

Poverty, social security and stigma

'Proud to be poor' is not a banner under which many want to march.'

Writing recently about the lack of respect accorded to those living on a low income, Ruth Lister identified the strong and historic link between poverty and stigma. Social security can be seen as a way of helping to reduce the stigma of poverty, providing enough for people to participate in society, without being reduced to charity. But in recent years, there has been a perception of an increasing sense of stigma attached simply to the receipt of benefits. Kate Bell asks whether social security itself has become a source of shame.

THIS WAS THE QUESTION we set out to answer in a study commissioned by Elizabeth Finn Care, a charity which runs the website Turn2Us, helping people identify the financial support to which they are entitled. The resulting report, *Benefits Stigma in Britain*, by Ben Baumberg, Declan Gaffney and myself, as well as analysing existing UK and international survey evidence and the extensive research literature, drew on data from three original pieces of research: a large-scale opinion poll conducted in May 2012 by Ipsos MORI; a series of focus groups held during summer 2012; and an analysis of national newspaper coverage from 1995 to 2011.

Our findings offer both gloom and cheer for those who believe that a key aim of the social security system should be to enable people to escape the stigma of poverty. To summarise, we found strong support for benefits for those seen as 'deserving', but an increasing suspicion that many of those claiming benefits did not, in fact, 'deserve' them and, therefore, to some extent 'should' be stigmatised.

Defining stigma as the idea that a characteristic (in this case, claiming benefits) is seen as embarrassing or shameful and leads to lower social status, we looked at three possible ways in which stigma might operate. Personal stigma is a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful. Social stigma is the feeling that other people judge claiming benefits to be shameful, and institutional stigma is that which arises from the process of claiming benefits. Of course, these forms of stigma interact. Even if someone believes that claiming benefits should not be a source of shame for her/himself, if s/he believes that everyone else thinks s/he should be stigmatised, s/he may change her/his behaviour accordingly.

We looked at the extent of these types of stigma using our MORI survey and focus groups with both claimants and non-claimants. We found that personal stigma, a person's own view that claiming benefits is shameful, is restricted to a minority – 68–72 per cent of those in our MORI survey said that they themselves would not feel ashamed to claim benefits. We then looked at social stigma, our perception that other people think claiming benefits is shameful. Focus group participants were more likely to say other people felt this, but the survey showed that social stigma was quite common; about half of respondents suggested they perceive at least some social stigma. Finally, we looked at institutional stigma from the process of claiming benefits. This was commonly reported by our focus group participants and survey respondents alike, with 49 per cent of survey respondents reporting high institutional stigma:

'I think they make things difficult to put us off, and they insult us, and they abuse us basically. I mean, those kind of things are abusive, and I think they just do it to frighten people away, make it difficult.'
(Yasmin, disability benefits group)

'Some people from the jobcentre, they are stupid... some people do not talk properly to [you], no respect, the "why do you come to the jobcentre?" So it's very rude, like you're not finding a job...'
(Fatima, mixed claimant and non-claimant group)

'I think as long as the jobcentre are treating everybody who comes through their door like second-rate citizens, you're going to feel like second-rate citizens applying for benefits. And the general public is going to see everybody walking through the doors of the jobcentre as second-rate citizens as well.'
(Alan, jobseeker's allowance group)

Why should claiming benefits be stigmatised at all? It has often been suggested that receiving benefits is seen as shameful because benefit receipt is seen as a way in which we receive a gift but do not offer one in return, thus breaking deeply embedded norms of reciprocity. The suggestion that these norms are important is rooted in studies of gift giving across different times and cultures, which all find that gifts create strong ties of obligation between people, and that those who fail to reciprocate gifts incur social penalties, including loss of status. As the anthropologist Mauss put it in 1924, 'there is no

gift without a counter-gift² or, in today's language, 'we demand something for something'. Charity is received by those unable to make this reciprocal contribution and is often a source of humiliation.

We suggest in the report that benefits are, in some circumstances, seen as a form of unreciprocated gift close to private charity, and that when these gifts are seen as being received by those who do not 'deserve' them, benefit receipt is seen as being stigmatising. As Thomas Hobbes put it in 1651, there is a clear distinction between charity and benefits that have been legally provided for:³

Whereas many men... become unable to maintain themselves by their labour; they ought not to be left to the Charity of private persons; but to be provided for... by the Lawes of the Common-wealth. For as it is Uncharitableness in any man to neglect the impotent; so it is in the Sovereign of a Common-Wealth to expose them to the hazard of such uncertain charity.

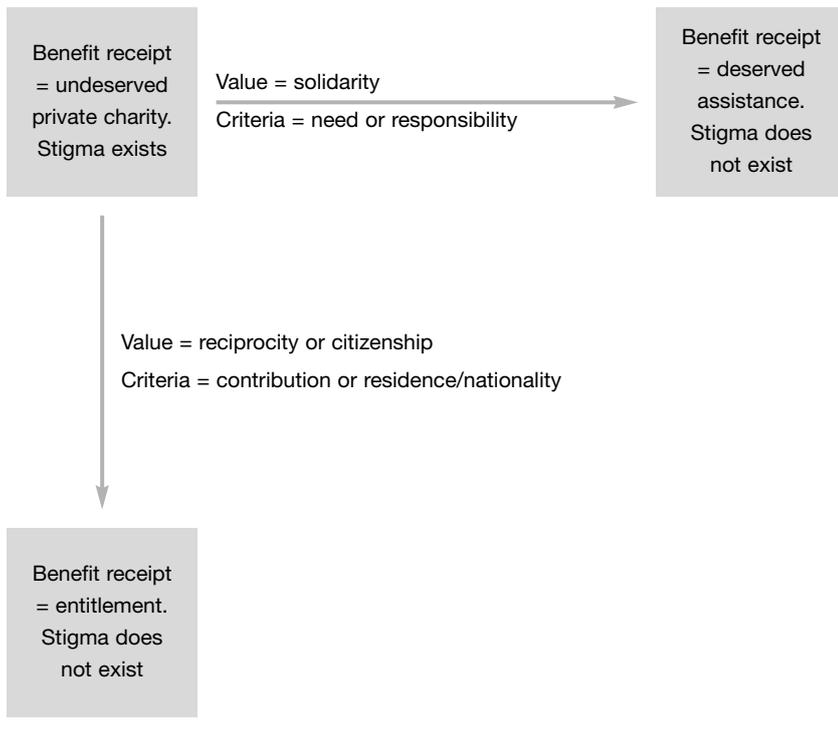
However, stigma can still exist even when the financial support is no longer on a voluntary, charitable basis, but has been guaranteed by legislation. We suggest there are two ways in which claimants can escape this. Firstly, they can be seen as deserving recipients of assistance. Our focus groups found that the key criteria for being seen as 'deserving' were primarily 'need' and 'responsibility' – the extent to which claimants can be seen as responsible for their own situation. The value justifying giving benefits on this basis is not reciprocity, but solidarity.

Alternatively, benefit recipients can be seen as people who have gained a 'right' to financial support. This right may come as a consequence of citizenship (for example, in the case of benefits for children) or as a consequence of a reciprocal transaction (for example, paying contributions). Here, the value of reciprocity ensures that the benefit is seen as an entitlement, rather than as an unreciprocated gift. Figure 1 attempts to set out this idea.

Returning to the concrete, we argue that, over time, benefit recipients in the UK have come to be seen as less deserving and less entitled, and therefore less likely to be able to escape stigma. To look at the extent to which claimants are seen as deserving, we examined public estimates of the proportion of people regarded as 'claiming falsely' or 'committing fraud'. We found that the public vastly overestimates these num-

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Figure 1: **Reciprocity and solidarity in action**



bers. This is confirmed in recent poll for the TUC, which found that ‘on average people think that 27 per cent of the welfare budget is claimed fraudulently, while the government’s own figure is 0.7 per cent.’⁴ But we also found that these misperceptions have been increasing over time. Looking at the British Social Attitudes Survey, we found that people are now more likely to say that claimants do not deserve help and that people in need are lazy.⁵

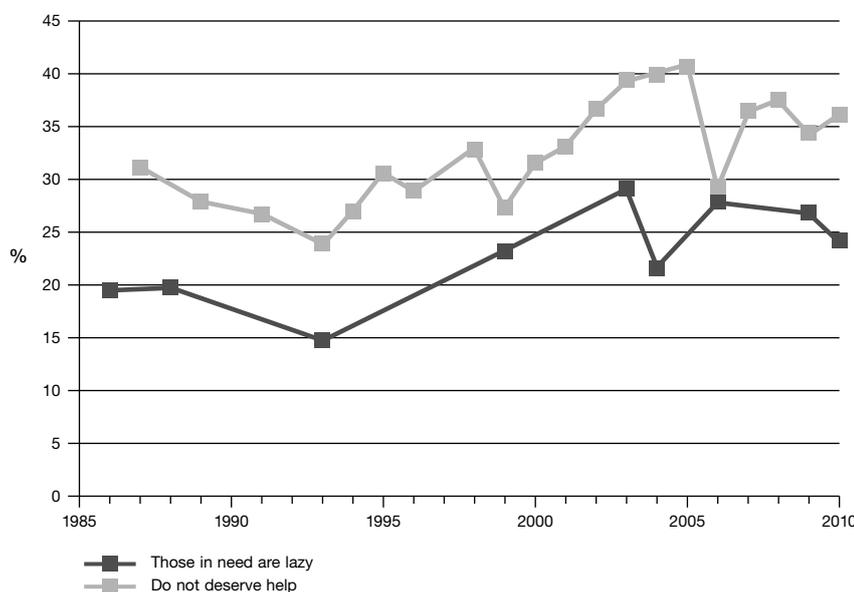
What has been driving this trend towards seeing claimants as less deserving? The media is often blamed for stigma in Britain, and our analysis of the coverage of benefits in national newspapers from 1995 to 2011 found that, while newspapers contained both positive and negative representations of claimants, the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations. There is also a particular focus on fraud, with the amount of coverage referencing fraud ranging from 39 to 21 per cent. Compare this again to the 0.7 per cent of benefit expenditure that goes on fraudulent claims. What is more, the percentage of negative coverage has increased in recent years, returning to levels last seen in the late 1990s. And finally, the amount of coverage referring to ‘non-reciprocity’ or to claimants failing to make an effort has also increased (see Figure 3). The study shows clear evidence of the rise of the scrounger discourse, culminating in the ‘skivers versus strivers’ language used in the current debate on the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill.

Should we just blame the media for the rise in the stigma attached to benefit receipt? We suggest not. As the reference to the Up-rating Bill makes clear, the media takes at least part its lead from politicians. Although tabloids publish a lot of stories about individual cases of benefit fraud based on prosecutions, the main source for stories about fraud is the policy process – statements from the government and opposition parties, parliamentary committees and organisations. It is arguable, therefore, that welfare policy and politics are more important than editorial policy in driving the high coverage of fraud overall.

We also know that media stories interact with people’s individual experiences, both of claiming benefits and of seeing people they know, or believe, to be doing so. Many focus group participants cited examples of people they believed were claiming fraudulently:

‘I worked for NACRO for a long a while, for a long time, and they got people there... their

Figure 2: **Popular perceptions of deservingness, 1985–2010**



Source: Data from British Social Attitudes Survey

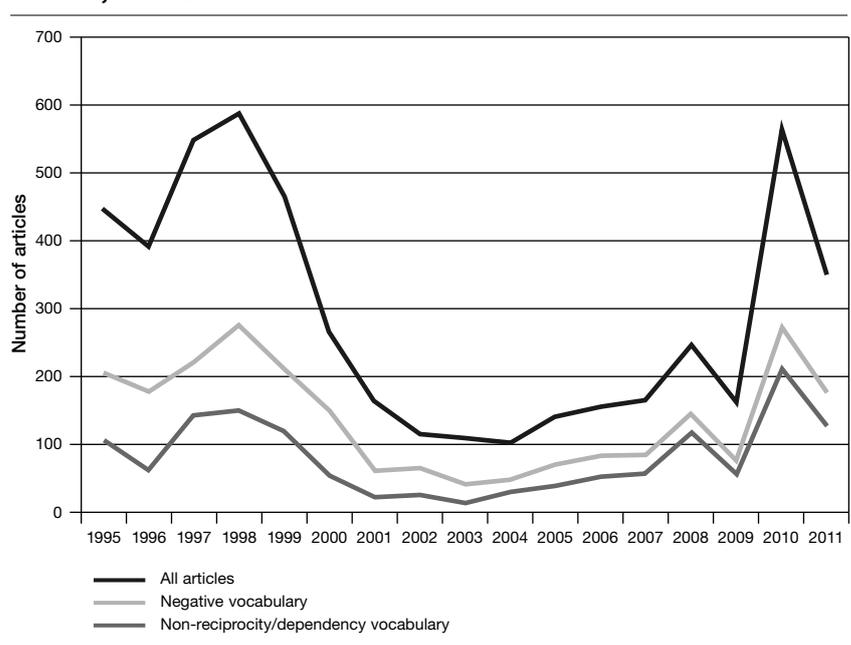
mother has been on the dole... and then suddenly the son has got a mental illness, you know what I mean, they know how to fill in every... The son's supposedly got learning difficulties, but they know how to fill in and scam every jobcentre, every benefit.'
(Graham, jobseeker's allowance group)

But we know that identifying 'deservingness' on casual acquaintance is difficult. Our MORI survey found that only one in five disabled people said their disability was usually 'obvious to anyone when they see me in the street'. Nearly twice as many said that people usually 'only know about my disability if I tell them'. We suggest in the report that the media provides a lens through which benefit recipients are viewed, and it is a lens that significantly distorts the true picture. We found support for this idea with evidence that people who read more stigmatising newspapers report higher levels of personal stigma, and perceive higher levels of fraud.

What should we do if we want to combat benefit stigma and return the social security system to one that reduces, rather than increases, the shame felt by those who lack economic resources? It is worth remembering that the existence of the system itself is a source of pride for many. A poll for Radio 4's examination of the 70th anniversary of the Beveridge Report found that 70 per cent thought that the welfare state was one of Britain's proudest achievements.⁶ But the design of this welfare state matters for the levels of stigma with which it is associated. We cite international evidence in the report that shows that universal and contributory benefits are less stigmatising than those requiring a means test. Even in less stigmatising countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, around two-thirds of people say that recipients of means-tested social assistance are 'looked down upon' – two to three times more than those saying the same thing about non-means-tested contributory unemployment benefit recipients.

The introduction of universal credit later this year provides an interesting test for the design of benefit systems. We found that tax credits, received by a wider spectrum of people than other means-tested benefits, were seen as less stigmatising (as they were explicitly designed to be). Perhaps by bringing together groups traditionally seen as 'deserving' (the in-work poor) and 'undeserving' (unemployed jobseeker's allowance recipients, for example), these distinctions will be harder to maintain under universal credit.

Figure 3: **Negative vocabulary in newspaper articles on working-age benefits, 1995–2011**



Perhaps most importantly, the report shows that political, media and public discourse has a strong influence on our beliefs about social security. If we want to tackle the stigma attached to claiming benefits and, by extension, to poverty, we need to convince politicians, the media and campaigners that the language used to talk about social security may be as important as the detail of the policies proposed. ■

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Benefits Stigma in Britain, by B Baumberg, K Bell and D Gaffney, 2012, is available from www.turn2us.org

- 1 Ruth Lister, 'No more of the poor', *The Guardian* accessed online at www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1352913,00.html
- 2 M Mauss, *The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Routledge, 1924 (1990)
- 3 T Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Penguin, 1981
- 4 TUC, 'Support for benefit cuts dependent on ignorance, TUC-commissioned poll finds', 2012, www.tuc.org.uk/social/tuc-21796-f0.cfm
- 5 British Social Attitudes Surveys are available at www.natcen.ac.uk/series/british-social-attitudes
- 6 BBC Radio 4, ComRes Welfare Poll, November 2012