay their execu-

tives a bonus on the basis of government provisions that increased their turnover.

## 10. How Are the Concepts Related?

Human thinking represents the human capacity to construct forms, functions and frames that focus on achieving future objectives.

The identified differences in patterns of thinking between the residents of the Australian Capital Territory establish that there are, in fact, significant sources of decisions within the Canberra population that do not establish differences between those in the top two quintiles of the Socio-Economic Scales (SEIFA).

To the extent, however, that the counsel of ACT Public Servants may be seen to be an application of independent communication and counsel to the government on the requirements of “order and good government”, it is appropriate to consider the possibility that the degree of differences between the Public Servants and the general population as a source of policy, and on differences in experience of the nature and causes of poverty are highly likely to result in ill-considered, intuitive, irrational and even imaginative approaches that stem from unconscious bias.

In this setting, cognitive bias appears to arise from different life experiences, education and social conditions leading to judgements about the extent that an individual or group of people are in a position to make considered actions, approaches and attitudes that enable them to move out of material or absolute poverty into alternative forms of independent, sustainable self-support.

A comparison of the similarities and differences in cohorts of thinking patterns may lead to cognitive dissonance as an explanation of the difference of policy makers from those of the general community and potential beneficiaries of two forms of income security provision.

Comparisons of the thinking patterns of Public Servants in the seat of Federal Government (The Australian Capital Territory) that determines the different levels of payment in respect of Sections of the Constitution authorising Age Pensioners and Unemployment benefits and allowances provides a framework for a theory of differences in thinking patterns.

Data is drawn from a probability sample of interviews conducted by Roy Morgan Research of employed in the public service against the population of Canberra over the period of major turbulence from July 2020 to June 2021.

Roy Morgan Research conducts more than 50,000 household interviews on a random probability sample basis representing one percent of the national population that is matched against the national census profile. It consistently identifies four quadrants of the geographic population that significantly differentiate patterns of thinking in the community. In 2020 and 2021 this research identified its respondents as Achievers, as Security Seekers, as Simple Living and as Home Base oriented.

The divide between the Canberra Public Servants geographic distribution and

that of pensioners and beneficiaries is demonstrated in a comparison of patterns of thinking arising from the perspective of the brain as the originator of thinking linked to the top and bottom (front and back) of the left and right hemispheres of the brain generating the core differentiators of human change and choice. Clearly, there are significant differences between the lifestyles and ambitions of the employed householders and those who are dependent upon pensions and benefits and further differences between the Pensioners and the Beneficiaries.

## 11. Sources of Bias and Contrasts in Thinking

Differences referred to in Treloar's questioning how politicians and bureaucrats think may be the result of conscious choices, considered decisions and ideological perspectives that are simply matters of political and social judgements of governments. Public servants in a Westminster system are presumed to carry out the policies and programs of the government of the day and the wishes of its Ministers.

It is not intended, here, to assert that public servants are biased or acting contrary to the conscious intentions of government. Rather, it is suggested that the differences in thinking of this small cohort of decision-makers constituting the "Canberra Bubble" may benefit from a greater appreciation of the lived experiences of income security recipients when Pensions and Benefit provisions are being treated in different ways with adverse effects on recipients.

Under these conditions, it is inappropriate to consider the thinking patterns of public servants merely implementing decisions that have Cabinet and legislative approval. The extent that there is a considered pattern of thinking related to the differences in responses to the two references in the Constitution becomes a matter of speculation beyond the scope of evidence.

A review of approaches to a more global theory of thinking is required to identify the wide range of elements, constructs and links between the mental processes of individuals and the construction of expressed and experienced thinking processes. Models of human thinking, artificial intelligence and affiliative consciousness incorporate models of Living Systems (Miller, 1965; Maturana and Varela, 1980) including core elements in common with other theories offering forms of binary outcomes.

## 12. Why Consider Thinking Patterns?

If the basis for conflicting interpretations of the Constitution leads to a failure to achieve its intention to provide for "order and good government" by removal of the impact of unconscious bias against specific sections of the community based on purportedly objective intervention-based socio-economic models, it is necessary to identify patterns of thinking that may constitute sources of cognitive dissonance generating undesirable and/or unintended consequences.

Taking up the significance of content and context, Illeris (2004) introduces interaction with the surroundings and environmental influences in pointing out

that “*for the internal psychological dimensions, the individual is the setting, while the action takes place through the individual’s meetings with the surrounding world. For the interaction dimension, it is the surrounding world that is the setting and the action is the individual’s deeds in relation to this surrounding world.*” The social distance of the decision-making public servant from those who are to be served ensures an isolated context in which the content, the supportive decision, seems bound to be significantly biased. As this bias is substantially entrenched through both education, employability criteria and geography, it seems unlikely that it can be addressed without a different way of thinking.

Miller’s (1978) general living systems theory explores phenomena in terms of dynamic patterns in the relationships between organisms and their environments, considering two sorts of spaces:

- 1) physical or geographical space, and
- 2) conceptual or abstracted spaces.

Both of Miller’s spaces come into play as the decision-makers apply their established thinking patterns from the “Canberra Bubble” to those necessarily abstracted groups of aged, unemployed and under-employed, whose major concerns are “defined” through poverty.

Bailey (2006) observes that Living Systems Theory provides the “most integrative” social systems theory. It has made many contributions that may be easily overlooked, such as providing a detailed analysis of types of systems; making a distinction between concrete and abstracted systems; discussion of physical space and time; placing emphasis on information processing; providing an analysis of entropy; and providing recognition of multiple sources of both conscious and unconscious bias.

While age and employment status tend to isolate people into apparently definable and measurable social sets, decision-making from afar reduces the potential for accurate provision. Miller’s recognition of the dynamic patterns in relationships offers an opportunity for re-thinking to include and to accommodate these dynamics so that answers to the question of differences in the implementation of the government’s intention to treat poverty as evidence of order and good government may benefit from a wider perspective.

### 13. Conclusion

Current interpretation of the intentions and provisions of the Australian Constitution is substantially lacking in its recognition of the diverse definitions and roles of poverty as they affect policy development and implementation. Comparative data presented in this paper strongly suggest that policies addressing poverty need to look beyond quantitative socio-economic models of income distribution to take account of the significant differences in lived experience of policy makers isolated in the national capital from those who receive their diverse offerings.

Specific comparison of differences in the thinking patterns of policy-making Public Servants, Age Pensioners and Unemployment payment recipients in the ACT provides a potential answer to concerns arising from an examination of the differences in treatment of Pensioners and Beneficiaries at the much broader national level.

Approaches to the definition of poverty that rely solely upon objective, rational, measurable and consistent economic differences in the implementation of measures for “Order and good government” require significant re-consideration of the complexity of human thinking as part of a neglected “social” component of socio-economic interpretations of poverty.

Innovative application of theories of thinking suggests the necessity for looking beyond “rational comprehensive” measures of socio-economic status to take into account differences between the lived experiences and understanding of policy makers and those of the varying and highly diversified sections of the population impacted by their policies. By this process, risks of unconscious bias with consequential discrimination and collateral damages for social security recipients may be recognised and foregrounded in future policy and practice.

While policy decisions reflect conscious and unconscious bias in favour of people with similar lived experience, patterns of thinking and shared values, differences in the provision of funding for these groups clearly reflect a combination of conscious and unconscious bias arising from different patterns of thinking about the nature of destitution. Seen from an objective socio-economic rational comprehensive planning viewpoint, humans in the recipient groups become abstracted; appreciation, even recognition, of the subjective lived experience of distress becomes largely irrelevant and the lived reality of poverty becomes dissociated from considerations of social inclusion and social justice perspectives. Unless and until policy makers become cognizant of the wide range of forms of thinking experienced by people in poverty, little seems likely to change.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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