ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is unemployment benefit stigma related to poverty, payment receipt, or lack of employment? A vignette experiment about Australian views

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Abstract

The present study sought to better understand the extent to which negative perceptions of people who receive unemployment benefits is due to their poverty status, their unemployment, and/or their receipt of income support payments. We sought to differentiate these three factors in a vignette-based experiment drawing on a large Australian general population sample ($N = 778$). Participants rated the personality and capability of two fictional characters. The key experimental manipulation of employment status and benefit receipt was embedded in description of other characteristics. Participants rated vignette characters who received unemployment benefits less favorably on personality (conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness), competence, and warmth than characters described as having a job, as being poor, or as not having a job but without mention of receiving benefits. There was a gradient in the strength of negative assessments across these conditions, but only warmth, conscientiousness and

employability distinguished between individuals receiving unemployment benefits and individuals without a job but no reference to benefit receipt. This study provides new insights showing that receiving benefits due to unemployment contributes to negative perceptions over and above the effects of poverty or being unemployed.

INTRODUCTION

Despite governments spending, on average, one fifth of Gross Domestic Product on social welfare (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016), many government programs and benefits are stigmatized (e.g., income support, housing support, and food stamps; Baumberg, 2016; Handler & Hollingsworth, 1969; Moffitt, 1983). From a policy perspective, attaching stigma to government assistance may discourage people from taking-up benefits to which they are entitled and rely on to get by (Blumkin et al., 2015; Moffitt, 1983). This use of 'stigma power' has flow on effects (Link & Phelan, 2014), and may alter how the public perceives those relying on the government for support. The present research is focused on the perceptions of people who rely on government income replacement because they are unemployed.

Arguably, receiving government assistance may have become more stigmatized since the 1990s as governments across the world have introduced reforms in attempts to reduce long-term dependency (Harris, 2001; Kvist, 1999; Moffitt, 2008; Saunders, 2002; Whiteford & Whitehouse, 2006). These reforms have increasingly: (1) integrated income support and employment policies, imposing job search requirements and work obligations on recipients of government benefits (Martin, 2015; Martin & Grubb, 2001); and (2) tightened eligibility rules to increasingly target payments to the most disadvantaged (e.g., Lam, 2014). While policy changes such as these may generate more negative stereotypes of people who rely on the government for support (Larsen, 2008), this stigma could also be explained by the close relationship between government benefit receipt and other stigmatized characteristics such as poverty (Soss & Schram, 2007). Further, because these negative stereotypes may create a barrier to future employment, it is important to better understand how people who rely on the government for support are perceived by others and why they are seen this way.

Sociological research shows that across countries, those receiving government income support, are frequently stereotyped as lazy and dependent (Humpage, 2011; McKay, 2014; Schofield & Butterworth, 2015; Seccombe et al., 1998; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). However, this stereotype varies between types of government support (e.g., Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). A rich research literature has documented the pervasive negative community views towards people who receive unemployment benefits from the government. This "benefit stigma" is particularly pronounced in countries with highly targeted benefit systems such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (Contini & Richiardi, 2012; Fiske et al., 2002; Schofield & Butterworth, 2015). Negative community attitudes and perceptions of benefit recipients are commonly explained by the concept of 'deservingness' (van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). Perceived deservingness also varies with the reasons people require support (e.g., whether based on unemployment, disability, age, caring status), with those receiving government benefits due to their unemployment frequently seen as the least

deserving (Schofield et al., 2021). Accordingly, people who are unemployed are more likely to be seen as responsible for their own plight, ungrateful for support, not in genuine need (Petersen et al., 2011; Roosma & Van Oorschot, 2017), and lacking reciprocity (i.e., seen as taking more than they have given – or will give – back to society; Aarøe & Petersen, 2014; Larsen, 2008; van Oorschot, 2000; Petersen et al., 2011).

Several experimental paradigms have been used to investigate perceptions of individuals who claim government benefits. The stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002), for example, characterizes stereotypes of social groups on two dimensions: warmth, relating to being friendly and well-intentioned; and competence, relating to one's capacity to pursue intentions (Fiske et al., 2002). Research using this approach has consistently found that individuals receiving government benefits are perceived as being low in both warmth and competence (e.g., Bye et al., 2014; Fiske et al., 2002; Schofield et al., 2021). The structure of benefit recipient stereotypes has also been studied using the Big Five personality dimensions (Schofield & Butterworth, 2018a; Schofield et al., 2019, 2021; Suomi et al., 2020): Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability (for background on the Big Five see: Löckenhoff et al., 2014; McCrae & Terracciano, 2005; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996). Others have discussed the consistency between the dimensions of the Big Five and the SCM, with warmth related to the dimension of agreeableness, and competence related to conscientiousness (Abele et al., 2016; Cuddy et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2006). Similarly, in the welfare literature, both warmth and agreeableness have been linked to perceptions of deservingness (Aarøe & Petersen, 2014).

In Australia where the current study was located, individuals are entitled to different forms of government income support when they are unable to earn an income for reasons such as unemployment, disability, caring responsibilities, and old age. Of these, individuals receiving support due to their unemployment are perceived most negatively by the general public (Schofield et al., 2021), though they also commonly have other stigmatized characteristics. In countries with a Liberal welfare regime (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States), unemployment entitlements are modest (e.g., often below the poverty line; Esping-Andersen, 1990, 2015), and are restricted to those individuals with very limited income and assets (Roosma et al., 2013). Unemployment benefit receipt, therefore, is inextricably tied to both poverty and unemployment but there is little research that has sought to disentangle the potential contribution of income support receipt, unemployment, and poverty to these stigmatized views of those receiving benefits. This separation of the deserving and undeserving poor has been most influential in Liberal welfare regimes with neoliberal ideology, compared to other welfare regimes (Nordic, Conservative) (Mendes, 2017). However, previous SCM research has shown that individuals who receive government benefits, those who are unemployed and those experiencing poverty are all seen as low in both warmth and competence (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002), while other research has shown that individuals' attitudes toward people experiencing poverty and receiving benefits are highly correlated (Tagler & Cozzarelli, 2013). In contrast, people make fewer attributions of personal failure and are more favorably disposed to individuals who suffer from poverty, than individuals who claim government benefits (Henry et al., 2004), and have a more positive view of programs labeled as "supporting the poor" than those labeled as "welfare programs" (Smith, 1987). Qualitative interviews also show how the bureaucratic processes specifically tied to applying for benefits lead to feelings of stigmatization (e.g., Seccombe et al., 1998).

The present study advances research in this area by directly comparing the different factors that may contribute to the stigmatized views of those receiving unemployment benefits using a vignette experiment. Previous vignette research has consistently shown that unemployed characters receiving government benefits are perceived as less employable and less conscientious than

employed characters (Schofield & Butterworth, 2018a, 2018b; Schofield et al., 2019; Suomi et al., 2020). A similar but weaker pattern of results has also been shown for perceptions of character agreeableness, and emotional stability (Schofield et al., 2019; Suomi et al., 2020). The present study makes an important contribution to research in this area, extending previous approaches by disentangling the effect of characteristics correlated with benefit receipt. Better understanding of the different components of benefit stigma can potentially inform policy responses to lessen this stigma.

In the current experiment, we assess the factors associated with the negative view of recipients of unemployment benefits by independently manipulating attributes representing poverty, unemployment, and dependence on government benefits. The study presented four different conditions in which the characters are described as: (1) *employed (no stigma)*; (2) *employed but experiencing poverty (poverty stigma)*; (3) *unemployed (poverty + unemployment stigma)*; and (4) *unemployed and receiving government income support (poverty + unemployment + benefit stigma)*. To test the generalizability of the findings, the experimental design also manipulates extraneous vignette features (age, gender, relationship status) and character social desirability.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this study was preregistered (https://osf.io/wknb6) and the data is available on request through the Open Science Framework. We hypothesized that characters in the unemployment benefit condition would be rated more negatively than characters in all other conditions, reflecting the incremental contribution of poverty, unemployment, and benefit stigma across conditions. We also expected to find a negative gradient in perceptions of characters from the employed, working poor, unemployed, and to unemployed benefit receipt conditions, reflecting the additive contribution of the different sources of stigma. Consistent with the previous literature, perceptions were assessed using the Big Five personality traits and measures of employability. Based on prior findings, we expected the predicted pattern of results will be strongest for conscientiousness, worker and boss suitability, and evident but weaker for agreeableness, openness, and emotional stability. Given previous results, we do not expect the same pattern across conditions for extraversion. The study also included measures related to warmth and competence (communion/warmth, agency/competence) which were expected to show the predicted pattern across the key study conditions.

Method

Participants

The analyzed sample consisted of 778 Australian participants (47.4% female, 51.8 % male, .5% other, .5% prefer not to say) drawn from the Australian Online Research Unit (ORU) panel. The ORU is an online survey platform that provides access to a panel of participants broadly representative of the Australian population, and which is recruited using online, telephone, print, and postal recruitment methods. For each project, the ORU randomly selects panelists who meet study eligibility criteria and provides an incentive for their participation. The sample size provided adequate coverage of all unique vignettes (see section 'Procedures'). The participants were predominantly White (8.9%) and Asian (15.7%) with a mean age of 43.1 years (SD = 17.0; range: 18–82 years).

The study methodology was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

Procedures

The four key experimental conditions were implemented via a nested mixed design. Each participant was exposed to an initial vignette condition – either an employed (employed or working poor) or unemployed (unemployed or unemployment benefits) condition – completed comprehension questions, followed by questions about the character's personality, their suitability as a worker and boss and level of warmth and competence. The process was then repeated, with the second vignette drawn from the alternative employment category. Thus, every participant rated one employed and one unemployed character.

Manipulation

The four key experimental conditions were operationalized by one sentence embedded within the vignette (*employed*: "S/he is currently working as a sales assistant in a large department store;" *working poor*: "S/he is currently working as a sales assistant, on minimum-wage, in a large department store;" *unemployed*: "S/he is currently unemployed;" and receipt of *unemployment benefits*: "S/he is currently unemployed, and is receiving government benefits due to his/her unemployment").

In Australia, few minimum-wage jobs are supplemented by tips, and therefore a minimum-wage job implies a level of relative poverty. A full-time worker in a minimum wage job is in the bottom quartile of income earners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In this way, relative to the employed condition the working poor condition could include poverty stigma, while those who are unemployed could include poverty and unemployment stigma.[1] Finally, given that a single person with no dependents receiving unemployment benefits receives approximately 75% of the minimum-wage in cash assistance, relative to the employed, those receiving unemployment benefits could face poverty stigma, unemployment stigma and benefit stigma.

Several other vignette characteristics were manipulated. Some characteristics were selected without replacement from the available options (e.g., character age, relationship status, social desirability). Age was specified as either 27 or 35 years, relationship status was either single or lives with his/her partner, and social desirability as low, moderate or high via a description of what the character did on the weekend (see Figure 1 in section Design). The low desirability character was described in a way that did not highlight any social connectedness or personal responsibility, the moderate desirability character was described in a way that highlighted both social connectedness and personal responsibility, while the high desirability character was described as socially connected, personally responsible and as altruistic. The character's gender was randomly varied with a name corresponding to each gender selected without replacement from the available options (male: John, Thomas; female: Mary, Rachel); this meant participants could get two differently named characters of the same gender.

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[1] We acknowledge that it is unknown whether study participants would assume someone described as unemployed is poor, or that in the absence of other information the unemployed are assumed to receive welfare.
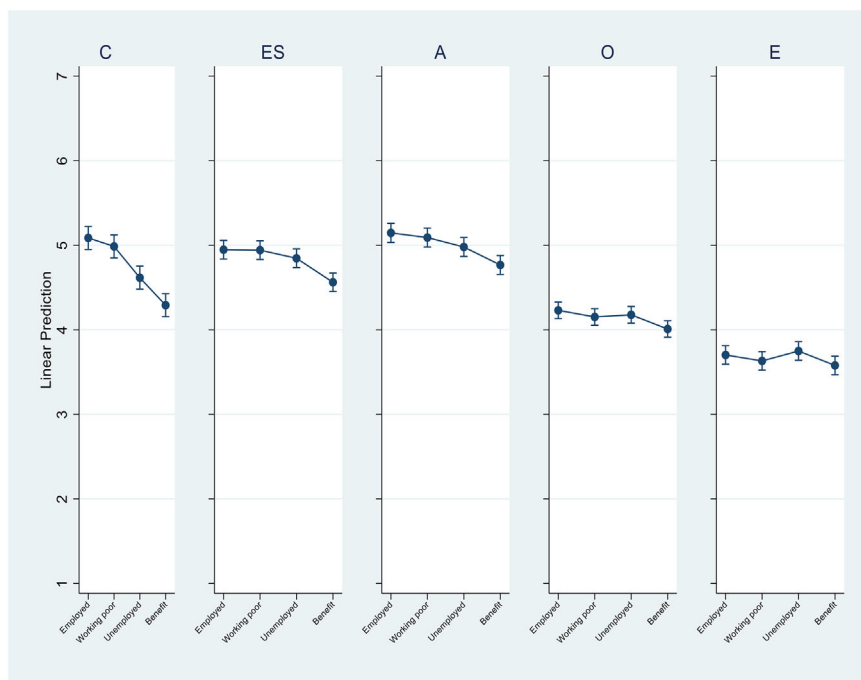
FIGURE 1 Effects of condition on character rating of personality dimensions, Unadjusted for vignette characteristics. A, agreeableness; C, conscientiousness; E, extraversion; ES, emotional stability; O, openness to experience [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Design

The study design balanced the presentation of the four key experimental conditions across other vignette characteristics (e.g., the characters' age, gender, relationship status, and social desirability).[2] Each participant was shown two vignettes with the features of the second vignette counterbalanced on each dimension except gender (which was balanced between-subjects).[3]

Estimation of sample size was complicated by the mixed within-/between-design and counterbalancing of vignette conditions. Comparisons involving two employed or two unemployed conditions were, by design, fully between different participants, whereas cross-condition comparisons involved a mix of within- and between-person comparisons (and were therefore more highly powered). Focusing on the (least powered) between-group comparison, a total sample size of 776 split equally between four conditions would provide 80% power to detect a standardized mean difference of .25 at the adjusted alpha level. This effect size is consistent with prior (unpublished) research contrasting perceptions of the unemployed and benefit conditions using some of

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[2] The combination of characteristics yielded 96 unique vignettes, comprising four key experimental conditions (employed, working poor, unemployed, unemployment benefits) × 2 ages × 2 genders × 2 relationship statuses × 3 levels of social desirability.

[3] The second vignette could assume one of eight sets of characteristics: either 2 (employed, working poor) *or* 2 (unemployed, unemployment benefits) × 1 age × 1 relationship status × 2 levels of social desirability, and be presented as either male or female. Thus, there were 96 × 8 = 768 unique ordered vignette pairs presented. The random generation of conditions meant that not all possible combinations were included, and 10 vignette pairs were presented twice within the sample of 778 participants.

the measures included in the current study (e.g., worker and boss suitability, conscientiousness, and openness).

Comprehension checks

Vignette comprehension was assessed via three free-response comprehension questions about the character's age and weekend activities. If a participant provided no correct responses, the vignette was excluded from analysis as per pre-registered plans.

Outcome measures

Personality, employment, fundamental dimensions of perception (communion/warmth and agency/competence), dehumanization, and moral emotions were all measured in the pre-registered experiment, although dehumanization and moral emotions were part of exploratory analysis and not reported in this article.

Personality

The Ten Item Personality Inventory was used to measure the Big Five traits (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003). This scale was adapted to other oriented wording as in prior work (e.g., Schofield & Butterworth, 2018). Two items measured each trait via two paired attributes. One item contained positive attributes and one contained negative attributes. Participants indicated the extent to which *"I think [Name] is [attributes]"* from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Agreeableness ($\alpha =$ .54) was assessed from "sympathetic, warm," and "critical, quarrelsome" (reversed); extraversion ($\alpha = .52$) was assessed from "extraverted, enthusiastic," and "reserved, quiet" (reversed); conscientiousness ($\alpha = .76$) was assessed from "dependable, self-disciplined" and "disorganized, careless" (reversed); openness to experience ($\alpha = .35$) was assessed from "open to new experiences, complex" and "conventional, uncreative" (reversed); emotional stability ($\alpha = .65$) was assessed from "calm, emotionally stable." and "anxious, easily upset" (reversed). The order of the 10 items was randomized. Previous research has established that employed characters (compared to unemployed and benefit recipients) are consistently rated higher on all personality dimensions except for extraversion (Schofield et al., 2019; Schofield & Butterworth, 2018; Suomi et al., 2020).

Employment

Single item measures: "I think [Name] would be a good worker" and "I think [Name] would be a good boss." were rated on the same scale as the personality measure. The order of these two items was randomized.

Fundamental dimensions of perception

Bocian et al.'s (2018) adaptation of Abele et al.'s (2016) scale was used. This scale measures the fundamental dimensions of communion and agency (which Fiske refers to as warmth and competence in SCM; Fiske, 2018). Although the scale identifies two subscales for each dimension (morality and warmth within communion, and competence and assertiveness within agency), we had no a priori hypotheses about these subscales and undertake analysis on the two dimensions. For each item, participants indicated the extent to which *"I think [Name] [attributes]"* from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). Communion/warmth ($\alpha = .96$) was measured by 12 items: "is just," "is fair," "is honest," "is considerate," "is trustworthy," "is caring," "is warm in relations with others," "is empathetic," "is helpful," "is friendly," "is understanding of others," Agency/competence ($\alpha = .92$) was measured with 11 items: "is efficient," "is capable," "is competent," "is intelligent," "is clever," "is self-confident," "stands up well under pressure," "never gives up easily," "can make decisions easily," "feels superior,", "is independent." These items were presented in a random order.

Analytical strategy

We use mixed-effects multi-level models, with the initial models representing the nine outcome measures from two occasions within each participant. The initial simple multi-level models included fixed terms for Measure (the nine different outcomes) and 4-level experimental Condition (character employment status). The analyses first assessed the main effects of Condition and Measure to establish the baseline pattern of results, and then evaluated whether the inclusion of the interaction term (Condition × Measure) improved overall model fit, which would indicate that the experimental effect differed across the outcome measures. Having demonstrated a significant interaction in this global model, the effect of experimental conditions was investigated in a series of separate linear regression models for each outcome measure. For each model, pairwise comparisons examined the difference between each level of Condition to identify potential sources of stigma, with the main focus on the comparisons between the unemployed benefit recipients versus unemployed (benefit stigma) conditions, unemployed versus working poor (unemployment stigma) conditions, and working poor versus employed (poverty stigma) conditions. We use a Bonferroni corrected significance level of $p < .0083$ in these analyses to account for the multiple comparisons for each outcome measure. For all models we considered unadjusted and adjusted results (controlling for non-focal vignette characteristics) and reported unadjusted results if the two results were similar, as specified in the pre-registration.

RESULTS

The overall multilevel model incorporating the four distinct vignette conditions and all nine outcome measures provided evidence of significant main effects of Condition (employed, working poor, unemployed, unemployed benefit receipt: $\chi^2 (3) = 489.44$, $p < .001$) and Measures (the nine distinct outcome measures; $\chi^2 (8) = 4886.32$, $p < .001$) in both adjusted and unadjusted models. The results from the unadjusted model showed that, relative to the unemployed benefit recipient condition, the characters in the unemployed, working poor, and employed conditions were rated
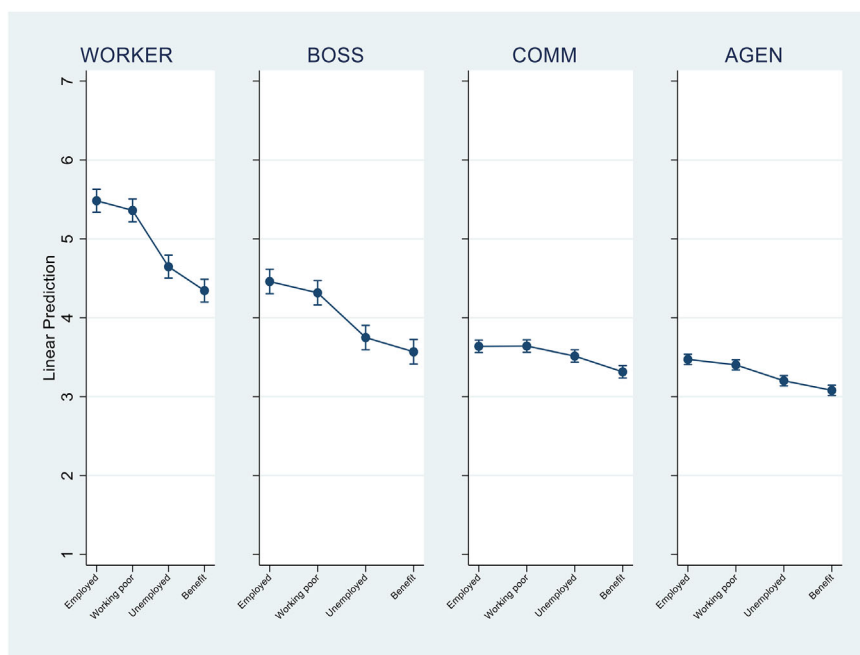
FIGURE 2 Effects of condition on character rating on worker and boss suitability, communion and agency, unadjusted for vignette characteristics [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

more favorably overall. Pairwise comparisons showed a gradient across conditions, although the difference between the two employed conditions was not significant: employed = working poor (*poverty stigma*; $b = -.08$, 95% CI [−.14, −.01], $p = .02$) > unemployed (*unemployment stigma*; $b = -.22$, 95% CI [−.28, −.16], $p < .001$) > benefit recipient (*benefit stigma*; $b = -.22$, 95% CI [−.29, −.16], $p < .001$). Adding the Condition × Measures interaction term improved the overall model fit, χ^2 (24) = 379.2, $p < .001$, prompting analysis of each outcome measure separately.

The pairwise comparisons between each level of condition for each measure (based on the unadjusted linear regressions) are shown in Table 1. While the employed condition was rated higher than the working poor condition (evident by a negative coefficient) for eight of the nine outcome measures, the difference between the employed and working poor condition (hypothesized to reflect poverty stigma) was not significant for any of the individual outcome measures.

Figures 1 and 2 graphically present the predicted mean scores across the four conditions for the key outcome measures used in previous research. While there is evidence of a gradient across the employed, unemployed and benefit receipt conditions, there are different patterns across the different outcome measures. Ratings of character extraversion were not influenced by the study manipulation, and the only significant difference observed for openness was between the most extreme conditions (employed vs. benefit receipt). In contrast, the experimental manipulation was strongest for conscientiousness, and measures of worker and boss suitability, with the effect of unemployment (the pairwise comparison between working poor and unemployed conditions) associated with the greatest decline. However, the effect of benefit receipt (the difference between the unemployed and the benefit condition) was also significant for worker suitability and conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness. The results for warmth/communion were similar to those observed for emotional stability and agreeableness. The differences were limited

TABLE 1 Unadjusted pairwise comparisons across the nine outcomes

	Employed (ref) vs Working poor — Poverty stigma — b(se)	Employed (ref) vs. Unemployed — Poverty & unemployment stigma — b(se)	Employed (ref) vs. Benefits — Poverty, unemployment, benefit stigma — b(se)	Working poor (ref) vs. Unemployed — Unemployment stigma — b(se)	Working poor (ref) vs. Benefits — Unemployment & benefit stigma — b(se)	Unemployed (ref) vs. Benefits — Benefit stigma — b(se)
Worker suitability	−.12 (.10)	**−.84 (.10)**	**−1.11 (.10)**	**−.71 (.10)**	**−1.02 (.10)**	**−.30 (.11)**
Boss suitability	−.14 (.11)	**−.71 (.11)**	**−.89 (.11)**	**−.57 (.11)**	**−.75 (.11)**	−.18 (.11)
Conscientiousness	−.10 (.10)	**−.47 (.10)**	**−.80 (.10)**	**−.37 (.10)**	**−.69 (.10)**	**−.32 (.10)**
Emotional stability	−.01 (.08)	−.10 (.08)	**−.39 (.08)**	−.10 (.08)	**−.38 (.08)**	**−.28 (.08)**
Agreeableness	−.06 (.08)	−.17 (.08)	**−.38 (.08)**	−.11 (.08)	**−.32 (.08)**	**−.21 (.08)**
Openness	−.08 (.07)	−.05 (.07)	**−.22 (.07)**	.03 (.07)	−.14 (.07)	−.17 (.07)
Extraversion	−.07 (.08)	.05 (.08)	−.12 (.08)	.12 (.08)	−.05 (.08)	−.17 (.08)
Warmth	.00 (.06)	−.12 (.06)	**−.32 (.06)**	−.13 (.06)	**−.33 (.06)**	**−.20 (.06)**
Competence	−.07 (.05)	**−.27 (.04)**	**−.39 (.04)**	**−.20 (.04)**	**−.32 (.04)**	−.12 (.05)

Note. The shaded columns highlight the sequential comparisons crucial for the study hypothesis indicating welfare stigma: poverty stigma; unemployment stigma; benefit stigma. Significant main effects of vignette characteristics are highlighted in bold (*p* < .008) parentheses contain the standard error of the coefficient.

to those comparisons involving benefit receipt (again, rated more negatively than the employed, the working poor and the unemployed conditions). A different pattern of results was evident for competence/agency, however, with the comparison between employed and unemployed conditions generating a significant difference. That is, characters described as unemployed (regardless of whether or not they were described as receiving benefits) were rated more negatively on competence/agency than characters in the employed or working poor conditions, but there was no difference observed between the unemployed and the unemployed benefit receipt on this measure.

This pattern is evident in Table 1. For measures of employability, conscientiousness and competence, each of the employment conditions (employed and working poor) were rated more positively than the unemployed and benefit conditions. Worker suitability and conscientiousness were also poorer in the benefit compared to the unemployed condition. In contrast, the experimental effects observed for emotional stability, agreeableness, and warmth were limited to contrasts involving the benefit receipt condition (compared to the employed, the working poor, and the unemployment conditions).

The results from the adjusted models were consistent. In addition, the model results show (Table S1) that the manipulation of character desirability was successful, with the characters in the high desirability condition rated much more positively than those in the moderate and low desirability conditions on all nine outcomes. There were also significant main effects of gender (with female characters rated higher on suitability as a worker, extraversion, and competence); and relationship status (with partnered characters rated as more suitable workers, conscientious, and agreeable). There was evidence of ordering effects, with ratings to the second vignette lower than the first in worker suitability, emotional stability and agreeableness, but higher on extraversion. While repeating the key analyses with data restricted to the first presented vignette did produce a different pattern of significance, further analysis indicated this difference was a reflection of the loss of power (i.e., the analysis involved only half the number of observations) rather than a difference in the model coefficients (see Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials).

DISCUSSION

Research from a range of disciplines and using a variety of different research methodologies has demonstrated that people who are unemployed and receiving government unemployment benefits are perceived negatively by the general population (Contini & Ricciardi 2012; Fiske et al., 2002; Schofield & Butterworth, 2015). However, the separate factors that may contribute to this stigma are not well understood. The current study applied an innovative experimental vignette methodology to disentangle the factors that may contribute to the negative view of people receiving unemployment benefits in Australia. We hypothesized that unemployment benefit stigma may represent the additive effect of poverty stigma and unemployment stigma, as well as the negative perceptions directly attributed to receipt of government benefits. Our experimental vignette approach enabled us to contrast characters in different circumstances, holding all other characteristics constant. Overall, unemployment appeared to be associated with perceptions of lower employability, conscientiousness, and competence, while benefit receipt was uniquely associated with lower warmth, agreeableness, and emotional stability suggesting that individuals on unemployment benefits may be seen as 'underserving' of income support by the Australian general public. While the results are complex, there were four distinct patterns in the results obtained.

First, the current study replicated previous research using a similar vignette approach that showed that individuals who were unemployed and receiving government benefits were perceived as less employable, and less conscientious than those in employment (Schofield & Butterworth, 2018; Schofield et al., 2019; Suomi et al., 2020). Unemployed individuals (where there was no reference to benefit receipt) were also perceived more negatively than those in employment. However, the key new finding representing the second important pattern of results, was that individuals receiving unemployment benefits were perceived to be poorer workers and less conscientious that those who were unemployed. That is, both unemployment and benefit receipt separately contributed to poorer perceptions on these outcomes.

Third, the results across experimental conditions on measures of communion and agency provide further context to this finding. Social groups viewed as having negative motives and engaging in exploitative behavior are rated low on communion, or warmth in the Stereotype Content Model terminology (Koch et al., 2020). The current findings showed that differences in perceptions of warmth were limited to comparisons involving individuals receiving benefits who were rated more negatively than those who were employed and unemployed (with no reference to benefit receipt). The same pattern was found for the personality measures of agreeableness and emotional stability. Agreeableness has shown a strong correlation with communion/warmth in prior research (e.g., Abele et al., 2016; McCrae & Costa, 1989). While emotional stability has been previously linked to agency/competence (e.g., Abele et al., 2016), the current findings suggest it is also associated with benefit receipt. Warmth and agreeableness have previously been linked to the welfare-specific characteristics of deservingness (Aarøe & Petersen, 2014). Thus, the correspondence between warmth/communion and benefit stigma (but not unemployment stigma) strengthens the evidence of those receiving unemployment benefits being perceived negatively and as undeserving of government support (Aarøe & Petersen, 2014; Larsen, 2008; Petersen et al., 2011; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017; van Oorschot, 2000). In contrast, the fourth pattern shows that differences in perceptions of agency/competence were tied to comparisons involving unemployment status, with no significant additional decrement associated with benefit receipt. Thus, those who are unemployed are perceived as lacking competence, while those who are receiving benefits are additionally seen as undeserving of support and lacking in warmth, agreeableness, and emotional stability.

Other aspects of the current findings warrant comment as they also reflect on the robustness of the findings. The distinct profile of results observed for the employment-specific (e.g., worker quality/conscientiousness), warmth/communion, and competence/agency measures suggests that the results do reflect different constructs, and that the results across the vignette conditions do not simply reflect variation on a continuum of general valence. Further, the evidence that extraversion (and openness to a lesser extent) showed no variation across the vignette conditions confirms the specificity of the findings.

Policy implications

The current results have relevance for welfare policy, as perceptions and stereotypes of people who receive benefits can be reinforced – or even generated – by government actions and policies. The stigma attached to a benefit receipt is often viewed as a potential policy lever with the capacity to limit benefit take-up, reduce dependence on income support, and encourage workforce participation (Baumberg, 2016; Blumkin et al., 2015; Contini & Richiardi, 2012; Garthwaite, 2014). The strong negative ratings of the warmth of individuals who receive benefits is consistent with an

(inaccurate) view that there are very high levels of fraud amongst those who receive benefits and that many recipients are cheating or unfairly taking advantage of the welfare system (Marston & Shevellar, 2014). There are, however, risks associated with the perpetuation of such stigmatizing perceptions. The most disadvantaged in society have the greatest need for government income support but are also those most likely to not take-up much needed assistance in order to avoid being tainted with this stigma (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004). As such, benefit and unemployment stigma may contribute to entrenching poverty and disadvantage. Individuals may internalize benefit stigma, which may create further barriers to employment and wellbeing (Baumberg, 2016; Corrigan et al., 2009). Based on this study and other research (Suomi et al., 2020), removing some of the stigmatizing features of the unemployment benefit (raising the rate of payment, reporting requirements) could be used to overcome negative perceptions toward welfare benefits.

Study strengths, limitations, and future directions

Outcome dimensions

One strength of the person perception approach adopted in the present study was the inclusion of a range of outcome measures. This presented the opportunity to observe consistency and divergence in the pattern of results across the vignette conditions, and provided insights into nature of poverty, unemployment, and benefit stigma. Further, by drawing our stereotype measures from the Big Five (e.g., Löckenhoff et al., 2014; McCrae & Terracciano, 2005) we obtained ratings on dimensions derived from natural language representations of the social perceptions of the self and others (Srivastava, 2010). These findings can also be related to the more traditional welfare literature, with connections drawn with related traits like laziness (McKay, 2014; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006) and deservingness (Jensen & Petersen, 2017; Larsen, 2008).

Vignette design

We generated experimental conditions to capture a potential gradient of stigma associated with poverty, unemployment, and benefit receipt. Limitations in study design reflect the challenge of unconfounding these correlated characteristics. Each decision involved a trade-off between ecological validity and tight experimental control. Maintaining ecological validity is important for welfare research to carry applied value (Stanley & Hartman, 2017). The failure to demonstrate evidence of poverty stigma is likely a limitation of operationalization rather than an absence of stigma in the community. There was some hint of a difference between the employed and working poor conditions in the global multi-level model, and the finding that the Employed condition was rated higher than the Working poor condition on eight of the nine outcome measures. It is possible that study participants did not attend to, or not understand the implications of the reference to the characters' receipt of the minimum wage in this vignette, or perhaps the description in both of the employment conditions of the characters' occupation as sales assistant already implied a modest income. As noted, the challenge in vignette design is to maintain consistency in all features aside from those that are the focus of the manipulation. Future research should examine alternative ways to implement these employment conditions.

Generalizability and future research

The present work demonstrated robust effects of unemployment benefit receipt on how a person's capabilities and personality are evaluated. Further studies should examine whether those receiving income support benefits for reasons other than unemployment (e.g., disability, retirement, single parent status) are perceived in the same way as those receiving unemployment benefits, especially given perceptions of deservingness vary across different types of payment (Larsen, 2008; Schofield et al., 2021). The experimental methods developed in the current study would provide a sound basis for this future research. For instance, this method could be used to compare the stereotypes of those with disabilities who are working, unemployed or receiving a disability pension. They can also be used to examine the contribution of other stigmatizing characteristics to person perceptions (race, ethnicity). The approach provides a framework for studying the potentially additive effects of different aspects of stigma for individuals or groups that are stigmatized in multiple ways (Mazziotta et al., 2015).

The present study was, by design, focused on building understanding of benefit stigma in the Australian context. It is unclear whether these results would generalize to other 'liberal' welfare regimes or to different types of welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Variability could be expected given that work on laziness and deservingness has shown substantial cultural differences (Jensen & Petersen, 2017; McKay, 2014). However, the current experimental methods provided individualized information about the characters in each vignette and this may have overwhelmed the culturally-specific aspects of the stereotypes of social groups (e.g., Aarøe & Petersen, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The study showed the different components contributing to unemployment benefit stigma: the benefit receipt contributed to the stigma over and above poverty or unemployment stigma. The findings can be used to inform welfare policy and efforts to reduce stigma around claiming benefits. The study findings suggest people who receive income support due to their unemployment are perceived more negatively in terms of their employability, their conscientiousness, their warmth and their competence, compared to those who are employed. The impact of benefit receipt itself, however, is linked to perceptions of warmth and the view that those without work are cheating and exploiting the welfare system. In contrast, negative perceptions tied to a lack of competence and ability are generalized to all who are unemployed, regardless of benefit receipt. This work extends previous research investigating the perceived deservingness of unemployed benefit recipients. The methods used in the current study can facilitate comparison of how factors such as employment and benefit receipt influence community perceptions and may be used to better understand the impact of different policy approaches.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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This article has earned Preregistered Research Design badge. Preregistered design are available at (https://osf.io/wknb6).

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