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# False beliefs and the perceived deservingness of social security benefit claimants

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## Abstract (for editors)

In Anglo-Saxon countries, there have been debates about whether the perceived undeservingness of benefit claimants is driven by ‘myths’. However, there has been no previous attempt to consider the truthfulness of deservingness perceptions, or even whether we can speak about their ‘truthfulness’ at all. This chapter firstly argues that while deservingness perceptions are closer to attitudes than beliefs and therefore difficult to judge as ‘true’ in themselves, we can look at their relationship to more specific false beliefs about the benefits system. The chapter then looks empirically at the beliefs-deservingness perceptions relationship, using 18 measures from seven UK surveys, together with a cross-national analysis of two measures from ESS. It finds that most benefit beliefs are associated with perceived undeservingness, with occasional exceptions (the perceived value of benefits). This relationship varies across different subgroups and countries, although perhaps by less than might be expected. This is robust to the inclusion of controls, although this is no guarantee the effect is causal. Finally, on the assumption that it is causal, it simulates how deservingness perceptions would change if the public’s beliefs about benefits were correct. It shows that the perceived deservingness of claimants would often be considerably greater if people held correct beliefs, and that the size of this effect is considerable in practical terms. It ends by calling for future research on the impact of false benefit beliefs, both conceptual and empirical.

## Introduction

In countries like the US and UK, where social security benefit claimants are widely perceived as undeserving, there has been a debate about whether these negative attitudes are driven by ‘myths’. The accusation is that perceived undeservingness is due to false beliefs, spread through politically-motivated media and politicians. ‘Mythbusters’ have therefore been produced by campaigning organisations or feature in wider factchecking initiatives ,[[1]](#footnote-1) and academics in both countries have made public contributions to this debate to try and eliminate these myths, not least Martin Gilens in the US (1996) and John Hills in the UK (2014). This is a specific form of a much broader phenomenon of mythbusting across countries and issues (see Kessler, 2014 and below).

Empirically, the public do indeed misperceive the realities of working age benefits in Anglo-Saxon countries in ways that seem likely to contribute to perceived undeservingness. In a previous paper (Baumberg Geiger, submitted)[[2]](#endnote-1), I reviewed the accuracy of 46 measures across 18 datasets in the UK.With occasional exceptions, this showed the public had low levels of understanding in ways that seem likely to undermine public support. People wildly overestimate unemployment benefits compared to pensions – similar to US polls showing wild overestimates of the cost of food stamps to the US government (e.g. CNN, 2011). Half of Britons think that out-of-work benefit claims have risen in the past fifteen years, whereas they have fallen noticeably. And while it is difficult to know the true level of benefit fraud exactly, the public overestimate fraud compared to any reasonable figure.

However, in the academic literature, the literatures on deservingness perceptions and benefit beliefs have hitherto remained separate. Moreover, the truth of deservingness perceptions – or whether it is even ontologically desirable to speak of their ‘truthfulness’ – has not been discussed. In this chapter, I make a first attempt to bring these literatures together. I begin by considering *conceptually* how deservingness perceptions might be connected to factual beliefs, before presenting the methods and results for an empirical analysis of the deservingness-belief link across three UK and one European datasets. I conclude by considering whether the empirical link between beliefs and deservingness perceptions is likely to be causal.

## Theory and hypotheses

While historically contested, attitudes are conventionally seen as evaluative judgements (a positive or negative disposition towards an attitude object), that can at least theoretically be separated from cognitive evaluations of the object that are known as ‘beliefs’ (e.g. Oskamp & Schultz, 2005). While it makes sense to ask if beliefs are empirically true (unlike for attitudes), this is not to suggest that our *knowledge* of the truth of any belief can be fully value-free (see Baumberg Geiger, submitted). We must therefore be continually aware of values and uncertainty if we are to make claims about ‘false beliefs’. (Furthermore, while I take ‘perceptions’ to be synonymous with ‘beliefs’, I depart from the wider literature in avoiding the term ‘knowledge’. This is because philosophers generally understand ‘knowledge’ to imply *justification* as well as true beliefs).

Under this definition, I argue that deservingness perceptions (as conceptualised in Chapter 1) are not conventional beliefs, but are either attitudes or what Oskamp & Schultz term ‘evaluative beliefs’ (in which explicit value judgements and beliefs are entangled). While deservingness perceptions themselves can therefore not be ‘true’ or ‘false’, they will be associated with benefit beliefs to the extent that these beliefs *imply* the (un)deservingness of claimants – and this will clearly vary dependent on the belief item in question. A small number of studies in the US (Blinder & Krueger, 2004) and Hong Kong (Wong & Tang, 2006) examine the links between benefit beliefs and various welfare state attitudes, but very few studies have previously examined the belief-deservingness link. My hypotheses for each of the belief domains reviewed in Baumberg Geiger (submitted) are:

* *Extent of benefits fraud*: fraudulent claimants seem almost tautologically to be undeserving, and I therefore expect perceived fraud to be associated with perceived undeservingness.
* *Value of benefit payments/incentives to work*: I expect perceived lower work incentives to be associated with perceived undeservingness (reflecting longstanding British debates). Similarly, I expect the higher perceived benefit values to be associated with lower perceived deservingness, partly because this implies a greater incentive to claim benefits, and partly because it implies a lower level of need.
* *Duration of claims*: a perception that most claims are long-term may imply a lack of reciprocity (being less likely to work in future) and greater control (making fewer efforts to overcome job loss). I therefore expect it to be associated with lower perceived deservingness.
* *Relative spending on different benefits*: some claimant groups are consistently perceived to be more deserving than others – indeed, Chapter 1 considers whether this ordering is universal. I therefore expect perceived spending on deserving group (e.g. pensioners vs. unemployed people) to be associated with greater perceived deservingness.
* *Overall extent of claims/spending*: greater perceived levels of claims may indicate undeservingness (if people have a fixed idea of the number of deserving claimants) – but may equally indicate deservingness (if times of unemployment increase support for benefits).

These hypotheses refer to the *average* relationship between benefit beliefs and perceived deservingness, but this may conceal a much more complex relationship between the two. This is best described by way of an analogy. People’s beliefs/attitudes are like a chaotically-constructed building. The impact of changing a belief is like removing a single pillar: it depends on the position of the pillar within the structure. If it is pivotal, then the structure will collapse; if it is irrelevant, then the building will remain intact; and often the building will be weakened, and only collapse if other supports are removed or other pressures applied. Similarly, changing a belief may lead to the collapse of someone’s worldview, or have no effect, or have a *contingent* effect on their worldview that depends on other factors. (As Converse (2006/1964) noted there can be logical constraints on belief systems, but only to the extent that these are *experienced* as logical inconsistencies). Despite my focus on average effects here, it seems likely that the relationship is complex, non-linear, and will vary across different groups, and I specifically test this secondary hypothesis below.

We now turn to examining whether these hypothesised associations between knowledge and deservingness are borne out empirically.

## Methods

### Analytical approach

The first step in the analysis is to examine the bivariate relationship between benefit beliefs and a perceived deservingness, using conventional (logit) regression models. However, correlation does not necessarily imply causation: both knowledge and attitudes may be determined by other factors (see also Conclusion). In a second stage, I therefore add controls for party affiliation, education, working status, region, age, and gender.

A further question is whether there is heterogeneity in the beliefs-deservingness association. One way of investigating this is to look at population subgroups in Britain (testing the significance of the interaction between beliefs and party affiliation/education/age). Another way is to examine whether the beliefs-deservingness link varies across countries. For the two beliefs for which I have comparative data, I examine the beliefs-deservingness association in each country, test the interaction between beliefs and country, and also use a random slopes multilevel model to see if there is statistically significant variation in the effect across countries.

Finally, I consider how the population would view deservingness *if* they held accurate beliefs. This is estimated in a third stage that Sturgis (2003) terms ‘simulation’, which has been used in the US (e.g. Bartels, 1996) and beyond (e.g. Bhatti, 2010) to estimate how electorates would have voted if everyone was fully informed. In practice, I use the estimated effect of each benefit belief to predict each respondent’s perception of undeservingness if their beliefs were correct. These are then averaged, and compared to the same respondents’ actual responses. This also requires establishing what an accurate perception of the world would look like; these are given in Web Appendix 5 and briefly discussed in the following section.

### Data

There are relatively few surveys that include measures of benefit beliefs. Of the British surveys reviewed in Baumberg Geiger (submitted), only three include a question on deservingness (further details on all surveys are given in Web Appendix 1):

1. *British Social Attitudes (BSA), various years*: BSA uses a stratified random sample of adults, and is one of the most widely-used and highly-respected survey series in Britain.
2. *European Social Survey (ESS) 2008*: the British arm of ESS is a face-to-face survey of 2352 people using a stratified random sample.
3. *TUC/YouGov 2012*: this is an online panel survey of 1667 people that was kindly provided via the TUC. This is not a full random sample, and we would expect the samples to be slightly skewed towards those with greater political interest/knowledge (Liu & Wang, 2014).

For the comparative analysis, I use ESS 2008, with sample sizes varying from 1,215 (Cyprus) to 2,750 (Germany) and a combined sample size of 47,421. For all datasets, the supplied weights are used.

### Measures

#### Benefits knowledge

In total there are 18 belief measures across seven survey waves and five sets of beliefs; this section describes each set in turn (full details of question wording are given in Web Appendix 4, and details of the derivation of the true figures are given in Web Appendix 5).

*Extent of benefits fraud*: three measures of perceived benefits fraud are used – two that ask about the share of ‘false claims’ (separately for sickness/disability and unemployment, from BSA 2007), and one that asks directly about ‘fraudulent’ claims as a share of the ‘welfare budget’ (from TUC/YouGov 2012). About 7-8% of respondents respond ‘don’t know’ in BSA, but respondents were forced to give an answer in TUC/YouGov.

The true figures are taken from official Government estimates based on reviews of a random sample of 26,000 claims, collating government data sources before interviewing the claimant. However, the resulting estimates (0.1-3.0%) are likely to be underestimates of the true figure, and we therefore consider any responses between 0-10% as plausibly ‘correct’ (see Baumberg Geiger, submitted).

*Relative spending on different benefits:* in BSA 2001, respondents were firstly given a list of different areas of government spending, and then given a list of areas of *social security* spending, in both cases being asked to pick the largest/smallest (4-5% were ‘don’t knows’). A different approach was taken in TUC/YouGov 2012, which asked respondents to specify exactly what share of the ‘welfare budget’ was spent on ‘benefits for the unemployed’ (and were forced to give an answer). In both cases, true figures are obtained by grouping public spending categories to match each question (so that e.g. housing benefits for unemployed people are counted as ‘benefits for the unemployed’).

*Overall claims*: ESS 2008 asks *“Of every 100 people of working age in [country] how many would you say are unemployed and looking for work?”*, and then repeats this question about the number who are ‘long-term sick or disabled’. This seems likely to produce similar answers to questions about the extent of benefit claims (though see Baumberg Geiger, submitted). This has been simplified to a continuous variable based on the mid-points of the response options (e.g. using 2% as the midpoint of the 0-4% category) and the bottom of the 50+% category. True values are taken from official labour force surveys, and are therefore subject to non-response and sampling errors.

*Value of benefits/incentives to work*: there are two direct questions in TUC/YouGov 2012 about the situation of an unemployed couple with two children, asking (i) how much they would receive in unemployment benefit, and (ii) how much better off they would be if one parent took a 30hrs/wk minimum wage job. (The former forces respondents to provide an answer, while 10% say ‘don’t know’ to the latter).

A different approach is taken in the BSA series, which firstly asks people if a particular type of benefit claimant has enough to live on, and then repeats the question telling them exactly how much this household receives (this question having been asked in various years and various types of claimant; we here focus on versions in 2000, 2005 and 2013). While this does not tell us people’s beliefs about the exact level of benefits, we can infer a lower bound of misperceptions from people who change their answers after receiving the correct information.

For both the BSA and TUC/YouGov questions, true figures are taken from historic benefits tables, although the simplifying assumptions necessary for the work incentives question mean this should be treated with additional caution (see Web Appendix 5).

*Duration of claims:* TUC/YouGov 2012 asks, ‘*Out of every 100 people who sign on to make a claim for Jobseeker’s Allowance, approximately how many do you think go on to receive it for more than a year?*’ (As for most questions in TUC/YouGov, respondents were required to give an answer). There are several ways of interpreting this question (e.g. whether the claim has to be uninterrupted or simply refers to the claimant’s state after a year), and a range of true figures are given in Web Appendix 5 using official government data.

#### Deservingness

Ideally, measures of deservingness perceptions are closely matched to the concept of deservingness, such as the question, *‘Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help’*. However, this question is only available in BSA, and three other questions are therefore also used (full wording is given in Web Appendix 6):

* Whether many people manage to get benefits/services to which they are not entitled (ESS);
* Whether unemployed people are ‘really’ trying to find a job(ESS) , or could ‘really’ get one (BSA);
* Whether ‘Britain’s welfare system has created a culture of dependency’ vs. claimants being ‘victims of circumstances beyond their control’ (TUC/YouGov).

For analysis, the deservingness questions were turned into binary undeservingness variables (‘(strongly) agree’ for BSA/ESS; saying there was a ‘culture of dependency’ in TUC/YouGov).

#### Controls

As described above, the second stage of the analysis controls for potential confounders. For the UK-only analyses, these are: political party (that feels closest to), education (degree-level/A-level or above/less than A-level/no qualifications), working status (working full-time/part-time/student/retired/unemployed/other), region, age2, and gender (and for ESS/BSA, whether respondents’ main source of income is benefits). The international ESS analyses were not able to use these versions of region, political party or education due to issues of cross-national comparability. These are therefore replaced by ISCED-measured education and a left-right political scale rather. Web appendix 3 gives further details of all variables.

## Findings

### Stages 1 & 2: The beliefs-deservingness association

The results are shown in Table 1 (for continuous variables), Table 2 (for categorical variables) and Table 3 (for the BSA benefit value variables) below. Turning first to the measures of benefit fraud beliefs in table 1, we can see that there is a strong bivariate association between fraud knowledge and the various deservingness perceptions, as expected. For example, a 1 percentage point (hereafter 1%) increase in the belief that disability claimants are ‘false’ is associated with 0.60% increase in agreement with ‘many claimants don’t deserve any help’. Similar sizes of effects are found for all three of the knowledge items about benefits fraud, and are statistically significant at the 1% level in all cases.

**[Table 1 about here]**

There are three other areas in which the hypotheses are borne out:

* A perception of greater unemployment or long-term disability is associated with greater perceptions of undeservingness (in ESS; see Table 1). While no studies have previously studied the perceived magnitude of sickness/disability in ESS, this fits previous evidence about the association between perceptions of the extent of unemployment and wider attitudes to unemployment (also using ESS; Chung & van Oorschot, 2012; Mackonytė et al., 2014).
* The relative size of benefits spending on groups commonly perceived to be undeserving is associated with greater perceptions of overall undeservingness. For example, in Table 2, those who correctly identify that pensions are the largest area of social security spending are 10.8% less likely to say that most claimants don’t deserve help (with similar if less consistently significant findings for correctly identifying that unemployment/single parent benefits have the lowest spending, and similar findings in Table 1).
* Third, respondents who think unemployment claims usually last longer periods are also more likely to say there is a ‘dependency culture’ (by 0.29% for each additional percentage of claimants perceived to claim for 12+mths; see Table 1).

**[Tables 2 and 3 about here]**

However, some knowledge items were not even weakly related to deservingness perceptions, contradicting the hypotheses above. In particular, there was a negligible and generally insignificant effect of knowledge about the value of benefits payments. This is true whether this was asked directly (in TUC/YouGov in Table 1) or indirectly by seeing if – after hearing the true figure – people change their views about whether benefits are enough to live on (in BSA in Table 3). Similarly, there was no link between agreeing there is a ‘dependency culture’, and beliefs about work incentives for a hypothetical benefit claimant. (It is further worth noting that this lack of relationship is not specific to deservingness perceptions; there is also little relationship between perceived value/incentives and policy preferences; see Web Appendix 8).

One explanation of these results is that they are confounded by other political and sociodemographic factors. However, even after controlling for party affiliation, education, working status, region, age, and gender (and in ESS/BSA, own claims), the associations are slightly attenuated but basically unchanged. This is shown in the next columns of Tables 1-3. This is perhaps surprising given that several control variables have strong effects (perceived undeservingness is higher among Conservatives, lower-educated people, and full-time workers). Sensitivity analyses that exclude those without political party affiliations also show effectively identical results (see Web Appendix 8). While other non-causal explanations are possible (see Discussion below), the association between benefit beliefs and deservingness perceptions does not seem to be due to sociodemographic or political confounding.

Overall, the hypotheses above seem largely correct: there is a strong relationship between people’s beliefs about the benefits system and their perception that claimants are undeserving, even after controlling for political and sociodemographic factors. This applies to beliefs about benefits fraud, the relative size of claims by groups perceived to be more or less deserving, the overall scale of unemployment and long-term sickness, and the duration of benefit claims. Yet there is one glaring exception to this pattern: people’s beliefs about the financial value of benefits payments (and similarly their perception of the incentive to work) were unrelated to deservingness perceptions.

### Stage 4: Heterogeneity in the beliefs-deservingness association

A secondary hypothesis was that the beliefs-deservingness associations would be heterogeneous across different groups and countries. If we firstly examine heterogeneity across key subgroups in Britain, we find (more detailed results are in Web Appendix 7):

* *Age*: fraud perceptions are particularly important for perceived undeservingness as people get older, but other beliefs are similarly associated with perceived undeservingness at all ages.
* *Education:* believing that unemployment/disability is more widespread is more strongly linked to perceived undeservingness among the *higher*-educated (with weak suggestions the same is true for perceived fraud), while it is the *lower*-educated for whom there is a stronger link of perceived deservingness to beliefs about the value of benefits.
* *Party affiliation:* beliefs that unemployment is a higher share of the ‘welfare budget’ are particularly associated with perceived undeservingness for Labour identifiers and those not supporting a particular party. Believing that benefits are higher value is particularly associated with perceived undeservingness among those supporting a minor party (mainly UKIP).

In general, however, only 11 of 39 possible interactions are significant (we would expect 2 to be significant simply by chance), and the joint significance of all three sets of interaction terms is less than 5% for only 4 of the 13 measures in Table 1. The beliefs-deservingness association does sometimes differ across population subgroups, but overall it is surprisingly unvarying.

Turning now to heterogeneity across countries, it is only possible to examine for the two belief measures in ESS, which cover the perceived extent of unemployment/long-term sickness. It is first worth noting how far these perceptions reflect (estimated) realities in different countries, shown in Figure 1 below. Readers should first note that the scales on the two axes are different; the actual share of the working-age population who are long-term sick/unemployed is less than 10% in all countries, but the perceived level is *greater* than 10% in all countries (!). Beyond this, there is a positive relationship between actual and perceived unemployment across countries, but much less of a relationship between actual and perceived long-term sickness.

Figure 1: Actual and perceived long-term sickness/unemployment across ESS countries



My main focus here, though, is on the relationship between benefit beliefs and perceived deservingness across countries, which is shown in Table 4. Many countries show similar patterns to the UK, in which a belief in higher unemployment/long-term sickness is associated with the attitude that more claimants are undeserving. However, this association seems to vary considerably across countries (an observation confirmed by a joint test of the significance of the interaction terms (p<0.01 for all models), and by a random slopes model (see Web Appendix 8)). In particular, the association is significantly positive for most (46 of 56 associations are positive with p<0.10) models in the ‘old’ (pre-2004) EU/EFTA countries, but for only a minority (9 of 44) of models in the ‘new’ EU and candidate countries, where the association tends to be weaker and is sometimes negative.

**[Table 4 about here]**

Cross-national comparisons are often fraught with difficulty, and here we must contend with the differing ESS response rates across countries (from 46% in Croatia to 79% in Cyprus) and widely differing propensities for people to say they ‘don’t know’ to these specific belief questions (for long-term sickness, varying from 2% in Norway to 39% in Portugal) – full details being given in Web Appendix 2. Moreover, further comparative work would enable us to examine if some countries have more accurate understandings of their welfare state than other countries, whether the pattern of association of these beliefs with deservingness perceptions also varies, and – to the extent that they do – to unpick the sources of this variation.

Still, both sets of results in this section come to a similar conclusion: the link between benefit beliefs and perceived undeservingness does vary across countries and population subgroups (as hypothesised), suggesting that the link them is contingent on wider belief structures rather than logically inevitable. However, the extent of this is less than expected, at least within the ‘old’ pre-2004 EU member states, suggesting that the impact of benefits beliefs is relatively consistent within the belief structures that are currently commonplace.

### Stage 5: Simulating an informed public

Finally, I use the preceding models to estimate the proportion of people that would see claimants as undeserving if they had an accurate knowledge of the benefits system; the results are shown in the final columns of Tables 1-3. In short, these show that claimants would generally be seen as much more deserving if people’s beliefs were accurate. For example, if people knew that the level of fraud was very unlikely to be more than 10% (itself likely to be an overestimate; see Baumberg Geiger (submitted)), we estimate that 8.1 percentage points fewer people would agree that there is a dependency culture. Similar results are found for other questions on fraud, the level of unemployment/ disability, and the relative share of unemployment benefit spending. (Results are also effectively identical if we allow interaction effects, following recommended practice in e.g. Sturgis, 2003).

However, there are two sets of knowledge items where the simulations estimate negligible changes in response to more accurate beliefs. The first is for the perceived value of benefits or the incentive to work, which we have already seen has no relationship with deservingness perceptions. The second, though, is for perceptions of the share of long-term claims among unemployment claimants. This is because the public are roughly correct on average (overestimates balance out underestimates; see Baumberg (submitted)), hence the simulations do not suggest that average attitudes would change if beliefs became more accurate.

While I cannot simulate people’s attitudes if *all* these beliefs were correct, I can use the TUC/YouGov survey to simulate people’s deservingness perceptions if they simultaneously held correct beliefs about (i) benefits fraud, (ii) spending on unemployment benefits, (iii) the amount that a family on unemployment benefits would receive, and (iv) the share of long-term claims within unemployment benefits. In adjusted models, of those who got none of these answers correct, 73.8% believed that there was a dependency culture. In contrast, only 35.9% believed there was a dependency culture among those with 3 or 4 correct beliefs (see Web Appendix 8). In other words, if these simulations represent a casual effect, then the effect is of considerable importance.

## Discussion

#### A causal effect?

This chapter has shown that people’s beliefs about the benefits system are associated with their attitudes about the deservingness of benefit claimants – and that this association is maintained after controlling for political affiliations and sociodemographic factors. However, even if we have controlled adequately for all potential confounders – a strong assumption in itself – this does not necessarily indicate a casual effect (Pierce, 2015). Rather than having a stable and coherent body of knowledge that underpins their attitudes, people’s attitudes may (partly) determine their beliefs. There are three main psychological mechanisms through which this could occur:

1. *Spontaneous generation*:some people believe that attitudes are constructed on the spot in response to survey questions, based on cognitive, affective and behavioural processes (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005; Schwarz, 2007). People may therefore construct their benefits beliefs to be consistent with their deservingness attitudes in surrounding questions.
2. *Selective exposure*:people selectively expose themselves to information that supports their existing beliefs and attitudes (Hart et al., 2009), which is the original meaning of the now more widely-used term ‘confirmation bias’ (Hahn & Harris, 2014).
3. *Motivated reasoning*:all of us – even those that know about psychological biases – engage in ‘motivated reasoning’, where we interpret information in ways that support our existing beliefs and attitudes (Bolsen et al., 2014).

There is good evidence that these channels partly work through partisanship (that is, through people’s affiliation to a left- or right-wing political party). For example, Bullock et al (2013) find that partisan differences in political knowledge become much smaller if respondents are incentivised to give correct responses. Similarly, Lauderdale (2015) experimentally shows that telling people about Obama’s political position influences their factual beliefs on this issue in ways that vary along party lines. These suggest that without incentives, and on politicised issues, people are often generating beliefs to be consistent with their political affiliations rather than trying to give a correct response. While the fact that I find beliefs-deservingness associations even after controlling for partisan affiliations is suggestive of a causal effect, this evidence is hardly definitive. In the words of Kulkinski et al (2000:801), *“like other scholars who have worked in this area… we can only assume that some of the causation runs from beliefs to preferences.”*

More recently, though, there has been a growth in testing the impact of knowledge on attitudes using experimental methods. For example, one recent paper (Kuziemko et al., 2015) tested the impact of three pieces of information (one on inequality trends, one on the growth rate during high-tax vs. low-tax periods, and one emphasising that the estate tax only affects the largest 0.1% of estates). Compared to the control group, those receiving this information were much more likely to agree that inequality was a serious problem and support a higher estate tax, but only showed slightly greater support for other policy proposals (e.g. higher tax credits, a higher millionaire tax). However, the effects in the few studies looking purely at benefits are less optimistic – providing information had no effect on related policy preferences in the US (Kuklinski et al., 2000), while a natural experiment based on the UK Government’s tax statements found increases in knowledge of the share of government spending on ‘welfare and pensions’ without parallel changes in attitudes (Barnes et al., 2016).[[3]](#endnote-2)

Reviewing a number of such studies, Lawrence & Sides (2014) conclude that *“providing knowledge can, but does not necessarily, change people’s minds about political issues.”* This is perhaps unsurprising – some information treatments may not even lead to changes in knowledge because they are felt to be unbelievable (see below). Moreover, as we discussed above, there are some knowledge items that would seem closely related to deservingness perceptions, but others that seem less likely to be. Arguably the regression-based methods above may be one possible guide to where knowledge is likely to relate to attitudes; when researchers have directly compared the simulation method to experimental or deliberative impacts, they have generally found smaller but still observable effects in the same direction (Martin Gilens, 2001; Sturgis, 2003).

Finally, it is worth noting that not everyone sees these kinds of survey experiment as a ‘gold standard’ for examining the causal effect of knowledge in real-life settings. In particular, the one-shot survey experiment looks at effects within a single survey rather than longer-term impacts; and it presents single pieces of information rather than the competing sources of (often inaccurate) knowledge that people will actually receive. Barabas & Jerit (2010) find suggestive evidence that natural experiments have much weaker impacts on knowledge and attitudes compared to parallel survey experiments, although they admit that the tests are low-powered and their contrasts between methods are non-significant. Deliberative workshops – where people receive information and discuss issues collectively – also seem to change attitudes by changing beliefs, but with a weaker relationship between the two than simulation studies would suggest (e.g. Sturgis, 2003). Overall, there is evidence that changing beliefs can sometimes change attitudes, but little consensus as to which beliefs matter for whom, or the size of this effect when it occurs.

#### Conclusions: A future research agenda

This chapter aims to make two contributions. Firstly, in the midst of widespread Anglo-Saxon debates on ‘benefit myths’, it is somehow the first discussion about the truthfulness of perceptions of benefit claimants as (un)deservingness. It argues that we cannot easily speak about whether claimants are ‘truly deserving’, but that we can talk about the truthfulness of particular benefit beliefs, and then examine the relationship between these beliefs and perceived deservingness.

Secondly, the chapter then empirically examines the beliefs-deservingness relationship using 18 measures across seven surveys. I find that most benefit beliefs are associated with perceived undeservingness, with occasional exceptions (notably, the perceived value of benefits has no effect). This relationship varies across different subgroups and countries, although perhaps by less than might be expected. This is robust to the inclusion of political/sociodemographic controls, although as the previous section makes clear, this is no guarantee that the association represents a causal effect.

Finally, on the assumption that this is a causal effect, I simulate how deservingness perceptions would change if the public’s beliefs about benefits were correct (following previous political science studies simulating informed voting). This shows that the perceived deservingness of claimants would often be considerably greater if people held correct beliefs, and that the size of this effect is considerable in practical terms (even if some fully-informed people would still believe claimants to be undeserving).

Such simulations are illustrative rather definitive given the unavoidable uncertainties around causality, much as the simulations clearly demonstrate the pattern of associations between beliefs and perceived deservingness. Rather than being a final word on this matter, I hope this chapter is the start of further careful empirical and conceptual consideration of the relationship between public attitudes to the benefits system and the (often poorly understood) realities that claimants actually face.

Table 1: Perceived deservingness if benefit beliefs were accurate (continuous variables)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Belief question*** | ***Deservingness question*** | ***Effect of 1 unit on % agree*** | | n | **∆agree if all correct** |
| *Adjusted model* |  | *N* | *Y* | *Y* | *Y* |
| ***Perceptions of benefit fraud*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| False as % of disability claims (1) | Many don’t deserve help | 0.60\*\* | 0.56\*\* | *1594* | -13.7%\*\* |
| False as % of unemp claims (1) | Many don’t deserve help | 0.58\*\* | 0.52\*\* | *1606* | -14.8%\*\* |
| False as % of disability claims (1) | Unemployed could find job | 0.46\*\* | 0.46\*\* | *1596* | -10.1%\*\* |
| False as % of unemp claims (1) | Unemployed could find job | 0.51\*\* | 0.51\*\* | *1607* | -13.0%\*\* |
| Fraud as % of welfare spending (1) | Dependency culture | 0.55\*\* | 0.44\*\* | *1241* | -8.1%\*\* |
| ***Perceptions of spending on benefits*** | |  |  |  |  |
| Unemp as % of welfare budget | Dependency culture | 0.51\*\* | 0.32\*\* | *1241* | -11.4%\*\* |
| ***Perceptions of level of claims among working-age population*** | |  |  |  |  |
| Long-term sick & disabled as % of pop | Many not entitled | 0.68\*\* | 0.71\*\* | *902* | -7.4%\*\* |
| Unemployed & looking for work as % of pop | Many not entitled | 0.40\*\* | 0.27\*\* | *916* | -6.5%\*\* |
| Long-term sick & disabled as % of pop | Unemployed could find job | 1.05\*\* | 0.89\*\* | *908* | -11.3%\*\* |
| Unemployed & looking for work as % of pop | Unemployed could find job | 0.92\*\* | 0.63\*\* | *922* | -13.4%\*\* |
| ***Perceptions of value of benefits*** | |  |  |  |  |
| £ unemp benefit, couple+2 kids (1) | Dependency culture | 0.00 | 0.06 | *1241* | 0.0% |
| £ incentive to take min wage job‡ | Dependency culture | 0.00 | 0.00 | *1147* | 0.3% |
| ***Duration of benefit claims*** | |  |  |  |  |
| 12mths+ as % of JSA claims‡ | Dependency culture | 0.29\*\* | 0.23\*\* | *1241* | -0.4%\*\* |

Key: \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, + p<0.10

‡ *Major issues around the 'true' figure given - see text*

*(1) Minor issues about the 'true value' given - see Web Appendices*

*Adjusted models control for sex, age, age2, region, education, economic activity, and political affiliation*

Table 2: Perceived deservingness if benefit beliefs were accurate (categorical variables)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **If correct** | **If incorrect** | ***Diff  (sig)*** | ***Adjusted  diff 3  (sig)*** |
| ***Many don't deserve any help*** |  |  |  |  |
| Largest area of social security spending | 25.6% | 36.4% | *-10.8% \*\** | *-9.6% \*\** |
| Smallest area of social security spending | 29.5% | 34.2% | *-4.7% +* | *-4.0%* |
| ***Most unemployed could get a job*** |  |  |  |  |
| Largest area of social security spending | 55.4% | 68.0% | *-12.6% \*\** | *-11.3% \*\** |
| Smallest area of social security spending | 58.9% | 66.0% | *-7.1% \*\** | *-7.9% \*\** |

*1 Correct answer from given list is ‘retirement pensions’ (see Web Appendix 5)*

*2 Correct answer from given list is either unemployment or single parent benefits (see Web Appendix 5)*

*3 Adjusted models control for sex, age, age2, region, education, economic activity, and political affiliation*

*Sample size in adjusted model varies from 2214-2227 (unweighted).*

Table 3: Perceived deservingness if benefit beliefs were accurate (response to accurate value of benefits)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Deservingness perception*** *(% agree that claimants are undeserving)* | **If no  change** | **If under-estimated benefit** | **If over-estimated benefit** | ***Difference (sig)*** | ***Adjusted diff (2)  (sig)*** |
| ***Most don't deserve help*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Unemployed single woman on £52, 2000 | 30.4% | 33.8% | 32.0% | *-1.8%* | *-4.2%* |
| Unemployed single woman on £72, 2013 | 33.3% | 34.5% | 35.4% | *0.9%* | *4.1%* |
| Unemployed couple w/o kids on £88, 2005 | 40.3% | 40.3% | 42.5% | *2.2%* | *0.3%* |
| Unemployed single mother on £95, 2000 (1) | 32.2% | 30.1% | 30.8% | *0.7%* | *-1.2%* |
| Pensioner couple on £171, 2005 (1) | 37.2% | 42.9% | 46.9% | *4.0%* | *7.4%* |
| ***Most unemployed could find job*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Unemployed single woman on £52, 2000 | 60.8% | 59.4% | 62.9% | *3.5%* | *-0.1%* |
| Unemployed single woman on £72, 2013 | 54.2% | 58.4% | 61.7% | *3.3%* | *6.5%* |
| Unemployed couple w/o kids on £88, 2005 | 69.6% | 68.7% | 73.1% | *4.4%* | *1.5%* |
| Unemployed single mother on £95, 2000 (1) | 61.5% | 59.3% | 66.1% | *6.8% +* | *5.8%* |
| Pensioner couple on £171, 2005 (1) | 70.7% | 71.1% | 63.3% | *-7.8%* | *-3.0%* |

*(1) Minor issues around the 'true' figure given - see Web Appendix 5*

*(2) Models control for sex, age, age2, region, education, economic activity, own benefits claim, and political affiliation*

*Sample size varies from 2490-2911 (unweighted)*

Table 4: The delief-deservingness link across different countries

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Country ↓* | **Effect of 1 unit change in perception on % agree (adjusted)** | | | |
| *Belief measure→* | Unempl. | Unempl. | L-t sick | L-t sick |
| *Deservingness measure→* | Many not entitled | Unemp cld find job | Many not entitled | Unemp cld find job |
| ***'Old' EU countries*** |  |  |  |  |
| Belgium | 0.41\*\* | 0.38\*\* | 0.51\*\* | 0.56\*\* |
| Denmark | 0.27\* | 0.33\*\* | 0.31\* | 0.50\*\* |
| Finland | 0.45\*\* | 0.78\*\* | 0.30\* | 0.65\*\* |
| France | 0.20+ | 0.42\*\* | 0.25\* | 0.61\*\* |
| Germany (combined) | 0.13 | 0.67\*\* | 0.11 | 0.57\*\* |
| Greece | -0.30\*\* | 0.23\* | 0.08 | 0.39\*\* |
| Ireland | 0.12 | 0.25\*\* | 0.14 | 0.36\*\* |
| Norway | 0.18 | 0.35\*\* | 0.41\*\* | 0.64\*\* |
| Portugal | 0.51\*\* | 0.16 | 0.23 | 0.49\*\* |
| Spain | 0.11 | 0.21\* | 0.29\* | 0.46\*\* |
| Sweden | 0.42\*\* | 0.47\*\* | 0.45\*\* | 0.52\*\* |
| Switzerland | 0.56\*\* | 0.78\*\* | 0.62\*\* | 0.80\*\* |
| The Netherlands | 0.63\*\* | 0.64\*\* | 0.62\*\* | 0.65\*\* |
| UK (combined) | 0.46\*\* | 0.85\*\* | 0.78\*\* | 0.99\*\* |
| ***'New' EU countries*** |  |  |  |  |
| Bulgaria | 0.00 | -0.27\* | 0.31\*\* | 0.14 |
| Croatia | 0.18\* | -0.17 | 0.01 | 0.24 |
| Cyprus | 0.33+ | 0.35+ | 0.20 | 0.34 |
| Czech Republic | 0.16 | 0.42\*\* | 0.09 | 0.58\*\* |
| Estonia | 0.15 | 0.05 | 0.50\*\* | 0.38\*\* |
| Hungary | 0.09 | -0.13 | 0.01 | -0.04 |
| Latvia | 0.10 | -0.27\*\* | 0.05 | 0.02 |
| Poland | -0.08 | 0.11 | -0.07 | 0.26\* |
| Romania | 0.11 | -0.20+ | 0.05 | -0.08 |
| Slovakia | 0.15 | -0.18 | 0.13 | 0.05 |
| Slovenia | 0.09 | 0.13 | 0.06 | 0.15 |

*Allmodels control for sex, age, age2, education, economic activity, own benefits claim, and left-right politics*

*Sample size varies from 745 to 2454; see Web Appendix 2 for details.*

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1. In the US, see <http://www.factcheck.org/issue/welfare/> and <http://www.politifact.com/subjects/welfare/> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/12/05/grothman-single-parents-welfare/> ; in the UK, see <https://fullfact.org/economy/> and <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/category/economy> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. {FOR REVIEWERS/EDITORS ONLY: To access the submitted version of Baumberg (submitted), see [this link](http://www.benbaumberg.com/files/2015%20Benefits%20beliefs.zip) (not for circulation/citation).} [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. An alternative interpretation of Barnes et al (2016) is that their incentives encouraged superficial rote learning rather than a transformation of beliefs, which explains the lack of impact on attitudes. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)