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Beyond 'mythbusting': how to respond to myths and perceived undeservingness in the British benefits system

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Abstract

In a context of 'hardening' attitudes towards benefit claimants in Britain, some argue that social security can only be rebuilt when 'benefit myths' and negative attitudes are tackled. However, this paper argues that some of these concerns are misplaced, based on evidence on (i) the extent of myths; (ii) the effectiveness of mythbusting; and (iii) the existence of myths/negative attitudes in times/places the benefits system is more popular. It argues that public attitudes are fundamentally characterised by ambivalence, and the critical issue is the balance between positive and negative aspects and which of these are triggered in public debate.

Introduction

Labour's defeat in the 2015 British General Election can be explained by a great many factors, as the official post-mortem (the 'Beckett report') makes clear. However, when the Beckett report was published, the headlines in the left-wing newspapers consistently settled on the party's lack of trust by the public on 'welfare' as a key explanation for their dismal election result (alongside parallel concerns about the economy and immigration).¹ This reflects a much wider preoccupation on the British left in recent years (not just within the Labour Party) about how to respond to public attitudes towards the benefits system, which are generally perceived to be both harsh and based on 'myths' fuelled by politicians and the media, leaving the public fundamentally at odds with left-wing values (e.g. Hills, 2014; Horton & Gregory, 2009; Taylor-Gooby, 2015). This potentially leaves progressives with a choice of either trying to correct the public's myths, or simply accommodating their policy agenda to a view of the world that they do not share.

In this paper, however, I want to argue that some of these concerns are misplaced, bringing together several different pieces of empirical evidence that have not previously been integrated. To be absolutely clear: the British public do believe myths, and they are also more negative about benefit claimants than they used to be, as I will show. Yet this does not mean that 'mythbusting' is the best way of getting public support for progressive benefit reforms. While myths are associated with negative perceptions of claimants, evidence suggest mythbusting is unlikely to change this. Moreover, such attitudes are not what primarily sets us apart from times and places where there is more public support for the benefits system. Instead, what is crucial is how far the public focus on the *positive* consequences of the benefits system, and how much we focus on the (widely-perceived) positive vs. negative consequences in our public debates.

Myths and deservingness judgements in 21st-century Britain

There are two parts to the prevailing view of British benefit attitudes. Firstly, the idea that public attitudes have become more hostile is, as Hudson and Lunt (in press) put it, "*now close to an orthodox view.*" This is hardly surprising in the face of newspaper headlines that have regularly proclaimed that attitudes towards benefit claimants are 'hardening', often based on the latest launch of the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey.² And this consensus is not completely divorced from the empirical reality: attitudes towards unemployment benefit claimants have definitely hardened, and noticeably fewer people believe that the government should spend more on 'welfare benefits for the poor' (Clery, 2012; Taylor & Taylor-Gooby, 2015), as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Yet the existence of this decline can blind us to the nuances of shifts in public opinion. Comparing current views to the late 1980s, the numbers saying that 'most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another' or that 'many people who get social security don't really deserve any help' has

¹ See <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/14/beckett-report-labour-lost-2015-election-economy-immigrants-benefits>, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/devastating-beckett-report-reveals-labour-7206957>, and <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-hasnt-won-back-the-publics-trust-on-welfare-and-immigration-says-margaret-beckett-a6822306.html>.

² See <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2009/02/hardening-attitudes-towards-welfare-make-reform-an-easier-sell/>, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21716638>, and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/10055079/Labour-voters-harden-their-hearts-against-welfare.html>

barely risen (Taylor & Taylor-Gooby, 2015), as also shown in Figure 1. Moreover, it is still the case – despite the financial crisis, and despite hardening attitudes to unemployed people – that more people agree than disagree that the Government should raise ‘welfare benefits for the poor, even if it means higher taxes’ (see Baumberg, 2014 and below). There is some truth to the idea that attitudes to the benefits system have hardened, but the scale and uniformity of these shifts is *perceived* to be greater than the evidence bears out.

[Figure 1 about here]

The second part of the prevailing view is that the public do not have an accurate view of the benefits system, instead believing ‘myths’ (often argued to be spread by parts of the press; see Baumberg et al., 2012). This is not just a view of think-tanks and campaigning organisations, but is also shared by notable academics such as John Hills (2014) and Peter Taylor-Gooby (2015). It is also supported by the empirical evidence, if anything even more strongly than increasing hostility towards benefit claimants. In a separate paper I systematically reviewed 46 beliefs across 18 datasets, and compared these to the best available data on the true picture (Baumberg Geiger, submitted). My overall conclusion was that the British public do indeed have low levels of understanding of the benefits system, primarily in ways that would seem to imply that claimants are undeserving:

- People wildly overestimate how much is spent on unemployment benefits compared to pensions. They also overestimate other related aspects of unemployment benefits (how much claimants without children receive, and the proportion of the population that is unemployed).
- Half the population believe out-of-work benefit claims have risen in the past fifteen years, when they have actually fallen noticeably.
- It is difficult to know the true level of benefit fraud – but the Government’s extensive attempts to estimate the level of probable fraud suggest low levels, and even assuming this is a lower bound, the public overestimate fraud compared to any reasonable figure.
- On almost no measure do more than one-third of individuals give a correct answer (as I define it, allowing some room for uncertainty / rounding in people’s numeric responses).

Inevitably there are further important nuances here. The public are in fact relatively accurate *on average* when estimating the share of the working-age population who currently claim out-of-work benefits (and within this, nearly one in four people provide *underestimates* rather than overestimates). People also tend to *underestimate* how much certain sorts of claimants receive, believing the system is less generous to pensioners and unemployed people with children than it really is. And it is important to avoid a false air of absolute certainty around these myths; the true figures are often uncertain, and people’s beliefs are obtained from sample surveys (often web panels) in which response biases are likely. Still, these nuances do not change the overall picture, in which the evidence strongly supports the assumption of widespread myths.

The role of mythbusting

While there do seem to be widespread benefit myths, my critique here is the implication that ‘mythbusting’ is the best way of getting public support for progressive benefit reforms. It is important not to construct a straw man here; Hills (2014) and Peter Taylor-Gooby (2015) are not

naively arguing that mythbusting is the panacea for all public concerns. Yet the need to tackle misperceptions is a common theme in progressive debate, and sometimes is central: for example, an article in the Guardian newspaper argues that *“it is perhaps this ignorance [of the welfare state] which is putting the survival of a safe system of support for the population at especial risk”* (Beresford, 2013), while the Independent newspaper contained a headline, *“Voters ‘brainwashed by Tory welfare myths’, says new poll”* (Grice, 2013). More broadly, ‘mythbusters’ are commonly used as an element in campaigning (among many others, see Baptist Union of Great Britain et al., 2013; Coote & Lyall, 2013).

However, mythbusters suffer two sets of problems in changing public attitudes: they may not change people’s beliefs, and even if they do, these changes in beliefs may not result in changes in attitudes. I review the evidence for each of these in turn.

The impact of mythbusting on factual beliefs

We might expect that presenting people with the facts will make their beliefs more accurate – but sadly persuasion is rarely that simple. Partly this is a matter of memory: the familiarity of misperceptions may linger even after the detail of their inaccuracy fades (Peter & Koch, 2015). Moreover, repeated misperceptions increase the fluency with which we can access the underlying idea, which makes the idea seem more credible, pithily summarised by Lakoff (2014) as ‘don’t think of an elephant!’ As a result, *“it is extremely difficult to return the beliefs of people who have been exposed to misinformation to a baseline similar to those of people who were never exposed to it”* (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). It is also a matter of ‘reactance’, an instinctive bristling when being told what to think (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). For these reasons, it is even possible that mythbusting will make our beliefs even less accurate.

But beyond this, there is also a crucial challenge around credibility. Sometimes a myth will appear to be more credible than the truth, particularly where the ‘mythbuster’ comes from an untrusted source. Hence for some right-wing individuals with hostile attitudes to benefit claimants, mythbusters by campaigning organisations that they usually distrust are unlikely to be convincing. These issues are magnified when the myths are part of a compelling story or ‘frame’ that fits with people’s wider mental models, whereas the facts are disembodied and would leave gaps in people’s understanding of the world. As the influential George Lakoff puts it (2006), *“facts can be assimilated into the brain only if there is a frame to make sense out of them... The consequence is that arguing simply in terms of facts... will likely fall on deaf ears”*.

Theory therefore suggests that mythbusting may either work or backfire – and there is now a burgeoning literature that seeks to test which way this falls empirically. Much of this stems from Nyhan & Reifler (2010), who show that mythbusting can fail or even backfire across several policy issues (Iraq, stem cell research, and tax cuts). However, an alternative interpretation of the Nyhan & Reifler study is that its attempts to improve knowledge are simply weak and unconvincing; for example, in the Iraq story where everyone received an article about a Bush speech on the invasion, the ‘mythbusting’ was a few lines at the bottom of the article mentioning a CIA report documenting the absence of WMD. Other research in the same vein but with various types of mythbusting has been more mixed, with some showing similar results (Peter & Koch, 2015) but others finding that mythbusting can be effective. For example, newspaper articles that correct misperceptions can change beliefs even in the midst of induced emotions and partisan biases (Weeks, 2015).

When it comes to benefits beliefs themselves, the only relevant experimental study is a recent working paper by Barnes et al (2016). They build their experiment around the UK Government's decision to send all taxpayers a 'taxpayer receipt' showing what their money was spent on. (It should be noted that the statements themselves have been heavily criticised for being misleading.³) Barnes et al find that people's knowledge of public spending in general improves after receiving the information, and that people who were encouraged to check the receipt had better knowledge than people who did not, although they do not show whether this applies more or less to perceived social security spending vs. other spending.

Other studies using different designs on different beliefs, however, have suggested that benefits mythbusting is likely to fail. Repeated qualitative studies in the UK have presented people with factual information, and found that it is simply not believed by participants. Not all facts are rejected out-of-hand; a growth in housing benefit claims among working people has some resonance, for example (Doron & Tinker, 2013). But mythbusters that contradict people's existing beliefs are widely rejected, particularly when they are based on statistics produced by distrusted institutions (Doron & Tinker, 2013; Mattinson, 2014:51). For example, one study reported that *"in cases where the evidence appeared to contradict their original views, participants typically dismissed the evidence as 'government propaganda' or 'newspaper talk'"* (Knight, 2015). Similarly, an Ipsos MORI/Demos study quoted one respondent saying, *"How do they get these figures then? Is it because they don't want people to know that their system is rubbish and that they're being conned? Because we're being conned all over the place with immigration, the whole lot, so I don't think I'd trust the figures"* (Duffy et al., 2013).

The impact of mythbusting on attitudes

A further assumption in benefits mythbusting is that there is a causal link between people's beliefs about the benefits system and their deservingness judgements. This is plausible in the light of the empirical literature, but with caveats. In a separate analysis (Baumberg Geiger, In Press), I show that beliefs about the benefits system are often strongly associated with deservingness judgements, even after controlling for political preferences and sociodemographic factors (education, working status, region, age and gender). One way of expressing this relationship is via a method that Sturgis (2003) terms 'simulation', which estimates what the population's attitudes would be if their knowledge was uniformly correct. A selection of the simulation results from Baumberg Geiger (In Press) are shown below in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

For example, this shows that if people knew the correct proportion of welfare spending that was fraudulent – taking 'correct' to be 10% of claims to allow for hidden fraud and a margin of error, but noting that this is considerably higher than the government's extensive fraud-checking suggests – then 8.1% fewer people would agree that there is a 'dependency culture'. Overall, the models suggest that for most beliefs, if people's knowledge was correct then 5-10% fewer would agree that claimants are undeserving. These add up to a considerable effect for the four beliefs that are in the same survey – 73.8% believed that there was a dependency culture if they were wrong on all four beliefs, compared to only 35.9% for those with 3 or 4 correct answers. However, beliefs about the

³ See <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7424>.

level of benefits that claimants receive, or their incentive to work, have no relationship with deservingness judgements, presumably depending on their connections to the particular belief structure held by the individual (see further discussion in Baumberg Geiger, In Press).

Yet while people with certain beliefs hold certain attitudes, this may indicate that their attitudes determine their beliefs rather than *vice versa*. People tend to selectively expose themselves to information – and to interpret the information they do receive – in ways that support their existing attitudes, a much-researched phenomenon known as ‘motivated reasoning’ (e.g. Taber et al., 2009). Not only does this make it difficult to convince someone to change strongly held beliefs (as above), but if a certain belief changes, then people may rearrange the structure of their worldview to continue justify their attitudes, rather than changing the attitude itself.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the experimental evidence on the impact of information on attitudes is mixed. Kuziemko et al (2015) found that giving people inequality-related information made them much more likely to agree that inequality was a serious problem and support a higher estate tax (but had no impact on support for other policy proposals such as a higher millionaire tax). In contrast, Lawrence & Sides (2014) found no impacts on policy attitudes of giving people a varied list of policy-relevant statistics. Overall, Lawrence & Sides (2014)’s conclusion seems reasonable: *“providing knowledge can, but does not necessarily, change people’s minds about political issues.”* (It is also worth noting that these survey experiments are a slightly artificial design that is likely to overestimate the real-life, longer-term impacts of mythbusting (Barabas & Jerit, 2010)).

When it comes to benefits beliefs, the evidence is sparse but more pessimistic. One study found that several pieces of information had no impact on people’s support for benefits-related policies (Kuklinski et al., 2000). The UK experiment on ‘tax receipts’ by Barnes et al did find that knowledge improved (see above), but without any change in attitudes. One interpretation is that mythbusters and other sources of information can give people ‘facts’ that they then later repeat to survey interviewers, which is a far cry from fundamental transformations in people’s ways of thinking that would lead them to support different policies. This would also explain why other types of mythbusting have been found to influence beliefs but have no effect (or even contrary effects) on attitudes (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

A blueprint for successful mythbusting

This does not necessarily mean that all mythbusting is doomed to failure – but it does provide several lessons (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Firstly, disembodied facts do not help people come to a more accurate worldview, and it is instead better to provide mythbusting embedded within alternative stories that ‘fill the coherence gap’ (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This is also the conclusion of those who have experimented with mythbusting in Britain, who argue *“the successful ‘scrounger’ narrative is rooted in anecdote, stories and symbols, not statistics.”* (Mattinson, 2014), or more succinctly, *“foster conversations, don’t just dispense facts”* (Doron & Tinker, 2013). Some commentators are coming to similar conclusions that *“fact-busting has its limits”* (Moore, 2013) or that we should stop *“bombarding the electorate with statistics that don’t resonate”* (Jones, 2016).

Secondly, mythbusting needs to be credible for the people it is trying to influence. One charity described their wider attempt at publishing a mythbusting supplement in the New Statesman magazine, which *“was well received – but only by people who were already well informed. There is*

no evidence to date to suggest that we have changed anyone's mind" (Knight, 2015). Rather than appealing to the converted, successful mythbusting *"must be tailored"* to the people who need to be convinced, *"preferably by ensuring that the correction is consonant with the audience's worldview"* (Lewandowsky et al., 2012:120). Indeed, there is some – albeit suggestive rather than definitive – evidence that 'partisan politicians who speak against their own apparent political interests' may be the most effective voices of mythbusting (Berinsky, 2015).

Finally, mythbusting may do more than simply directly change people's minds. Nyhan & Reifler (2014) test if drawing state legislators' attention to the Pulitzer-winning 'Politifact' operation leads them to make fewer claims that are later fact-checked and found to be untrue. While the numbers of claims that are fact-checked by Politifact is relatively small over this period and the analyses therefore low-powered, there is some suggestive evidence that there is an effect. Mythbusting may therefore contribute to a more truthful public debate, and have an indirect impact on public attitudes via the behaviour of elected representatives and other prominent public figures. Still, while well-constructed benefits mythbusting may have some value, it seems a distant hope that it will have a transformative effect on the public's knowledge and attitudes on benefits.

Myths and deservingness judgements in other times and places

If mythbusting is likely to fail, then British progressives may resign themselves to the impossibility of progressive reforms in the midst of a hostile public debate. Yet this too relies on a faulty assumption about the difference between contemporary Britain and other times and places in which the benefits system is more generous, as this section explains.

While the evidence on benefit beliefs in other times and places is thin, the limited evidence that exists suggests that the public are never particularly well-informed about the benefits system. In Britain, Golding & Middleton (1982:174) found that an outright majority overestimated a hypothetical family's income on Supplementary Benefit in 1977, though perceptions of the level of unemployment seemed to be reasonably accurate. Hudson & Lunt's review of even earlier survey data (this volume) finds that understanding of the famous Beveridge Report in 1942 was limited. There is no comparative data on benefits beliefs across countries, but Scandinavians similarly have imperfect knowledge of their unemployment and long-term sickness rates, with only around half of respondents managing to provide a roughly correct answer (see Appendices to Baumberg Geiger, In Press).

As a further step, we can compare perceptions of the value of benefits in Belgium vs. the UK, based on two sets of similar questions in the 2014 Belgian National Election Study (Swyngedouw et al., 2014)⁴ and the UK studies reviewed in Baumberg Geiger (submitted):⁵

- *Approach 1:* these surveys firstly ask if a single benefit claimant has enough to live on (UK) or whether their benefits are too high/low (Belgium). Respondents are then asked this again after hearing the actual amount of the benefit; if people become more generous then this implies that they overestimated the real benefit level. In Britain, 24% overestimate the benefit and 13% underestimate it (52% not changing their view when given the true figure), whereas in Belgium, 33% overestimate the benefit and 12% underestimate it.
- *Approach 2:* the surveys also ask directly for the estimated value of benefits received by a couple (UK) or a single person (Belgium). Taking correct responses to be those within a window of £25/pw (UK) or €100/pcm (Belgium) around the true value, 29% give underestimates and 50% overestimates in the UK, whereas in Belgium 26% give overestimates and 45% overestimates.

While there are some further differences between the surveys that make exact comparisons difficult,⁶ benefit beliefs seem to be about as inaccurate in both countries – something which is further supported by the similar inaccuracy of Belgians and Britons in estimating levels of unemployment and long-term sickness (see Appendices to Baumberg Geiger, In Press). Accurate benefits beliefs are clearly not a precondition of the more positive benefits attitudes in Belgium (see Figure 2).

Moreover, even at the moments in history where the benefits system was being expanded, hostile attitudes to some groups of claimants existed. For example, in the midst of the US New Deal, there was “*far more skepticism and outright hostility towards the safety net than our admiring view of the policy history would suggest*” (Newman & Jacobs, 2008). Hudson & Lunt (this volume) likewise find

⁴ This post-electoral study was carried out among a register-based probability sample of Belgians entitled to vote in the 2014 elections. The study consists of two surveys: a face-to-face survey (response rate 47%), and a follow-up questionnaire to return via mail (which 74% of the initial respondents did, leading to a sample size of 1403). The questions are as follows:

- “*People who do not have sufficient means of subsistence in Belgium can obtain social assistance from the OCMW. [Follow-up questionnaire only: In the case of a single person, the social assistance benefit is currently 817 Euro per month]. Do you think that amount is too high or too low?*” Answer categories: 1 (Much too high) – 5 (Much too low)
- “*People who do not have sufficient means of subsistence in Belgium can obtain social assistance from the OCMW. There are few people who know exactly how much the social assistance benefit is. Expressed in euros, how high do you estimate the social assistance benefit is for someone who lives alone? You can always guess when you do not know the correct amount.*”

Both questions were originally given in the face-to-face survey; in order to avoid memory effects, the question giving true value of benefit in question 1 was given in the follow-up survey.

⁵ The UK questions are given in Baumberg Geiger (submitted), Table 3 (for approach 1) and Table 1 (for approach 2).

⁶ The main differences are: (i) the Belgian questions refer to a benefit including housing costs (as there is no separate housing benefit), whereas the UK questions explicitly exclude housing costs; (ii) for approach 1, the Belgian questions are asked in two separate surveys (the follow-up question being asked in a self-completion survey after the interview), whereas the British questions are asked directly following one another; and (iii) the claimant types are different between countries for approach 2.

such attitudes in the postwar consensus of 1960s Britain; for example, they show that large majorities agreed that ‘many people are drawing supplementary benefit/national assistance who could really be earning enough to support themselves if they wanted to’. The same is true in the relatively generous systems of present-day Scandinavia. For example, 68-73% of people in Scandinavian countries say that people often look down on social assistance claimants (Albrekt Larsen, 2006:Table 6.2), while 29-43% of Scandinavians agree that social benefits/services make people lazy, and 32-51% agree that many people manage to obtain benefits/services that they are not entitled to.⁷

In fact, if we look across European countries, the perception of negative economic and moral consequences is *higher* in those countries that have higher social expenditures (van Oorschot et al., 2012:192). The perception of negative consequences across each country in the ESS is shown below in Figure 2, and highlights that the Scandinavian countries are unexceptional in their perception of negative consequences; it is clearly not the case such attitudes present an insurmountable barrier to more generous welfare states. What van Oorschot et al make clear, however, is that the perception of *positive* consequences of the welfare state – preventing widespread poverty, creating a more equal society, and helping people combine work and family – is higher still in these countries. As they put it, “*a higher spending welfare state promotes its social legitimacy by stimulating in people the idea that it is doing a good job, more than that it arouses their worries about its effect on the economy and morals.*”

[Figure 2 about here]

Again, it is important to be clear on my argument here. I am not claiming that negative attitudes towards benefits are equally high in Scandinavian countries as the UK, as Figure 2 makes clear (indeed, the same ESS data shows that far more Britons think that social benefits/services make people lazy). Nor am I claiming that Scandinavian perceptions of their benefits system are as erroneous as British perceptions (Britons perceive higher levels of unemployment and long-term sickness compared to Swedes, for example, despite Sweden having higher levels of both; Baumberg Geiger, In Press). Instead, I want to argue that myths and perceptions of undeservingness are not unique to the UK, and can be found even in times and places in which the benefits system is much more generous. What is different in such settings is not whether such ideas exist to any great extent in society, but how widespread they are, and how far they are balanced by widespread perceptions of more positive consequences of the welfare state.

The ambivalence of benefits attitudes

What characterises attitudes to the benefits system, above all, is ambivalence. This seems to be true of all countries at all times – even when the benefits system is generous and popular, many people still have some concerns, as the previous section has shown. The same is true in reverse for 21st century Britain: even though attitudes are usually felt to be predominantly hostile, many people have positive elements to their attitudes to the benefits system. For example, when last asked (in 2003), over half of people said that they were proud of Britain’s social security system (and not just proud about the welfare state in general). Nearly 80% of respondents agree that large numbers who

⁷ Authors own analysis of weighted ESS data 2008.

are eligible for benefits fail to claim them (both from BSA data in Baumberg et al., 2012:17). And there is relatively widespread agreement in the ESS data in the previous section that the benefits system has positive consequences in preventing widespread poverty (57%) and helping people combine work and family (58%).

Another way of expressing this ambivalence is to look within a single country at how far groups perceived to be deserving are supported compared to groups perceived to be undeserving. In the UK in 2013, far more people thought there should be less spending on unemployment benefits than though that spending should rise (49% less vs. 15% more). Yet the same respondents also overwhelmingly thought there should be more spending on disabled people who cannot work (4% less, 54% more) (Baumberg, 2014:9). This has visible impacts on political debate, most recently with the (right-wing) Government's attempt to cut a (non-work-related) disability benefit by tightening the eligibility criteria. This faced overwhelming public disagreement (two polls at the time put opposition to the policy at 70% and 84%)⁸ and seems to have been scrapped in the light of a backbench rebellion and the (partially-attributable) resignation of the Secretary of State (against what he argued to be a policy imposed by the Treasury).⁹

Such differentiation according to deservingness judgements is by no means limited to the UK; indeed, Wim van Oorschot has influentially argued that there is a *universal* ranking of different claimant groups from most deserving to least deserving (van Oorschot, 2006). Aarøe & Petersen (2014) have likewise argued that both Americans and Danes show a similar 'deservingness heuristic', with citizens of both countries making similar judgements about whether hypothetical claimants are worthy of support when given a clear sign about their motivation to work. It is only when people are asked to form an opinion about benefits claimants in the absence of clear deservingness clues that the expected US-Denmark differences are visible.

The challenge in the UK is therefore *not* that negative attitudes exist, nor that there is little support for claimants who are seen to be undeserving, nor even that there is ambivalence about the benefits system – for all of these are universal. Rather, the challenge is that public debate about benefits emphasises the negative side of this ambivalence at the expense of the positive side, and emphasises undeserving claimants over deserving ones. Hence in Figure 2, the balance of positive vs. negative perceived consequences of the welfare state is higher in the Scandinavian countries than nearly every other European country, while the UK in contrast has the most negative perceived balance of any country barring Slovakia and Hungary (van Oorschot et al., 2012:188). This is reflected in media coverage: stories about benefits in Britain are split between the positive and negative, while stories in the Scandinavian press are usually positive (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that some of the concerns of British progressives about how to respond to myths and harsh benefit attitudes are misplaced. It is true that many benefit myths are

⁸ See the YouGov poll 16-17 March at <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/03/18/least-fair-budget-omnishambles/> and the Ipsos MORI poll 19-22/3/2016 at [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3713/George-Osbornes-satisfaction-ratings-equal-his-worst-ever-following-budget.aspx#gallery\[m\]/2/](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3713/George-Osbornes-satisfaction-ratings-equal-his-worst-ever-following-budget.aspx#gallery[m]/2/)

⁹ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-35848687>

widespread in Britain, and that claimants are perceived more harshly than twenty or thirty years ago – and there are also some signs that these myths and harsh attitudes are linked. However, it is doubtful that ‘mythbusting’ will have large impacts on either of them. Moreover, it is not clear that progressive benefits system reforms depend on wiping out either myths or perceived undeservingness, as these can be found in more generous benefit systems ranging from post-war Britain to present-day Scandinavia. At the population level, people are fundamentally ambivalent about benefits systems, and what is critical is the balance between the positive and negative aspects of this ambivalence. This is a different starting point than most current debates on benefits in Britain, but one that is borne out by the evidence, and takes the debates in a different direction.

This obviously leaves the question of how to influence this balance – but to avoid repeating an argument I have previously made in this journal, I will only summarise this briefly here (for a fuller argument, see Baumberg, 2012). The cornerstones of debates about benefits are often set by the benefits system itself: some systems ‘open up’ questions of deservingness, while others close them down (Albrekt Larsen, 2006). This still leaves some space to ‘reframe’ debates to support progressive reforms (Lakoff, 2014), but these need to resonate with people’s existing beliefs, which are in turn partly structured by the present system. While it is therefore impossible to take progressive leaps at first, it may be easier to take a series of small steps that successively unlock the possibility of hitherto impossible changes. This is something that Conservative politicians have appreciated (albeit with opposing aims), setting in motion reforms in the 1980s that change public preferences and political possibilities in the 2010s. As Margaret Thatcher once said, *“it isn't that I set out on economic policies... Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul”* (Thatcher, 1981).

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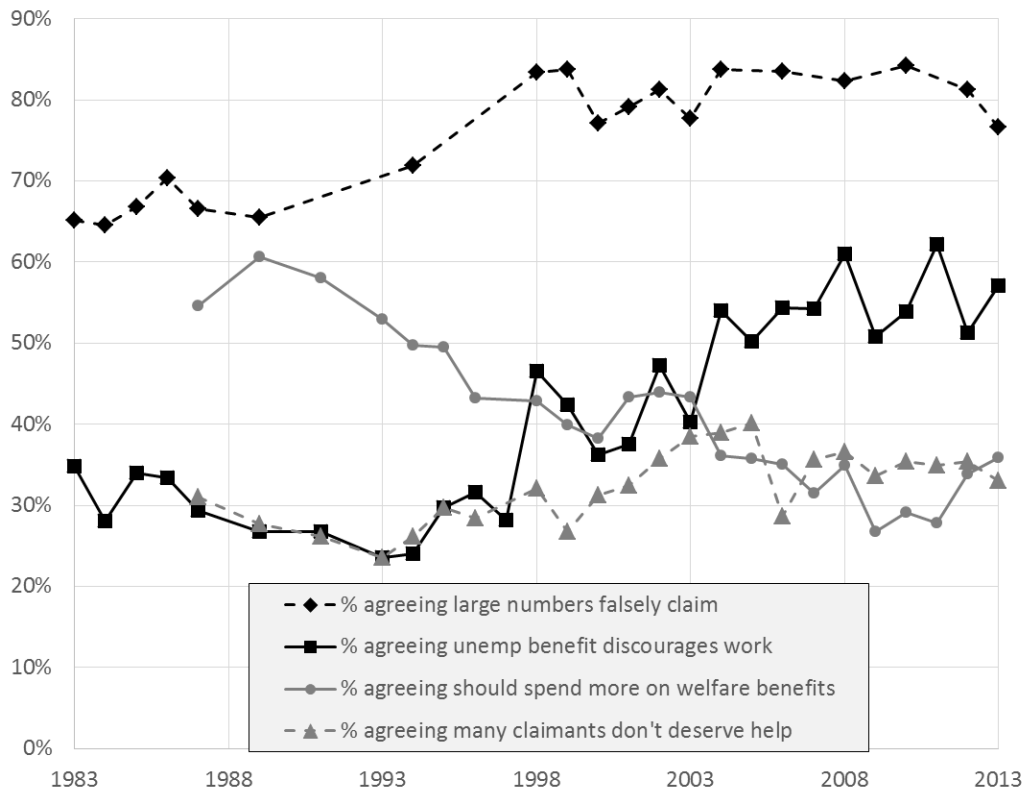
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Table 1: Simulated population-level deservingness perceptions if people held correct beliefs about the benefits system

| <i>Belief question</i> | <i>Deservingness question</i> | Δagree if all correct |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| PERCEPTIONS OF BENEFIT FRAUD | | |
| Fraud as % of welfare spending ⁽¹⁾ | Dependency culture | -8.1%** |
| PERCEPTIONS OF SPENDING ON BENEFITS | | |
| Unemp as % of welfare budget | Dependency culture | -11.4%** |
| PERCEPTIONS OF LEVEL OF CLAIMS AMONG WORKING-AGE POPULATION | | |
| Long-term sick & disabled as % of pop | Many not entitled | -7.4%** |
| Unemployed & looking for work as % of pop | Many not entitled | -6.5%** |
| PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE OF BENEFITS | | |
| £ unemp benefit, couple+2 kids ⁽¹⁾ | Dependency culture | 0.0% |
| £ incentive to take min wage job‡ | Dependency culture | 0.3% |

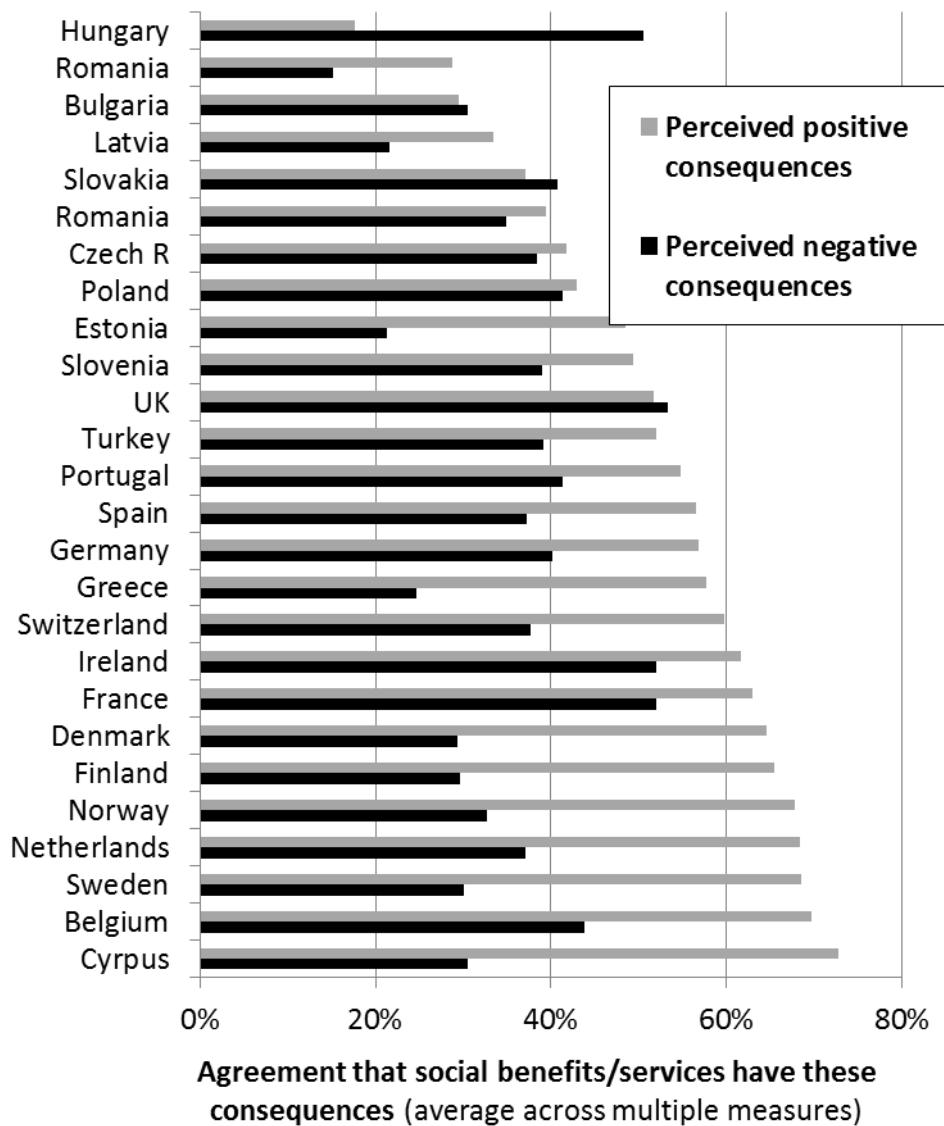
*Table adapted from Baumberg Geiger (In Press). Key: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10; ‡ Major issues around the 'true' figure given, ⁽¹⁾ Minor issues about the 'true value' given. Models control for sex, age, age², region, education, economic activity, and political affiliation (see Baumberg Geiger, In Press for further details).*

Figure 1: Trends in benefit attitudes in Britain since 1983



Source: British Social Attitudes survey (see Baumberg, 2014 for further details)

Figure 2: Perceived positive and negative consequences of the welfare state across Europe



Adapted from van Oorschot et al (2012). Data are own analyse of ESS 2008 data; bars show the average share of the population agreeing that social benefits/services have each of five negative consequences (darker bars; items are placing too great a strain on the economy, costing businesses too much in taxes/charges, making people lazy, making people less willing to care for one another, making people less willing to look after themselves/family) and each of three positive consequences (lighter bars; items are preventing widespread poverty, leading to a more equal society, making it easier to combine work & family).