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An evaluation of the nature and effects of negative implicit attitudes
towards welfare benefit claimants in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies of attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants have focused on measuring *explicit* attitudes – those attitudes respondents are willing and able to report in a survey or focus group. The present study investigates the nature and implications of implicit (i.e. automatic, unconscious) negative attitudes people may hold towards this group.

The study provides the first evidence of negative implicit attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants in the UK. These attitudes are present even among respondents who do not explicitly report any negative feelings or attitudes towards claimants.

The study also finds that implicit attitudes have a substantial effect on welfare policy attitudes – respondents with stronger negative implicit attitudes are more likely to think that benefit payments are too high and discourage work, and that benefits spending should be cut. Importantly, these effects are largely independent of respondents' explicitly reported attitudes towards claimants.

Finally, this study also attempted to determine whether implicit attitudes were modifiable using alternative framings of the issue of unemployment. No strong evidence was found for a framing effect.

INTRODUCTION

In all modern capitalist economies, some proportion of the population will suffer periods of unemployment. Societies must decide whether these people should be supported by a welfare system, and if so, how generous this system should be – for example, how high payments should be and how strict the preconditions for access.

Previous research has shown that public support for welfare benefits is strongly determined by the perceived ‘deservingness’ of recipients (Bang Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2010; Van Oorschott & Halman, 2000). Broadly, if welfare recipients are perceived to be genuinely in need (i.e. requiring assistance to avoid real hardship) and to have become unemployed through no fault of their own (for example through ‘genuine’ injury or illness, or through economic forces outside their control) then support for welfare benefits will be high. If recipients are perceived to be largely at fault for their unemployment (for example due to laziness or incompetence), or to be misrepresenting their need for assistance (for example by feigning illness, failing to take opportunities available to them, or by spending their resources on perceived luxuries), then support will be low.

This suggests that people’s overall support for the welfare benefits system will be at least partly a function of the *kind of people they perceive most benefit recipients to be*. If the terms ‘benefit recipient’ or ‘benefit claimant’ most readily call to mind an image of a decent person fallen on hard times, then there will be support for a generous welfare policy. If the default image is rather of someone lazy and dishonest – a ‘scrounger’ – then support will be lower.

In the UK, two studies constitute the primary recent work directly investigating attitudes towards benefit recipients as a social group: Bamfield & Horton (2009), and Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney (2012). As part of a broader piece of research for the Rowntree Foundation on attitudes towards wealth and inequality, Bamfield & Horton (2009) used focus groups and surveys to investigate attitudes towards people on low incomes, particularly benefit recipients. Among their focus group and survey participants, they found an overwhelming tendency to attribute poverty and unemployment to individual effort and application. As a consequence, benefit recipients were largely seen as people who had not made sufficient effort to find work. This is consistent with previous work on beliefs about the causes of poverty, which tends to show poverty and unemployment being attributed to individual choice and behaviour, rather than to social or economic factors (Van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). Bamfield & Horton (2009) also note that, in their focus groups, more general attitudes towards benefit recipients were also negative – respondents “often struggled initially to conceptualise benefit recipients in positive terms” (p.23), and often resorted to negative stereotypes of laziness and dishonesty.

Baumberg et al. (2012), in a study for the welfare charity *Turn2us*, focused more specifically on the stigmatisation of welfare benefit recipients in the UK. Part of this study employed separate focus groups comprising welfare recipients and non-recipients. Participants in both groups clearly distinguished between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ benefit claimants, but nevertheless agreed on the dominant view of claimants overall as ‘lazy’ and as ‘scroungers’.

These results are consistent with the few non-UK studies that have directly investigated attitudes towards welfare recipients. Studies by Bullock (1999) and Seccombe, James, & Walters (1998) found that both welfare recipients and non-recipients in the US subscribed

to the dominant stereotype of recipients as “dishonest and idle”, with participants who were themselves receiving welfare benefits taking pains to distinguish themselves from welfare recipients in general.

These studies, like those of Baumberg et al. (2012) and Bamfield & Horton (2009) have yielded results primarily relating to welfare recipients relationship to work. If the general perception in both the UK and the US is that unemployment is due to lack of effort and motivation, and that the majority of those claiming unemployment benefits could find work if they really wanted to, it is easy to see why welfare recipients would be stereotyped as lazy and dishonest. However, research in US by Susan Fiske and her colleagues has suggested that people might also harbour more general negative perceptions of welfare recipients.

Fiske’s work (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) relies on the ‘dual process’ model of stereotype formation. This model divides stereotyped characteristics into two domains; competence and warmth. Social groups stereotyped as ‘warm’ tend to be liked, and groups stereotyped as ‘competent’ tend to be respected. Based in the US, Fiske et al’s (1999) study compared 17 groups on these domains, including “housewives”, “disabled people”, “feminists”, “rich people”, “black people”, and “welfare recipients”. Where some groups were liked but not respected (housewives, disabled people), and others were respected but not liked (rich people, feminists), only welfare recipients were both strongly disliked **and** disrespected. This finding was replicated by Fisk et al. in a subsequent study (2002).

Taken together, the picture that emerges from these studies is that people’s feelings towards benefit recipients are generally negative, and that their thinking about this group is coloured by a number of negative stereotypes – about their relationship to work, and about

their character more generally. So far, this research has focused exclusively on *explicit* attitudes – those attitudes respondents are willing and able to report in a survey or focus group. However, previous research with other social groups has shown that, over and above explicit attitudes, *implicit* or unconscious associations and stereotypes are also important.

Implicit attitudes are unconscious, automatic feelings and associations we hold towards certain groups, separate from our explicit attitudes (Greenwald, McGhee, & Shwartz., 1998).

For example, a person may explicitly hold to the view that the colour of one's skin has no bearing on the content of one's character, and yet still possess unconscious, automatically activated negative feelings and beliefs about Black people. Picture the metropolitan liberal who loudly decries racism, but still locks his car door when a Black man walks by – a commonly used trope in fiction.

A large number of studies have shown that implicit attitudes are empirically separable from explicit attitudes and have important independent effects. For example, work in the US with measures of unconscious association has consistently found that White Americans harbour implicit negative attitudes towards African Americans, more easily associating African American faces with negative concepts like 'disgusting', 'annoying', and 'bad' (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995), or with negative stereotype words like 'lazy' or 'criminal' (Lepore & Brown, 1997). Such research has shown that these implicit associations are present even among those who do not report explicit negative views. It has also shown that, over and above explicit attitudes, implicit negative associations are important predictors of behaviour towards a stereotyped group. For example, Amodio & Devine (2006) showed that, independent of their explicitly reported attitudes towards African Americans, people who showed stronger negative implicit attitudes were more critical of the same

piece of work produced by an African American student (see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009, for a review and meta-analysis of studies showing the effects of implicit attitudes)¹.

By concentrating purely on explicitly measures, our existing picture of attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants in the UK (and elsewhere) is likely to be incomplete. For example, those identifying with a particular political ideology which precludes negative attitudes towards welfare claimants may still hold strong negative implicit attitudes towards this group.

There are good reasons to believe that people in the UK will tend to develop negative automatic associations with benefit claimants. Media representations and political discussions on the topic of welfare benefits are dominated by negative and stereotyped characterisations of claimants. Baumberg et al.'s (2012, Ch. 4) investigation showed a strong emphasis in the print media on fraud and 'undeserving' claimants, with a large number of stories in high circulation papers focusing on specific extreme cases of perceived fraudulent claims.

Incidents of violence or social disorder in deprived areas also tend to be quickly linked to the issue of welfare claimants. After the English city riots of 2011, newspapers and politicians were quick to associate the disorder with welfare claimants – with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, stating that he was considering altering an upcoming bill to ensure that convicted rioters would have their welfare benefits removed (The Daily Telegraph, 11 Aug 2011). The faked abduction of Shannon Matthews in a deprived area of

¹ It is important to note here that neither implicit nor explicit attitudes should be considered more 'genuine' (Greenwald et al., 1998). Implicit and explicit attitudes are separable and have independent effects.

Northern England also resulted in widespread negative coverage of welfare benefit claimants, with newspaper columnists describing the case as “revealing the existence of an underclass which is a world apart from the...social conventions that most of us take for granted” (Daily Mail, 17 March 2008), and the area as being full of “People who’d never had jobs, never wanted one, people who expected the state to fund every illegitimate child they had – not to mention their drink, drug, and smoking habits”, who lived in “houses that looked like pigsties” (News of the World, 7 December 2008).

There remains considerable debate as to the influence of political and media discourse on people’s attitudes and beliefs (see e.g. Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). However, it seems highly plausible that exposure to this media and political environment would lead to the development of negative implicit attitudes towards benefit recipients.

The first aim of the present study was therefore to provisionally investigate the presence and extent of negative implicit attitudes towards benefit claimants in the UK. Specifically, I attempted to answer the following questions using a small sample of UK residents:

RQ1: To what extent are negative implicit associations with welfare benefit claimants observable?

RQ2: How do these implicit associations relate to explicitly reported attitudes towards this group, including a) affective feelings, b) stereotypes, and c) attributions for unemployment?

The second aim of the study was to test the association between implicit attitudes and support for the UK welfare system; specifically:

RQ3a: Do implicit negative attitudes towards benefit claimants predict reduced support for the welfare system?

RQ3b: Is this association independent of explicitly reported attitudes?

The final aim of the study was to determine whether negative unconscious attitudes towards benefit claimants could be modified by exposure to a prime.

Previous research has suggested that exposure to alternative framings of the issue of unemployment can alter *explicitly* reported attitudes towards welfare. For example, Slothuus (2007) examined Danish participants' attitudes towards welfare benefit cuts after exposure to a fictional newspaper article which framed the cuts as either an issue of poverty (welfare recipients genuinely could not find work, so the cuts would create more poverty) or an issue of personal responsibility (claimants were not trying hard enough to find work). Participants in the latter condition saw welfare recipients as less deserving and became more supportive of benefit cuts.

Previous research in other areas has suggested that priming can also be effective in altering *implicit* associations. For example, Dasgupta & Greenwald (2001) found that exposing participants to images of admired Black Americans (e.g. Denzel Washington) and disliked White Americans (e.g. Jeffrey Dahmer) reduced negative automatic associations with Black faces. Similarly, Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park (2001) found that White Americans primed with a gang incident scenario demonstrated stronger negative implicit attitudes towards Black Americans than did those primed with a family barbecue scenario. However, other research has shown limited effects of priming on implicit attitudes. For example, Teachman et al.

(2003) found that informing participants of large genetic influences on obesity did not reduce negative implicit attitudes towards overweight people.

In the present study, following Slothuus (2007), I investigated the effect on implicit attitudes of a fictional newspaper article presenting unemployment as either an issue of personal responsibility (failure to make sufficient effort to find work) or as a consequence of economic forces and government policy (a lack of available jobs).

RQ4: Does the representation of unemployment in a single newspaper article prime (as either a consequence of personal effort or of economic forces and government policy) affect the strength of negative implicit attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants?

METHODS

Participants and procedure

Participants were 112 people (58 women and 54 men) recruited from the Nuffield College Centre for Experimental Social Science (CESS) participant pool at the University of Oxford. Ages ranged from 16 to 70 years, with a median age of 29. 40% of participants were in full time education at the time of the study, 41% were employed, 8% were unemployed, 6% were retired, and 5% reported being outside the labour force looking after the home or family. The majority of participants (85%) were of White British ethnicity.

The study was administered through the internet using Millisecond Inquisit software.

Members of the CESS participant pool received emails inviting them to participate in an internet study of political attitudes, with a £5 payment for participation. As the study was primarily concerned with negative implicit attitudes developed through exposure to the UK

political and media environment, the email specified that only members born and continuously resident in the UK could participate.

Clicking a link embedded in the email took respondents to the study webpage where they were briefed on the nature and requirements of the study. Those agreeing to participate were randomly assigned to read either the 'personal responsibility' or 'economic forces' newspaper prime. They then completed the implicit attitudes measure (as detailed below). Finally they completed a survey measuring i) demographic characteristics, ii) experience of welfare benefits, iii) media consumption, iv) general political attitudes, and v) explicit attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the CESS ethical review panel.

Primes

Participants were primed with a fictional newspaper article which framed unemployment as either an issue of personal responsibility (the 'personal responsibility' condition) or as a result of economic forces and government policy (the 'economic forces' condition). In both cases, the article described a 10% reduction in the number of people moving off unemployment benefits and into work over the preceding 12 months (this statistic was derived from UK Office for National Statistics figures). The articles differed only in terms of their headline and closing quote.

The 'personal responsibility' article was headlined "Despite recovery, more choosing to stay on benefits" and ended with a quote stating "Too many people feel no compulsion to work. They are comfortable living off benefits for potentially their whole lives. The government needs to force people to leave benefits and take up work in order to relieve this burden on

hardworking taxpayers". The 'economic conditions' article was headlined "Despite recovery, fewer able to find work" and ended with a quote stating "Too many people are still struggling to find work. GDP and corporate profits have started to recover, but on the ground jobs are still very scarce. The government needs to do more to create the jobs that people desperately need". The two articles are given in full in Appendix A.

Implicit attitudes measure

Implicit attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants were measured using the Go/No-Go Association Task (GNAT; Nosek & Banaji, 2001). The GNAT is related to the widely used Implicit Association Task (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998), which uses reaction time measures to examine implicit associations between concepts. The IAT procedure requires respondents to classify stimuli into target categories. For example, respondents may be asked to classify words as either positive or negative, and faces as either racially Black or White. In one set of trials (the 'stereotype consistent' condition), Black faces and negative words share one response – i.e. respondents must press the same key on the keyboard to classify a word as negative or to classify a face as Black – and White faces and positive words share a different response key. In the 'stereotype inconsistent' condition, Black faces will share a response key with positive words and vice-versa for White faces. The central idea behind the IAT is that respondents will find it easier to classify closely associated concepts together and that this will manifest as decreased reaction times in the stereotype consistent trials – i.e. people would be slower to classify stimuli when Black faces and positive words share the same key. The difference in response times between the consistent and inconsistent conditions gives an indication of the strength of negative associations with the stereotyped group.

The IAT is a relative measure – it examines whether certain concepts (e.g. positive and negative) are more strongly associated with one target category (e.g. African Americans) than with another (e.g. White Americans). The GNAT procedure rests on the same central idea, but is more appropriate for use when investigating associations with a single target concept (welfare benefit claimants in this case). In the GNAT procedure, participants are presented with a pair of target categories (e.g. benefit claimants and positive words) and are asked to respond ('Go') by pressing a key when a presented stimulus fits into either of these categories and to ignore ('No-Go') any stimuli that do not fit into either category. As with the IAT, respondents are expected to have less difficulty with the task when closely associated concepts are paired (e.g. benefit claimants and negative words) than when non-associated concepts are paired (e.g. benefit claimants and positive words).

Although less widely used than the IAT, the GNAT has been used by a large number of studies to investigate stereotyped associations with, for example, women (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001), African Americans (Nosek & Banaji, 2001), and genetically modified foods (Spence & Townsend, 2006).

In each block of GNAT trials in the present study, two labels were presented at the top of the screen (e.g. "Benefit claimants" and "Positive words"). Participants were asked to press the space bar when a stimulus corresponded to either of the labels, and to ignore any stimuli that did not correspond to either label. The stimuli consisted of 10 positive words (e.g. "friendly", "clean", "wonderful"), 10 negative words (e.g. "bad", "useless", "dirty"), 5 words related to welfare benefit claimants (e.g. "benefit claimant", "on welfare", "jobseeker"), and 10 distracter object words (e.g. "snooker table", "spoon",

“cupboard”). The full list of stimuli is given in Appendix B. Stimuli were presented randomly without replacement.

Stimuli were presented in the centre of the screen for 650ms before being replaced by the next stimulus. Each trial was scored as a ‘hit’ (if the participant pressed the space bar for a target word before it disappeared), a ‘correct rejection’ (if the participant ignored a non-target word), a ‘false alarm’ (if the participant responded to a non-target word) or a ‘miss’ (if the participant ignored a target word). A green circle was presented in the centre of the screen on correct responses (hits or correct rejections), and a red X on incorrect responses (misses and false alarms). A measure of sensitivity (d') was calculated for each block from the proportion of hits and false alarms following the procedure outline in Nosek & Banaji (2001).

Participants first completed three practice blocks, each with a single category label (e.g. “Positive words”). They then completed the two critical blocks in counterbalanced order. In the ‘stereotype consistent’ critical block, the target labels were “Benefit claimants” and “Negative words”. In the ‘stereotype inconsistent’ block, the target labels were “Benefit claimants” and “Positive words”. Each block consisted of 14 practice trials and 80 critical trials.

Explicit measures

After completing the GNAT, participants completed a brief survey covering demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, highest educational qualification, employment status and type of work, parents’ educational qualifications, parents’ employment status and type of work when the participant was aged 14). Participants were also asked about their

experience of unemployment and welfare benefit receipt (whether they had ever been unemployed and looking for work, whether they had ever claimed any form of state unemployment benefit, whether their parents had ever been unemployed for six months or longer, whether a close friend or family member had ever claimed unemployment benefits), about their news media consumption (the frequency with which they i) watched television news, ii) read online news websites, iii) read print newspapers; which sources of television, online, and print news they watched/read most frequently), and about their political affiliation (which political party they would be most likely to support in a general election, where they would place themselves on a scale of 1:Strongly Liberal to 7:Strongly conservative).

In order to determine the association between implicit and explicit attitudes towards welfare benefit claimants, the survey also included the following attitudinal measures, following Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler's (2001) study of attitudes towards poor people:

Affective feelings toward claimants – in order to measure participants' feelings towards claimants, they were asked which of the following statements best described them

- a. I strongly prefer other people to people on benefits
- b. I slightly prefer other people to people on benefits
- c. I like people on benefits and other people equally
- d. I slightly prefer people on benefits to other people
- e. I strongly prefer people on benefits to other people

Cognitive stereotyped beliefs about claimants – in order to assess explicit beliefs about claimants, participants were given a list of positive and negative characteristics (e.g. responsible, intelligent, dirty, uneducated) and were asked whether they associated each

characteristic more strongly with benefit claimants, more strongly with non-claimants, or equally strongly/weakly with both groups. A full list of the characteristics is given in Appendix C.

Attributions for claimant status – participants were asked which of the following reasons was the best explanation for why there were “people in this country who are unemployed and claimant state benefits” (these items were chosen to cover the four attributional domains outlined by Van Oorschott & Halman [2000]; personal fate, personal blame, social blame, and social fate):

- a. Luck
- b. Laziness
- c. Injustice
- d. Economic forces

Finally, to determine the association between implicit and explicit attitudes and support for welfare benefits, participants were asked the following two questions adapted from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA, 2012):

1. “About the level of benefits for unemployed people. Which of these two statements comes closest to your own view:
 - a. Benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship
 - b. Benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from working”
2. “Listed below are six groups who receive money from the government through state benefits. For each group please say whether the amount they receive is too much, too little, or about right:

- a. Old age pensioners
- b. Parents of children under 18
- c. Unemployed people
- d. Disabled people
- e. Employed people on low incomes

Participants were also asked the following question adapted from a recent UK Trades Union Congress (TUC) survey (TUC, 2013) to assess their support for a specific recent welfare policy:

1. For at least the next three years, the government is limiting the increase in unemployment benefits to 1%. This is less than the current rate of inflation (i.e. the rate at which prices go up every year). To what extent do you support or oppose this policy? (strongly/slightly support/oppose)

They were also asked the following novel question to assess their support for a hypothetical reduction in welfare spending:

1. Some people have suggested that the government should reduce the amount of money they spend on unemployment benefits, and instead spend this money in other areas. To what extent would you support or oppose this suggested policy? (strongly/slightly support/oppose)

RESULTS

Overall implicit attitude results

In order to determine whether participants had more difficulty in the stereotype inconsistent (benefit claimants paired with positive words) than in the stereotype consistent (benefit claimants paired with negative words) block, sensitivity scores (d') were calculated for each block. Three participants had d' scores of less than 0 in one or both of the blocks and were therefore excluded from further analysis (a d' score of 0 indicates chance responding).

I compared sensitivity scores (d') between the two conditions using a two-tailed within subjects t-test. Participants were significantly less sensitive (i.e. made relatively more errors) in the stereotype inconsistent condition than in the stereotype consistent condition (*Cohen's* $d = 0.46$, $t(108) = 7.52$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the concept 'benefit claimants' was significantly more closely associated with negative than with positive words.

I examined the association between demographic characteristics and the strength of the negative implicit association by deriving an individual stereotype strength measure for each participant. Following Devos, Viera, Diaz, & Dunn (2007) this was calculated by subtracting sensitivity (d') in the stereotype consistent condition from sensitivity in the stereotype inconsistent condition. Higher values therefore indicated more negative implicit attitudes towards benefit claimants. This score ranged from -0.73 to 1.44, with a mean of 0.32 and a standard deviation of 0.45.

In separate regression models adjusting for prime condition, only gender showed a statistically significant (at the 0.05 level) association with implicit attitudes, with men showing significantly weaker negative implicit attitudes towards benefit claimants than women ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$). Other factors were also associated with implicit attitudes but did not quite reach significance at the 0.05 level: participants who were employed full time had

stronger negative implicit attitudes ($\beta=0.16$, $p=0.06$), whereas retired participants ($\beta=-0.34$, $p=0.06$), and those whose parents were employed in professional occupations ($\beta=-0.15$, $p=0.09$) showed weaker negative attitudes. Somewhat surprisingly political affiliation, media consumption, and experience of unemployment benefits (having personally claimed, or having a close friend or family member who had claimed) were not significantly associated with implicit attitudes.

Effect of newspaper article prime

Randomisation check

Table 1 gives demographic and political affiliation characteristics for the overall sample and for participants in each of the prime conditions (note that, due to a programming error, unequal numbers of participants were assigned to each condition). There were no statistically significant differences between the prime conditions in any of the measured characteristics.

-----TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE-----

Effect of prime condition

Table 2 gives the mean sensitivity in each block for participants in each prime condition. Contrary to the expected results, implicit negative associations appeared to be stronger for participants primed with the newspaper article emphasising economic forces and government policy as causes of unemployment.

-----TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE-----

The effect of the prime condition was tested using a hierarchical linear model with one two-level within subjects factor (block) and one two-level between subjects factor (prime condition), fitted using Stata's xtmixed command with the 'reml' option. This is equivalent to a 2x2 mixed ANOVA. This model showed a significant interaction between block and prime condition, suggesting significantly stronger negative implicit attitudes in the 'social blame' prime condition. However, this relationship was only borderline statistically significant ($F=3.85, p=0.0498$).

Although there were no statistically significant demographic differences between participants in the two prime conditions, there were several differences that may have been large enough to potentially bias the estimated effect of the prime. First, a larger proportion of participants in the 'personal responsibility' prime condition reported having a friend or family member who had claimed unemployment benefits. Second, those in the social blame condition were somewhat more ideologically conservative. These differences would work against the expected effect of the newspaper prime. Adding political ideology to the linear model did not alter the results. However, adding the indicator of a friend or family member claiming benefits attenuated the observed interaction effect and rendered it non-significant ($F=3.20, p=0.07$).

Relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes

Affective feelings

The majority of participants explicitly reported neutral feelings about benefit recipients. 66% reported that they liked benefit claimants and non-claimants equally. However, a

higher proportion (25%) reported preferring non-claimants than reported preferring claimants (9%).

The relationship between implicit attitudes and explicit affective feelings was investigated by regressing individual stereotype strength (see above) on a binary indicator of preference for non-claimants (adjusting for a binary indicator of prime condition). This showed significantly stronger negative implicit stereotypes among participants who reported preferring non-claimants ($\beta=0.18$, $p<0.05$).

Attributions for claimant status

The majority of participants (55%) reported that the best explanation for why some people were unemployed and claiming benefits was “Economic forces”. “Laziness” was the next most popular explanation (endorsed by 27% of respondents), followed by “Injustice” (14%), and “Luck” (5%). These results suggest slightly more positive attitudes in this sample than have been found in previous studies. For example, in the 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA, 2012), the majority of respondents (56%) agreed that “around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one”, an attribution of unemployment to personal effort and motivation as opposed to economic forces. However, this may be due to the wording of the questions. For example, it may be possible to believe that unemployment in general is due to economic forces, but that most people could still find employment if they were willing to take poor quality jobs.

A regression predicting individual implicit stereotype strength showed stronger negative stereotypes among participants who attributed claimant status to laziness (adjusting for

prime condition) than among those who endorsed other attributions. However, this association was not statistically significant ($\beta=0.11$, $p>0.05$).

Stereotyped beliefs

Table 3 (below) gives the extent to which respondents explicitly reported associating given words with benefit claimants and non-claimants. Though consistently large proportions of participants reported that they did not associate a given word more strongly with either group, there is a clear pattern of negative words being associated with benefit claimants and positive words with non-claimants. Very small numbers of participants associated any of the negative words with non-claimants, or associated any of the positive words with claimants. On average, participants associated 3.5 (of 6) negative and 0.27 (of 6) positive words with benefit claimants. By contrast, they associated an average of 0.23 negative and 3.36 positive words with non-claimants. Of the list of 12 words, participants associated an average of 6.88 in a stereotype consistent manner (i.e. negative with claimants and positive with non-claimants).

----TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE----

Separate regressions predicting individual implicit stereotype strength (adjusting for prime condition) tended to show a positive effect of stereotype consistent associations. However, none of these associations were statistically significant. There was also no significant association between the number of stereotype consistent word associations and individual implicit stereotype strength.

Are implicit negative attitudes present in those with no explicit negative attitudes?

In order to determine whether implicit negative attitudes towards claimants were present among participants who did not explicitly report negative attitudes, I re-ran the primary GNAT analysis in various restricted samples.

First the sample was restricted to participants who did not report preferring non-claimants to claimants (N=72). In this sub-sample, sensitivity remained significantly higher in the stereotype consistent than in the stereotype inconsistent GNAT block (*Cohen's d* = 0.39, $t(71) = 4.76, p < 0.001$).

Second, the sample was further restricted to those who also did not attribute claimant status to laziness (N=60). In this sub-sample, the GNAT effect remained significant (*Cohen's d* = 0.36, $t(59) = 4.06, p < 0.001$).

Finally, the sample was further restricted to those who also did not explicitly associate the most hostile words (dirty, lazy) with benefit claimants (N=32) (these words were specifically chosen as very few participants associated no negative words with claimants). In this sub-sample, the GNAT effect was attenuated, but still remained statistically significant (*Cohen's d* = 0.28, $t(31) = 2.32, p < 0.05$).

Relationship between implicit attitudes and support for welfare benefits

33% of respondents reported that they thought that unemployed people received too little money from the government. This was identical to the proportion who thought that parents of children under 18 received too little. Substantially higher proportions reported that pensioners (69%), disabled people (50%), and poor people (54%) received too little.

Participants were evenly divided on whether benefits were too high and discouraged work or were too low and caused hardship (51% vs. 49%). This is comparable with BSA results showing 54% of respondents agreeing that benefits were too high and discouraged work (BSA, 2012).

Similarly, participants were evenly divided on support for the benefits cap (similar to results found in TUC, 2013), and on support for a hypothetical reduction in spending on unemployment benefits.

The relationship between implicit attitudes and support for welfare benefits was investigated using logistic regression. Each indicator of support for welfare was initially separately regressed on individual stereotype strength, adjusting only for prime condition. These results are given in Table 4 below.

----TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE----

Table 4 shows that the strength of implicit negative attitudes was related to an increased likelihood of thinking that unemployed people received too much money from the government, of agreeing that benefits were too high and discouraged work, and of supporting a reduction in government spending on benefits for unemployed people. Implicit negative attitudes were not significantly related to any of the other measured attitudes towards the welfare state.

In order to determine whether implicit attitudes were related to support for the welfare state independently of explicit attitudes, I re-ran the above models separately adjusting for i) the number of stereotype consistent explicit word associations (see above), ii) whether respondents reported preferring non benefits claimants to claimants, and iii) whether they

attributed unemployment primarily to laziness. The models were largely consistent with the original specification. Notably, the association between implicit stereotype strength and agreement that benefits were too high remained positive and statistically significant. The positive association between implicit stereotype strength and support for a reduction in benefits spending also remained consistently statistically significant, with the exception that when adjusting for preference for non-claimants, the association was somewhat attenuated and became borderline non-significant (OR=2.42, $p=0.07$). The negative association between implicit attitudes and believing that unemployed people received too much money from the government was not attenuated but became borderline non-significant in these models.

In these mutually adjusted models, the effect of implicit attitudes on support for welfare benefits was comparable to that of explicit attitudes. A 1.0 increase in implicit attitude strength (roughly two standard deviations) predicted roughly 3-4x increased odds of agreeing that benefits were too high, and a 2-3x increase in the odds of supporting a reduction in benefits spending. In the same models, a two SD increase in the number of stereotype consistent word associations predicted a 3.2x increased odds of agreeing that benefits were too high, and a 3.5x increase in the odds of supporting a benefit spending cut. Reporting an affective preference for non-claimants predicted a 130% increase in the odds of agreeing that benefits were too high, and 150% increase in the odds of supporting a benefit spending cut. Finally, respondents who believed that unemployment was largely due to laziness had roughly 4x greater odds of agreeing that benefits were too high and 150% greater odds of supporting a cut in benefits spending.

DISCUSSION

The primary results of this study showed that participants more readily associated negative words like 'bad', 'useless', and 'dirty' with benefit claimants than they did positive words.

The GNAT effect size of 0.46 is comparable with that found in previous implicit attitude studies showing negative associations with African Americans (Amodio & Devine, 2006), and women (Blair et al., 2001).

Previous research has shown that implicit association tasks like the IAT and GNAT are valid measures of unconscious attitudes (Greenwald et al., 2009). The present study therefore represents the first evidence of the existence of negative implicit attitudes towards unemployment benefit recipients in the UK.

Relationships between implicit attitudes revealed by the GNAT and explicitly reported attitudes towards claimants were mixed. Participants exhibiting stronger negative associations with benefit claimants were more likely to explicitly report negative affective feelings towards this group – being more likely to explicitly state that they 'preferred' people who did not claim benefits. There was some suggestion that these participants were also more likely to explicitly report stereotyped beliefs about claimants (being more likely to explicitly associate them with negative terms like 'dirty' or 'uneducated'), and to attribute unemployment to laziness rather than bad luck or economic circumstances. However, these latter associations were not statistically significant.

These results suggest that implicit attitudes towards claimants may not be strongly associated with cognitive beliefs about this group. This may be due to an effect of social desirability on questions relating to stereotyped beliefs. However, it is also possible for participants to feel implicitly negative towards benefit claimants, whilst simultaneously holding the genuine belief that they are not inferior to non-claimants, and that

unemployment (and consequent claimant status) is primarily caused by economic circumstances outside of an individual's control (or vice-versa). This is especially true if negative implicit attitudes, inculcated by an almost universally negative political and media environment, are widely shared across different groups in society with genuinely different political beliefs and attitudes. This may also explain why there were no strong differences in implicit attitudes by political party affiliation or media consumption. This explanation is supported by the important finding that negative implicit associations were present even in participants who reported no explicit negative attitudes towards claimants. The stronger observed association between implicit attitudes and expressed affective preference for non-claimants may be because this measure is not an expressed belief, but is closer to the implicit feelings measured by the GNAT.

The next important findings of the study concern the association between implicit attitudes and support for the welfare system. These findings were relatively consistent. Participants with stronger negative implicit attitudes were significantly more likely to agree that benefit payments were too high and discouraged work, and to support a (hypothetical) proposed cut in spending on unemployment benefits. Those with stronger negative implicit attitudes were also significantly less likely to think that unemployed people received too little money from the government. They were also more likely to support the government's policy freezing benefit rises to below inflation; however this association were not statistically significant.

The effect of implicit attitudes on these welfare attitudes was relatively large. A two standard deviation increase in the strength of negative implicit attitudes towards claimants predicted a three to fourfold increase in the odds of agreeing that benefits were too high,

and a two to threefold increase in the odds of supporting a cut in benefits spending. These effects are comparable to the effect of political affiliation in this dataset, with supporters of right-wing parties (Conservative or UKIP) having roughly three times higher odds than supporters of other parties of agreeing that benefits are too high, and roughly two times higher odds of supporting a cut in benefits spending. Crucially, the apparent effect of implicit attitudes towards benefit claimants was largely independent of the effect explicitly reported attitudes – those with stronger negative implicit attitudes had weaker support for welfare payments regardless of their explicitly reported attitudes towards claimants. This is a striking finding with potential relevance for public policy messages. If people's welfare policy preferences are influenced separately by both their implicit and explicit attitudes towards claimants, this suggests that campaigns to support welfare payments should also concentrate on improving people's implicit feelings towards this group.

This study tested one potential method for moderating negative associations with benefit claimants – a short newspaper article prime which framed the issue of unemployment as either an issue of personal preference (people prefer to be on benefits) or of economic circumstances (insufficient jobs being created). The results suggested that this had no effect on increasing or reducing the strength of participants' negative attitudes towards claimants. There are several potential explanations for this result. The first is that the prime was simply too weak to elicit any moderating effect. Previous research and discussion has suggested that negative implicit attitudes are built up slowly over time through, for example, media exposure. A single newspaper article may not be sufficient to significantly counteract these ingrained attitudes. This is particularly true given that participants may have heard or read

similar facts and arguments as those contained in the prime expressed many times over the preceding week, or even that day.

However, as noted in the introduction, previous research has shown mixed effects of priming on implicit attitudes. Research using positive exemplars (showing participants pictures of admired members of the stereotyped group) or situations has shown significant moderating effects (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Wittenbrink et al., 2001). However, research using what could be considered more 'information-based' primes, such as the scientific information on obesity used by Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins, & Jeyaram (2003) to moderate negative implicit attitudes towards overweight people, has shown no effect. The prime adopted in the present study could be considered closer to that used by Teachman et al. (2003). Together, these results might therefore suggest that interventions focusing on increasing positive *feelings* towards the stereotyped group might be more effective. This is a rich area for potential future research.

The results of the present study also leave a number of other avenues open for future work. This study was designed as a small initial examination of implicit negative attitudes towards a novel group. It therefore has a number of limitations which could be addressed by future studies. The first is simply that the sample was relatively small and unrepresentative. While not entirely based on undergraduate students, as many studies in this area have been, 40% of the sample was composed of students, the majority of whom will have been studying at The University of Oxford. Oxford is one of the UK's most academically selective universities and its student body is highly skewed towards those from higher socio-economic status families. Future studies using larger, more representative samples could more thoroughly

investigate this topic, including the likely complex relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes, and between implicit attitudes and welfare policy preferences.

The second main limitation of the study is that it relied on a single GNAT design based only on word associations – associating negative/positive words with words intended to capture the concept of ‘benefit claimants’ (e.g. Jobseekers, benefit claimants, etc.). Resources were not available for a pilot study comparing different designs, for example using images.

Nevertheless, the study strongly suggests the existence of negative implicit attitudes towards benefit claimants in the UK, and also suggests that these attitudes may have important implications for attitudes towards welfare policy. Future research is needed to further examine the implications of these attitudes, especially for behaviour towards benefit claimants. As noted in the introduction, previous research has shown that negative implicit attitudes can have a significant effect on how people treat members of a stereotyped group. It is important to determine whether this is also true for benefit claimants in the UK and elsewhere. Baumberg et al’s (2012) focus group study showed that treatment at the hands of officials in the welfare system, such as Jobcentre staff and disability evaluators, is of particular importance to welfare recipients. It is entirely possible that workers in these roles share implicit negative attitudes towards welfare recipients, and that these attitudes affect their interactions – both in terms of tone and more concretely; for example in how claims are assessed. Research in this area is therefore strongly needed. A model for this research could be found in the large literature investigating implicit race bias among medical professionals in the US (see e.g. Cooper, Roter, Carson, Beach, Sabin, Greenwald, & Inui, 2012)

Combined together, the above avenues of research would give us a much deeper insight into people's unconscious attitudes towards a highly stigmatised but under-researched group, and the important effects these attitudes might have.

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APPENDIX A – NEWSPAPER ARTICLE PRIMES

Personal responsibility prime:

DESPITE RECOVERY, MORE CHOOSING TO STAY ON BENEFITS

The number of people moving off benefits and into work has decreased, according to new official statistics. Figures released by the ONS show that, despite signs of economic recovery, the number of people leaving unemployment benefits has gone down by approximately 10% in the last 12 months. “Too many people feel no compulsion to work”, said John Davies of the Centre for Policy Reform in response to the figures; “They are comfortable living off benefits for potentially their whole lives. The government needs force people to leave benefits and take up work in order to relieve this burden on hardworking taxpayers”.

Economic forces prime:

DESPITE RECOVERY, FEWER ABLE TO FIND JOBS

The number of people moving off benefits and into work has decreased, according to new official statistics. Figures released by the ONS show that, despite signs of economic recovery, the number of people leaving unemployment benefits has gone down by approximately 10% in the last 12 months. “Too many people are still struggling to find work”, said John Davies of the Centre for Policy Reform in response to the figures; “GDP and corporate profits have started to recover, but on the ground jobs are still very scarce. The government needs to do more to create the jobs that people desperately need”.

APPENDIX B – GNAT STIMULI

Positive words: Friendly, Clean, Happy, Superior, Wonderful, Smart, Nice, Beautiful, Good, Kind

Negative words: Bad, Useless, Dirty, Unpleasant, Ugly, Nasty, Awful, Disgusting, Inferior, Horrible

Words relating to benefit claimants: Benefit claimant, Unemployed, On welfare, On benefits, Jobseeker

Object words: Snooker table, spoon, cupboard, pencil, cat flap, door, flower, aeroplane, ice-cream, cloud

APPENDIX C – COGNITIVE STEREOTYPE WORDS

Positive words: Responsible, Intelligent, Happy, Healthy, Family Oriented, Proud

Negative words: Drug abuse, Uneducated, Dirty, Lazy, Depressed, Embarrassed

TABLES

Table 1. Demographic and political affiliation characteristics overall and in each prime condition (N=109)

	<i>Whole sample</i>	<i>'Personal responsibility' condition (n=65)</i>	<i>'Social blame' condition (n=44)</i>
Age	Mean = 33.10 (SD = 15.05)	Mean = 33.39 (SD = 16.30)	Mean = 32.69 (SD = 13.24)
Male	47.1%	48.44%	46.67%
Non-white	14.60%	14.06%	17.78%
Have university degree or higher	46.79%	51.56%	40.00%
<i>Employment status</i>			
Employed	42.28%	39.06%	44.44%
In full-time education	40.37%	42.19%	37.78%
Looking after home	4.59%	3.13%	6.67%
Retired	5.50%	6.25%	4.44%
Unemployed	8.26%	9.38%	6.67%
Employed in a professional occupation ¹	27.52%	29.69%	24.44%
Parent with university degree	41.51%	40.63%	42.86%
Parent with professional occupation ¹	48.11%	51.61%	43.18%
Ever been unemployed	8.26%	46.79%	46.67%
Ever claimed unemployment benefit	23.85%	25.00%	22.22%
Family/friend claimed unemployment benefit	48.62%	46.25%	37.78%
Don't watch TV news regularly ²	30.28%	29.69%	31.11%
Don't read online news regularly ²	29.36%	26.56%	33.33%
Read right-wing newspaper ³	34.86%	32.81%	37.78%
Read left-wing newspaper ³	25.69%	26.56%	24.44%
Read <i>Mail</i> or <i>Express</i>	11.93%	10.94%	13.33%
Conservatism ⁴	Mean=3.30 (SD=1.49)	Mean = 3.07 (SD = 1.45)	Mean = 3.62 (SD = 1.50)
<i>Party affiliation</i>			
Conservative	20.62%	21.05%	20.00%
Labour	28.87%	31.58%	25.00%
Liberal Democrat	15.46%	15.79%	15.00%
Other	35.05%	28.58%	40.00%

1. Participant reported profession as "Traditional Professional (e.g. solicitor, doctor, scientist)", "Modern Professional (e.g. teacher, social worker, computer programmer)", or "Senior managers or administrators (e.g. finance manager, CEO)".

2. Watched television news/read online news less than once per week

3. Papers defined as left or right wing according to declared support for Labour or Conservative party in 2010 general election

4. 1-7 scale: 1=Strongly liberal, 4=Neither liberal nor conservative, 7=Strongly conservative

Table 2. Mean d' (and Standard Deviation) in each GNAT block for participants in the 'personal responsibility' and 'social blame' prime conditions (N=109)

	<i>Stereotype consistent</i>	<i>Stereotype inconsistent</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
'Personal responsibility'	2.39 (0.74)	2.14 (0.71)	0.25	0.35***
'Social blame'	2.50 (0.68)	2.08 (0.63)	0.42	0.64***

*** $p < 0.001$ in two-tailed within subjects t-test

Table 3. Percentage of respondents reporting associating negative and positive words with benefit claimants vs. non-claimants (N=109)

	<i>% associate more with claimants</i>	<i>% associate with neither</i>	<i>% associate more with non-claimants</i>
<u>Negative</u>			
Drug abuse	68.81	30.28	0.92
Uneducated	66.97	27.52	5.50
Dirty	40.37	59.63	0.00
Lazy	59.63	38.53	1.83
Depressed	61.47	30.28	8.26
Embarrassed	55.05	38.53	6.42
<u>Positive</u>			
Responsible	1.83	40.37	57.80
Intelligent	0.92	40.37	58.72
Happy	2.75	40.37	56.88
Healthy	6.42	25.69	67.89
Family oriented	13.76	62.39	23.85
Proud	0.92	28.44	70.64

Table 4. Effect (Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals) of implicit stereotype strength on indicators of support for welfare benefits, from separate logistic regression models (N=109)

Agree pensioners receive too little	1.27 (0.49 , 3.31)
Agree parents receive too little	1.00 (0.40 , 2.49)
Agree unemployed people receive too little	0.38* (0.14 , 0.99)
Agree disabled people receive too little	0.71 (0.29 , 1.70)
Agree poor people receive too little	1.63 (0.68 , 3.93)
Agree benefits are too high	3.78** (1.43 , 10.02)
Support benefits cap	1.99 (0.81 , 4.89)
Support reduction in benefits spending	2.84* (1.11 , 7.23)

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$