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The persistence of welfare stigma: Does the passing of time and subsequent employment moderate the negative perceptions associated with unemployment benefit receipt?

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Abstract

People receiving welfare payments are stigmatized. However, previous studies of welfare recipient stereotypes have not examined whether the stigma endures after payments are no longer received and have rarely considered the stigma associated with specific categories of welfare payments. We examined this question in three experiments (total N=873) focused on one category of welfare recipient, people receiving government income support due to their unemployment. To test if this stigmatized identity marked or scarred how people are perceived we compared evaluations of currently unemployed benefit recipients, to currently employed people who either previously received this benefit or who had no stated history of benefit receipt. Across the three experiments we found that current recipients of unemployment benefits were evaluated as much less conscientious, less human, and poorer workers, but as somewhat more extraverted than currently employed individuals irrespective of their welfare history. Moreover, we found that currently employed individuals were evaluated similarly, regardless of whether they had a prior history of benefit receipt, and the recency of the prior benefit experience. This pattern of results suggests that receiving unemployment benefits does not scar how a person is perceived by others, but only temporarily marks how they are perceived. These findings suggest that welfare stigma may create an evaluative barrier to returning to work, but that if this barrier can be overcome there

are no negative evaluations of former recipients' character. Overall, community members seem accepting of prior benefit receipt once a person returns to work.

Governments provide welfare payments and income support as a social safety net for people experiencing circumstances like unemployment, disability, parenting obligations and retirement. Since the 1990s, welfare policies across OECD countries, including the USA and Australia, have become increasingly integrated with labour market policy (OECD, 2003; Whiteford & Whitehouse, 2006), eligibility criteria have been tightened (McVicar, Wilkins, & Ziebarth, 2016), and policies have been developed to reduce long-term dependency (e.g., job search and work requirements; Martin, 2015). Welfare regimes fall into different categories. The present research spans two countries with liberal welfare regimes, the USA and Australia. Liberal regime countries are defined by their heavy targeting of welfare benefits (e.g., income support payments) to those most in need, but they do not provide a generous amount of support (Esping-Andersen, 1989). The targeting of income support payments tends to emphasise the differences between those who do and do not require welfare (Larsen, 2008), while the low payment rates exacerbate social stratification and lead to entrenched intergenerational disadvantage (Esping-Andersen, 2015). These two processes separate welfare recipients from broader society and might explain why those who rely on the government for income support often experience "welfare stigma" in liberal regime countries (Baumberg, 2016). In general, possession of a stigmatized identity is associated with negative stereotypes, and leads to exclusion, status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Less is known about the stereotyping of those who formerly possessed a stigmatized identity. However, this case of prior possession is central to understanding welfare stigma because many citizens have, at some stage in their life, temporarily relied on the government for support.

Sociological and psychological literatures have examined the stereotypes underpinning welfare stigma. Welfare recipients are generally viewed as lazy, but this varies cross-nationally (McKay, 2014) and across the reasons for government assistance (e.g., unemployment, disability, lone parent status; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). The present investigation focuses specifically on individuals receiving income support payments due to their unemployment (hereafter described as unemployment

benefit recipients). Sociological studies find that this subset of welfare recipients are typically seen as the least deserving of government support (Larsen, 2008; Van Oorschot, 2000). They are perceived as being responsible for their plight, ungrateful for support, not in genuine need, and as low in reciprocity. Perceptions of low reciprocity reflect a belief that people are taking more than they have given back or will give back to society. Psychological research shows that manipulating these attributes shifts the perceptions that the unemployed deserve welfare (Aarøe & Petersen, 2014; Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2011). Other psychological research has considered evaluations of “welfare recipients” collectively and the “unemployed” from the frame of the stereotype content model. The stereotype content model represents the stereotypes of social groups in terms of warmth (being friendly and well-intentioned rather than hostile and ill-intentioned) and competence (perceived status, and capacity to pursue their intentions; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Both “welfare recipients” and the “unemployed” are evaluated as low in warmth and competence across countries with a variety of welfare regime types (Bye, Herrebrøden, Hjetland, Røyset, & Westby, 2014; Fiske et al., 2002). Thus, when these two attributes intersect in unemployment benefit recipients we expect a continuation of the low warmth and competence stereotyping. Indeed, the low perceived competence of these individuals is consistent with stereotypes of current unemployed benefit recipients as less conscientiousness than currently employed individuals (Schofield & Butterworth, 2018).

Existing findings only speak to the stereotypes resulting from contemporaneous unemployment benefit recipient. It has not been considered whether the prior receipt of unemployment benefits, or welfare payments more broadly, scar perceptions of a person. Of central interest is whether employed people are stereotyped negatively because at some point in time they received unemployment benefits. That is, do the negative stereotypes of unemployment benefits apply to former recipients. Stigma is often described as a mark of disgrace: but while the term originated in more permanent scars that identified a person’s status, in more modern use it often refers to the characteristics that are disgraceful (Goffman, 1963). The question of whether the disgrace lingers is one of scarring. It is a pertinent question when studying malleable stigmatized characteristics (e.g., welfare receipt) but is largely irrelevant to fixed stigmatized characteristics (e.g., race). One proposed function of welfare stigma is to encourage people to move off payments (Blumkin, Margalioth, & Sadka, 2015). Such a function would be facilitated if unemployment benefit recipients anticipated that the stigma they currently face would disappear on their return to work.

Research into the scarring nature of other stigmatized characteristics has been more equivocal. On the one hand, possession of other malleable stigmatized characteristics, even temporarily, scars perceptions long after the person stops possessing the characteristic (Clow & Leach, 2015; Thompson, Molina, & Levett, 2011). On the other hand, prior receipt of unemployment benefits may not scar how a person is evaluated because returning to work intrinsically challenges the stereotypes of benefit recipients. Returning to work demonstrates reciprocity because the person is now giving back to society, and recharacterizes prior need for support as due to the circumstances the person found themselves in rather than personal failing, and this shift can attenuate stigmatized perceptions (Aarøe & Peterson, 2014). There is precedent for the possibility of a stigma temporarily marking rather than permanently scarring. Finding out that a person used to be obese conditionally scars how they are evaluated in the present. If weight was lost via surgery, former obesity scars evaluations, because surgery does not challenge beliefs about the role of personal responsibility in obesity. However, prior obesity has no effects when weight is lost via hard work because this indicates that a person has taken personal responsibility (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2012; Vartanian & Fardouly, 2013; but see Latner, Ebner, & O'Brien, 2012). In the case of unemployed benefit recipients, the scarring hypothesis suggests that former recipients will be viewed most like current recipients; whereas, the marking hypothesis suggests that former recipients will be viewed more similarly to those who are employed and without a history of unemployment benefit receipt.

We tested these competing hypotheses by examining the perceptions of current and past unemployment benefit recipients using the framework of the Big Five personality traits (i.e., openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability). These traits capture the way people perceive and describe both themselves and others in natural language (Hogan, 1996; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996; Srivastava, 2010), and have been used in prior stereotyping research (e.g., Chan et al., 2012; Löckenhoff et al., 2014; McCrae & Terracciano, 2005; Schofield & Butterworth, 2018). Although other stereotyping frameworks, such as the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002), capture major stereotype dimensions, recent work has demonstrated benefits of considering additional evaluative dimensions, including those of the Big Five (Abele et al., 2016; Walker & Vetter, 2016). The Big Five may be especially suitable for studying the perceptions of unemployed benefit recipients if stereotypes extend beyond low warmth (i.e., primarily low agreeableness) and low competence (i.e., primarily low conscientiousness). For example, the perceived lack

of warmth of “welfare recipients” might reflect emotional instability as much as low agreeableness (Digman, 1997; Ward, Thorn, Clements, Dixon, & Sanford, 2006; Wiggins, 1991; but see Abele et al., 2016), and using the Big Five may capture additional beliefs that unemployed benefit recipients are lacking refinement or intellect (i.e., low openness). Moreover, the Big Five traits of conscientiousness and emotional stability are robust predictors of work place success and career outcomes (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001), attributes that are highly relevant when individuals are looking to move from unemployment to employment. Direct assessments were also made of perceived workplace capacity (i.e., suitability to function as a worker or boss). Finally, a measure of dehumanization was used to capture an important aspect of stigmatization, which involves the discrediting of the stigmatized person's personhood, not just the attribution of specific personality traits. Prior work suggests that socially disadvantaged groups and groups stereotyped as low in warmth and competence are frequently dehumanized (Harris & Fiske, 2011; Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014; Waytz & Epley, 2012).

We examined the perceived character, workplace capacity, and perceived humanness of unemployment benefit recipients in three experiments conducted with samples from two countries with targeted, liberal welfare regimes. In these experiments, ratings of individuals currently receiving government benefits due to their unemployment were compared to those of currently employed individuals with either a stated history of receiving unemployment benefits in the past or without such a history. We predicted that currently receiving unemployment benefits versus current employment would result in perceptions of lower conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional stability; lower worker and boss suitability ratings; and greater dehumanization. Consistent with the marking rather than the scarring hypothesis, within the currently employed conditions we expected a history of receiving benefits due to unemployment not to affect perceptions.

Methods

Ethics and pre-registration

Experiments were approved by the Delegated Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian National University (Protocol number: #2015-006). All studies were pre-registered (https://osf.io/qxupf/?view_only=a60fba197bcc48e9818cdc7bc5bfdd3e; https://osf.io/icaiz/?view_only=90d64352c50b4f43bc146405e4edcc2a; https://osf.io/6xdcz/?view_only=81545f806752415fafef9ae5cf900f35).

Sampling and participants

Power analyses indicated that pairwise comparisons would have 80% power to detect $d = 0.4$ with 100 participants per group in pairwise comparisons. Oversampling (i.e., 120 participants per condition) took place to account for participant withdrawal and failure of attention checks. Based on the number of conditions, target samples sizes were 240 for Experiment 1 and 360 for Experiments 2 and 3. Given a lack of previous similar research the target effect size was based on an intuitive assessment and equivalent to following Simonsohn's (2015) guidelines for powering a study if trying to replicate a published small effect ($d \approx 0.2$) with the same sample size. Experiments 1 and 2 recruited participants from within the United States through Amazon mTurk, while Experiment 3 recruited participants from within Australia using a Qualtrics Panel. Participant exclusions in-line with pre-registered protocols are noted in Figure 1, with participant demographics reported in Table 1.

Procedures

In each experiment, participants gave informed consent and read a vignette about a person. They then rated the character described in the vignette, with condition manipulated through a string of text. Only the included conditions varied across the three experiments.

Manipulation. The experiments manipulated the employment and benefit status of the vignette character. There are four conditions spread across the three experiments, and these vary in employment status and unemployment benefit status. The combination of factors is noted with a two character code: a U for unemployed vs. E for employed, followed by an indicator of the number of years since their period of benefit receipt (0 for current, 1 or 5 for histories; and the letter N in the case of no stated history). The four conditions are currently unemployed and receiving benefits (U0), currently employed but a history of receiving benefits due to unemployment 1 year ago (E1), currently employed but a history of receiving benefits due to unemployment 5 year ago (E5), and currently employed with no stated history of relying on the government for support (EN). All experiments include conditions to compare current employment with current unemployment benefits (Experiment 1: U0 vs. EN; Experiment 2: U0 vs E1, E5; Experiment 3: U0 vs E1, EN). The marking hypothesis – which predicts no difference based on the recency of benefit receipt – was then tested as the time since receiving unemployment benefits (Experiment 2: E1 vs. E5), and the presence versus absence of a history of benefit receipt (Experiment 3: E1 vs. EN).

Vignette. The experimental manipulations were contained within a vignette describing the background and weekend activities of a 29 year-old male character without a college

education. These characteristics were selected because they reflect the age and gender combination at greatest risk of unemployment in the post-college years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) and the modal educational attainment of those aged over twenty-five years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Condition allocation was random in each experiment. Full vignette and condition text is presented in the supplementary materials.

Vignette reading time was participant controlled; however, attention was confirmed via a free response comprehension test. Participants were asked “How old was the person in the story?”, “What sport did the person in the story play?”, “What genre/type of movie did the person in the story watch?” Participants with no correct responses were excluded from analysis as per pre-registered plans (see Figure 1). Only in Experiment 2 was there significant variation in comprehension accuracy across conditions ($F(2,333) = 3.71, p = .025$; other $ps \geq .731$), but investigation revealed none of the reported patterns of significance/non-significance changed if accuracy was controlled, and so the analyses are reported without adjusting for accuracy.

Outcome measures. The items from all measures were presented in a random order and rated on a five-point scale labelled from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Personality. The Ten-Item-Personality-Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann Jr, 2003), a self-oriented personality scale, was adapted to other-oriented wording (i.e., “I felt like the person in the story was...”). This scale contains two items for each trait in the Big Five, and each of these items contains a pair of trait adjectives (e.g., “dependable, self-disciplined”). One item contained a pair of positively keyed adjectives and the other item contained a pair of negatively keyed adjectives. Thus, trait ratings were taken as the average after reverse coding the negatively keyed item. The items were significantly correlated ($rs \geq .21, ps \leq .001$) in each experiment for every trait except agreeableness. The agreeableness items were significantly correlated in Experiment 2 ($r = .20, p < .001$), but not Experiments 1 ($r = .03, p = .624$) or 3 ($r = -.04, p = .376$). Thus, in addition to the planned scale-level analysis, results for the positively (“sympathetic, warm”) and negatively valenced (“critical, quarrelsome”) agreeableness items are also tested and reported.

Dehumanization. Dehumanization was assessed using an eight-item scale used to measure denial of humanness to characters in a previous vignette study (Bastian, Denson, & Haslam, 2013). Four items concerned the denial of human nature (e.g., “I felt like the person in the story was mechanical and cold, like a robot”) and four the denial of human uniqueness

(e.g., “I felt like the person in the story lacked self-restraint, like an animal”; see Haslam, 2006). These two types of dehumanization were not considered separately because the disattenuated correlation coefficients indicated that the scales were measuring very similar constructs (Exp. 1: $\rho = .93$; Exp. 2: $\rho = .95$; Exp. 3: $\rho = 1.00$). As such, and in a deviation from the pre-registered plans, the two sets of items were combined in the same way as in the study from which they were drawn (Bastian et al., 2013). Higher scores indicated a greater denial of humanness. This scale yielded acceptable reliabilities in all experiments (Exp. 1: $\alpha = .67$; Exp. 2: $\alpha = .76$; Exp. 3: $\alpha = .75$).

Work competence. Two items, analysed individually, assessed the perceived work competence of the character (i.e., “I felt like the person in the story would be a good employee/worker”, and “I felt like the person in the story would be a good employer/boss”).

Analysis strategy

In all studies, each rated dimension was considered separately in all analyses. In Experiment 1, t-tests were used to evaluate differences between the unemployment benefits and employed conditions on the outcome measures. In Experiments 2 and 3, an ANOVA was performed for each outcome, with the comparisons of interest implemented via a priori orthogonal contrasts. These contrast patterns first compared evaluations of the character in the current unemployment benefits condition to the currently employed conditions. The second contrast compared the two currently employed conditions to each other.

Results

The correlations between each outcome dimension in each experiment are presented in the supplementary materials.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 compared perceptions of a target currently receiving unemployment benefits (U0, $n = 127$) with perceptions of an employed target (EN, $n = 91$) (Table 2). The benefit receiving target was rated as much less conscientious, more extraverted, and lower on the positive agreeableness items (U0 vs. EN). In addition, the unemployment benefit recipient was rated as less human and as a poorer worker and boss. There were no significant differences in perceptions of openness, the negative agreeableness items (or total agreeableness), or emotional stability.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 made a comparison of current benefit receipt (U0, $n = 133$) to current employment, as in Experiment 1. However, now, the employed targets were described as

having either received unemployment benefits either 1 year ago (E1, $n = 120$), or 5 years ago (E5, $n = 81$). Despite this change to the current employment condition, most of the effects from Experiment 1 were replicated. That is when the character was currently on benefits rather than employed with a history of benefits (U0 vs. E1, E5) they were perceived as having lower conscientiousness, greater extraversion, lower humanness, and lower worker and boss suitability (Table 3). These effects were of a similar size to Experiment 1, suggesting that prior benefit receipt may be equivalent to no stated history. The only effect seen in Experiment 1, but not Experiment 2, was a lower rating on the positive agreeableness item.

The second contrast compared the perceptions of the two current employment conditions (E1 vs. E5). This contrast tested whether the recency of the unemployment benefit receipt affected perceptions. There was no significant effect of the recency of unemployment benefit receipt on any outcome (i.e., no significant differences between receiving benefits one year ago vs. five years ago).

Experiment 3

There was high consistency in the direction and magnitude of current unemployment benefit effects in Experiments 1 and 2, despite the differences in the stated history of benefits in the employed conditions. Due to the consistency, and reuse of these conditions, one-tailed tests were pre-registered for the effects seen in both prior studies. The use of one-tail tests reflects the directional and confirmatory nature of these analyses.

Experiment 3 used two current employment conditions, one describing a history of benefit receipt one year ago (E1, $n = 106$) and one with no stated history of benefit receipt (EN: $n = 106$). The effect of current unemployment benefit receipt (U0 vs E1, EN) replicated the findings of Experiment 1 and Experiment 2: characters currently receiving unemployment benefit recipients ($n = 109$) were perceived as less conscientious, and human, as less suitable workers and bosses, and as being more extraverted than the currently employed (Table 4). Comparing the two currently employed conditions (E1 vs. EN) on this set of outcomes indicated there were no differences in perceptions of employed individuals associated with history of benefit receipt.

In addition to the effects observed in Experiments 1 and 2, Experiment 3 showed that characters identified as currently in receipt of unemployment benefits were also rated as less open to experience, less emotionally stable, and as more disagreeable (on the negative agreeableness item), when compared to the currently employed targets (U0 vs. E1, EN). Moreover, the employed targets with a history of welfare receipt were rated as more

disagreeable (on the negative agreeableness item) than those without a stated history of benefit receipt (E1 vs. EN). This was the only instance across the experiments where there were significant differences between employed conditions.

Meta-analysis

Some effects were seen in all 3 experiments, but internal meta-analysis was used to help synthesise the variable patterns and estimate the magnitude of non-significant effects. A multilevel mixed-effects generalized linear model was used to implement a meta-regression model of all rated dimensions simultaneously.¹ We modelled the fixed effects of condition by rated attribute on observed mean rating with random intercepts and coefficients on the standard error of the observed mean rating (constrained to its observed value) by a unique indicator for each observation nested within experiment, nested within country. Consistent with low variation in the country and study random effects, comparable results were obtained with a standard meta-regression.

This meta-analysis found significant effects of current unemployment benefits compared to current employment (U0 vs. E1, E5, EN) for all factors except openness to experience ($b = -.063$, $z = -1.07$, $p = .283$). There were large negative effects of current welfare receipt on conscientiousness ($b = -.536$, $z = -9.29$, $p < .001$), worker suitability ($b = -.634$, $z = -10.56$, $p < .001$) and boss suitability ($b = -.565$, $z = -8.35$, $p < .001$). There were smaller negative effects of current welfare receipt on humanness ($b = -.197$, $z = -4.41$, $p < .001$), emotional stability ($b = -.152$, $z = -3.05$, $p = .002$), and agreeableness ($b = -.119$, $z = -2.50$, $p = .013$). The positive effect of current welfare receipt on extraversion was also present ($b = .230$, $z = 3.88$, $p < .001$). We then made all possible comparisons between the three current employment conditions (E1 vs. E5, E1 vs. EN, E5 vs. EN); none were significant, with the range of $|z|$ values between 0.018 to 1.523. The fixed-portion of the model is plotted in Figure 2.

Discussion

Taken together, the current experiments indicate that people receiving unemployment benefits are perceived negatively compared to those who are currently employed. However, among the employed, there was little difference between those who were revealed to have previously received unemployment benefits, and those with no stated history of these benefits. Therefore, a consistent, hypothesised pattern of character perceptions emerged

¹ We treated agreeableness as a total scale only.

across all three experiments: current benefit recipients were rated lower on conscientiousness, humanness, and worker and boss suitability. These effects provide evidence of welfare stigma faced by individuals receiving benefits due to unemployment. However, there was also a robust but initially unexpected tendency for recipients of unemployment benefits to be evaluated as more extraverted. The presence of each of these effects was supported by overall and pairwise comparisons in the meta-analysis. By contrast, there was no evidence that either a greater passage of time since benefit receipt or having a history of benefit receipt qualified these evaluations. Overall, this work suggests that receiving unemployment benefits is associated with a derogatory stereotype involving a lack of self-control, industriousness, competence and humanness, but that this stereotype does not apply after a former benefit recipient has re-entered the workforce. In sum, the stigma of unemployment is more like a temporary mark than a permanent scar.

In each experiment, we examined perceived character using the Big Five model of personality. Our expectations for these outcomes were guided by existing research from several sociological and psychological traditions. Our starting points included literatures on the perceived laziness of welfare recipients (McKay, 2014; Schofield & Butterworth, 2015; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006), the perceived lack of deservingness of welfare recipients (Jensen & Petersen, 2016; Larsen, 2008), and the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002). While we would suggest the conscientiousness results linked to current benefit receipt clearly reflect stereotypes of laziness (Jackson et al., 2010) and incompetence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Caruana, Lefevre, & Mollaret, 2014; Kervyn, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2013), we are less confident about the interpretation of the unpredicted extraversion effects. High levels of extraversion are typically seen as positive and desirable (Bäckström, Björklund, & Larsson, 2009), in contrast to the unfavourable view of low conscientiousness. However, this evaluation could reflect specific negative beliefs about either agency or communion because extraversion has both such facets, reflecting assertiveness and sociability, respectively (Depue & Collins, 1999; Wiggins, 1991). It may capture an agentic view of welfare recipients as engaging in deliberate welfare fraud and making illegitimate claims, or it may capture a somewhat more communal belief that welfare recipients would prefer to socialise and be hedonistic than look for work. Indeed, these are both commonly reported perceptions of welfare recipients (Roosma, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2016; Schofield & Butterworth, 2015).

Recipients of unemployment benefits were seen as being less suitable for the workplace and as having low levels of personality traits linked to workplace success (e.g.,

conscientiousness; Barrick et al., 2001). This perception could create a barrier to finding employment, especially if the stereotypic beliefs of employers mirror those of the general population. However, after former recipients of unemployment benefits successfully re-establish themselves in employment, our results indicate that they should no longer be evaluated negatively. Similarly, when perceptions of employed targets with distal welfare histories, proximal welfare histories and without stated experiences of welfare were compared, there were no robust differences, further emphasising that the mark of unemployment benefit receipt does not scar the evaluations of a person. Evaluations may not be scarred because returning to employment demonstrates reciprocity by responding favourably to the provision of social benefits. However, as not everyone who leaves unemployment benefits moves into employment (some transfer to other welfare payments and others leave the labour force), future research must consider whether former receipt of unemployment benefits scar those who exit in other ways. In addition, welfare and unemployment stigmas may leave other kinds of scars, such as lasting effects on benefit recipients' mental health (Kiely & Butterworth, 2013; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006), life satisfaction (Clark, Georgellis, & Sanfey, 2001) and internalized self-stigma (O'Donnell, Corrigan, & Gallagher, 2015; Schofield & Butterworth, 2017).

The use of a singular vignette and brief outcome measures are limitations of the present work. The rated vignette character represents just one small segment of the heterogeneous welfare recipient population. Although previous vignette-based experiments into the evaluations of welfare recipients found few effects of character demographics (Kootstra, 2016), it is possible that negative perceptions of welfare recipient character varies depending on the demographic attributes of the target (e.g., more stigmatizing for young versus old, men versus women). The use of a wider array of stimuli should be considered in future studies. The personality measures used were selected because previous research suggested they were both brief and reliable when used for ratings of others (Furnham, 2008; Gosling et al., 2003). While largely true here, the agreeableness measure was not reliable, which might partially account for the absence of the hypothesised effects on this trait. The use of a different scale in the future may overcome this issue, further demonstrate the generalisability of the effects, and could provide more nuanced coverage of personality trait facets. For instance, the large effects of welfare receipt on perceived conscientiousness may be restricted to a subset of the trait's facets (e.g., competence, achievement-striving and self-discipline), with other facets (e.g., deliberation) potentially unaffected by welfare receipt.

However, as our data only assessed the full trait, and did not consider separate effects on each facet, this question can only be addressed in future research.

Socio-political generalizability must also be considered as the results are contextually bound to the country, current welfare system, and payment reason. Although the experiments were replicated in two different countries (USA, Australia), they have somewhat similar 'liberal' welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1989). This style of welfare regime is highly targeted toward the most disadvantaged, but also tends to provide fairly modest rates of benefit. The consistency of the low conscientiousness perceptions may be unsurprising given that welfare recipients are stereotyped as lazy in both the US and Australia (Schofield & Butterworth, 2015; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). On the other hand, there was some evidence of additional personality trait perceptions being affected by unemployment benefit recipient in the Australian sample (i.e., less open and emotionally stable, and less agreeable). Further investigation is required to determine if this variation reflects cross-national variability in welfare recipient stereotypes (e.g., Jensen & Petersen, 2016; McKay, 2014), rather than differences due to recruitment method, or population representation. Consideration should be given to whether the degree of stereotyping might be reduced when the structure of the welfare system is less targeted (e.g., Western Europe's conservative systems, Scandinavia's social democratic systems), or when it does not promote social stratification (e.g., social democratic systems; Esping-Andersen, 2015). Finally, future work could consider the extent to which the observed differences in perceived character generalize across the types of welfare benefits other than unemployment (e.g., disability, retirement, single parent status).

Policy applications

Policy makers need to remember that the community is accepting of peoples' reliance on welfare during prior times of need. If the goal of policy makers is to promote a cohesive and undivided society, then government policies should simultaneously offer support to unemployed people when needed and aim to help them to move off benefits and back in to employment. Although stigmatizing income support might encourage people to try harder to move off the payment, it is likely to simultaneously erect barriers to returning to work: the community views these individuals negatively and may be less likely to render assistance. The use of stigma as a policy lever may not only erect barriers to employment but may increase the stress and adverse psychological impact on those receiving unemployment benefits. The current results suggest that effective welfare/employment policy should consider options to reduce stigmatized community perceptions of those receiving benefits

which may enhance the benefits of activation programs that seek to promote employment outcomes. Ultimately, if policy can assist people who are trying to work then it will help to minimize the stigmatized community perceptions of individuals because unemployment benefit stigma only marks perceptions, it does not scar.

Conclusion

People receiving unemployment benefits were perceived as less conscientiousness, less fully human, and as poorer workers and bosses than the employed and employed former benefit recipients. Unexpectedly, current recipients of unemployment benefits were also seen as more extraverted than those who were currently employed. The perceptions were tied to current receipt of benefits, with a person's prior receipt of unemployment benefits having little influence on how they were perceived in the present. These findings offer the hopeful implication that welfare stigma may not lead to an enduring reputational blemish. Although it may create an evaluative barrier to returning to work, if this barrier is overcome then derogatory perceptions based on the stereotype of welfare recipients may dissipate.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Flow chart of exclusions through the three experiments.

Figure 2. Meta-analytic linear prediction from just the fixed portion of the model. It should be noted that the error variance in the random effects approached zero, and thus this is a reasonable estimate despite the multi-level nature of the model. Error bars represent +/- 1 SE, calculated using the delta method. The U0 vs E1, E5, EN comparison is significant for all outcomes except Openness. Although inconsistent with the analysis plan of the individual studies U0 was compared to each of the employed conditions separately. For Conscientiousness (U0 vs E1: $z = 6.54$, U0 vs E5: $z = 4.90$, U0 vs EN: $z = 7.55$), Dehumanisation (U0 vs E1: $z = -4.09$, U0 vs E5: $z = -2.45$, U0 vs EN: $z = -3.59$), Worker suitability (U0 vs E1: $z = 9.01$, U0 vs E5: $z = 6.99$, U0 vs EN: $z = 8.73$), and Boss suitability (U0 vs E1: $z = 6.53$, U0 vs E5: $z = 4.90$, U0 vs EN: $z = 7.55$) all pairwise comparisons were significant. In the cases of extraversion, the comparison was significant against E1 ($z = -4.18$) and EN ($z = -3.82$) but not E5 ($z = -1.25$). For agreeableness, the comparison was significant against EN ($z = 2.12$) only (E1: $z = 1.84$, E5: $z = 1.67$). For emotional stability it was significant against E5 ($z = 2.98$) only (E1: $z = 1.92$, EN: $z = 1.67$). There was no overall effect for openness, but the comparison against E1 was significant ($z = 2.34$) while the other comparisons were not (E5: $z = 0.09$, EN: $z = 0.56$).

Table 1. Demographics of considered responses in the experiments

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2	Experiment 3
Recruitment	mTurk	mTurk	Qualtrics panel
Survey tool	Survey Gizmo	Survey Gizmo	Qualtrics
Country	USA	USA	Australia
Included conditions			
U0 – unemployed, current benefits	Yes	Yes	Yes

E1 – employed, benefits 1 year ago	No	Yes	Yes
E5 – employed, benefits 5 years ago	No	Yes	No
EN – employed, no benefit history	Yes	No	Yes
<hr/>			
Gender			
Female %	48.9%	49.3%	54.9%
Male %	51.1%	50.7%	45.1%
Other %	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Race			
White %	78.3%	76.3%	81.8%
Age			
Median	31	30	46
Mean (SD)	35.0 (12.7)	33.6 (11.6)	46.1 (15.6)
Range	18 - 70	18 - 67	18 – 87

Note. In Experiments 1 and 2 “White” was selected from a list of options, while in Experiment 3 it was coded from free-responses of White, Australian, Anglo, Caucasian or European

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for and significance tests, Experiment 1. Condition U0 is current unemployment benefits, while Condition EN is current employment with no stated history of benefit receipt.

	<u>Mean (SD)</u>		t	<u>U0 vs. EN</u>	
	Unemployment benefits (U0)	Employed, no history (EN)		p	d
<u>Personality outcomes</u>					
Openness to Experience	2.96 (0.65)	2.90 (0.73)	0.69	.491	0.09
Conscientiousness	3.40 (0.77)	3.95 (0.60)	-5.63	.000	-0.77
Extraversion	2.80 (0.77)	2.54 (0.78)	2.37	.019	0.33
Agreeableness	3.65 (0.55)	3.75 (0.51)	-1.39	.166	-0.19
Sympathetic, warm	3.25 (0.75)	3.45 (0.69)	-2.00	.046	-0.28
Critical, quarrelsome	1.96 (0.76)	1.96 (0.76)	0.04	.965	0.01
Emotional Stability	3.72 (0.57)	3.83 (0.62)	-1.30	.196	-0.18
<u>Other outcomes</u>					
Dehumanization	2.69 (0.47)	2.56 (0.42)	2.14	.033	0.29
Worker suitability	3.23 (0.80)	3.87 (0.67)	-6.23	.000	-0.86
Boss suitability	2.78 (0.80)	3.30 (0.82)	-4.66	.000	-0.64

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and significance tests, Experiment 2. Condition U0 is current unemployment benefits, while Conditions E1 and E5 are current employment with benefit receipt 1 year ago and 5 years ago, respectively. The pairwise comparisons of U0 to E1 and U0 to E5 are post-hoc comparisons provided for completeness.

	<u>Mean (SD)</u>	<u>U0 vs. E1, E5</u>	<u>U0 vs. E1</u>	<u>U0 vs. E5</u>	<u>E1 vs. E5</u>
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	Unemployment benefits (U0)	Employed, benefits 1 year ago (E1)	Employed, benefits 5 years ago (E5)	t	p	d	d	d	t	p	d
<u>Personality outcomes</u>											
Openness to Experience	3.07 (0.76)	3.05 (0.78)	2.98 (0.82)	0.64	.521	0.07	0.03	0.11	0.70	.484	0.08
Conscientiousness	3.31 (0.89)	3.83 (0.67)	3.93 (0.58)	-6.75	<.001	-0.74	-0.66	-0.83	-0.94	.348	-0.10
Extraversion	2.82 (0.70)	2.55 (0.80)	2.57 (0.79)	2.86	.005	0.31	0.36	0.33	-0.17	.862	-0.02
Agreeableness	3.76 (0.61)	3.81 (0.57)	3.79 (0.54)	-0.61	.541	-0.07	-0.08	-0.05	0.22	.827	0.02
Sympathetic and warm	3.42 (0.75)	3.53 (0.69)	3.35 (0.78)	-0.17	.863	0.02	-0.15	0.09	1.70	.091	0.19
Critical and quarrelsome	1.90 (0.81)	1.91 (0.72)	1.77 (0.68)	0.78	.437	0.09	-0.01	0.17	1.33	.184	0.15
Emotional Stability	3.81 (0.59)	3.83 (0.57)	3.96 (0.54)	-1.33	.184	-0.15	-0.03	-0.27	-1.68	.094	-0.18
<u>Other outcomes</u>											
Dehumanization	2.68 (0.52)	2.52 (0.51)	2.50 (0.51)	2.87	.004	0.31	0.31	0.35	0.37	.710	0.04
Worker suitability	3.14 (0.94)	3.83 (0.65)	3.93 (0.64)	-8.59	<.001	-0.94	-0.85	-0.98	-0.94	.347	-0.10
Boss suitability	2.67 (0.97)	3.28 (0.83)	3.36 (0.87)	-6.41	<.001	-0.70	-0.68	-0.75	-0.64	.520	-0.07

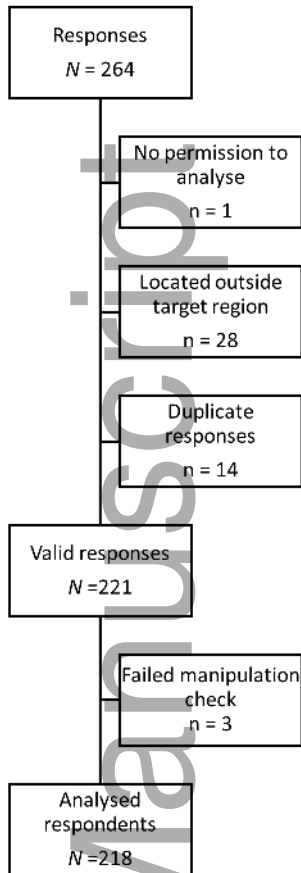
Table 4. Descriptive statistics and significance tests, Experiment 3. Condition U0 is current unemployment benefits, Condition E1 is current employment with benefit receipt 1 year ago, and Condition EN is current employment with no stated history of benefit receipt. The pairwise comparisons of U0 to E1 and U0 to EN are post-hoc comparisons provided for completeness.

	<u>Mean (SD)</u>		<u>U0 vs. E1, EN</u>			<u>U0 vs. E1</u>	<u>U0 vs. EN</u>	<u>E1 vs. EN</u>		
Unemployment	Employed,	Employed,	t	p	d	d	d	t	p	d

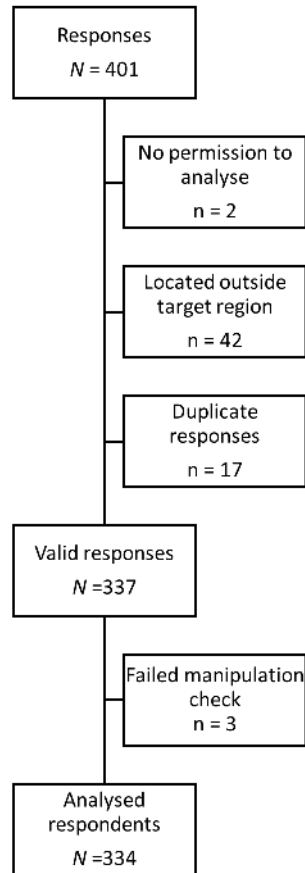
	benefits (U0)	benefits 1 year ago (E1)	benefits 5 years ago (EN)								
<u>Personality outcomes</u>											
Openness to Experience	2.95 (0.66)	3.24 (0.68)	3.14 (0.71)	-2.92	.004	-0.33	-0.43	-0.28	1.11	.269	0.12
Conscientiousness	3.51 (0.76)	3.98 (0.61)	4.04 (0.57)	-6.48	<u><.001</u>	-0.73	-0.68	-0.79	-0.68	.494	-0.08
Extraversion	2.47 (0.69)	2.31 (0.63)	2.35 (0.67)	1.79	<u>.074</u>	0.20	0.24	0.18	-0.47	.641	-0.05
Agreeableness	3.57 (0.54)	3.72 (0.50)	3.81 (0.53)	-3.15	.002	-0.35	-0.29	-0.45	-1.25	.211	-0.14
Sympathetic and warm	3.98 (0.83)	4.11 (0.71)	4.07 (0.88)	-1.14	.257	-0.13	-0.17	-0.11	0.43	.671	0.05
Critical and quarrelsome	2.83 (0.70)	2.67 (0.71)	2.44 (0.69)	3.36	.001	0.38	0.23	0.56	2.35	.019	0.26
Emotional Stability	3.61 (0.66)	3.84 (0.53)	3.83 (0.64)	-3.12	.002	-0.35	-0.38	-0.34	0.22	.822	0.02
<u>Other outcomes</u>											
Dehumanization	2.68 (0.52)	2.42 (0.45)	2.41 (0.52)	4.61	<u><.001</u>	0.52	0.53	0.52	0.07	.945	0.01
Worker suitability	3.45 (0.76)	3.93 (0.54)	3.99 (0.75)	-6.28	<u><.001</u>	-0.70	-0.73	-0.72	-0.60	.552	-0.07
Boss suitability	2.95 (0.88)	3.35 (0.83)	3.52 (0.84)	-4.79	<u><.001</u>	-0.54	-0.47	-0.66	-1.46	.146	-0.16

Note. All p-values in this table are based on two-tailed test, however, some hypotheses were pre-registered as one-tailed, directional tests. These tests are underlined. The null hypothesis was rejected in each of these pre-registered cases.

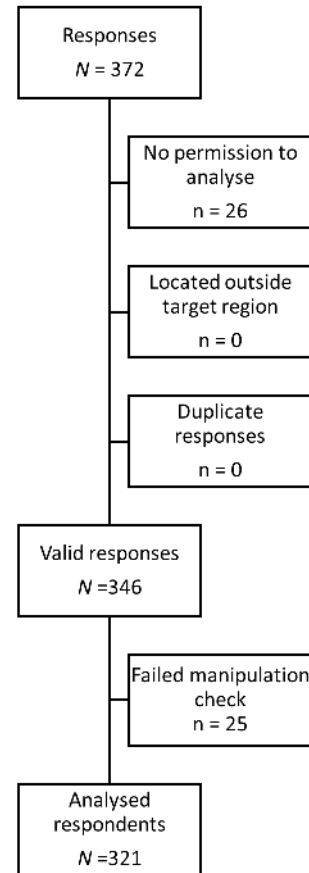
Experiment 1



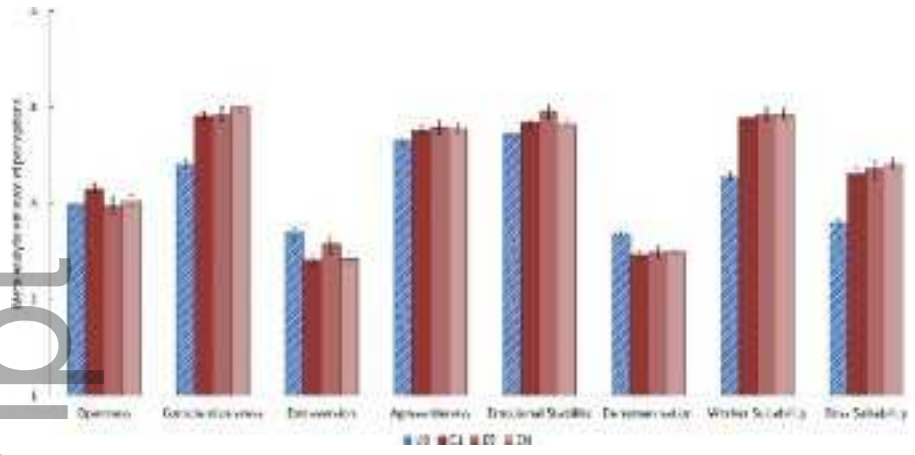
Experiment 2



Experiment 3



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