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"Poor Carina" and "Lazy Robert": Social Constructions and the Mental Health of Welfare Clients

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Abstract

Politicians engage in, and the media reflects, socially constructions of welfare recipients as undeserving. Such efforts seek to change public opinion among the mass publics, but what are the effects on the target population receiving welfare benefits? Social construction and policy feedback theory suggest that negative messages can be internalized by target populations, while evidence from public health research shows that people experience psychological costs in response to some forms of stigma, such as racism. We empirically examine if undeserving messages affect the mental health of welfare recipients. To do so, we exploit both a quasi experiment entailing a dramatic shift in deservingness messaging after a welfare recipient in Denmark became the subject of a very public debate, and detailed administrative data on the consumption of anti-depressants by the welfare recipients. We find evidence that welfare recipients experienced worse mental health outcomes after being exposed to negative deservingness messaging.

Introduction

"There's a woman in Chicago. She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans' benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands," said Ronald Reagan. "And she's collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000" (New York Times, 1976).

Ronald Reagan made the welfare queen a central part of his presidential campaigns, a staple of his stump speech.[i] The phrase "welfare queen" became shorthand both for the idea of the undeserving poor, and the power of political messaging in embedding and exploiting such images to polarize and dismantle the welfare state (Hancock 2004). But what are the effects of such political messaging on the welfare recipients themselves? Such concerns become ever more pressing given the return of populist politics, of which a central feature is the demonization of some groups.

A variety of theoretical perspectives point to the importance of social constructions. Political communications points to the role of framing in shaping public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007; Slothuus 2008). Social construction theory proposes that the status of citizens is created through political discourse and policy design (Ingram and Schneider 2007), with significant consequences for policy outcomes. Policy feedback theory proposes that citizen state interactions teach lessons to citizens about their status (Mettler and Soss 2002; Bruch et al. 2010). Administrative burden theory draws from these traditions, proposing that state actions do not just make access to public services more onerous, but also impose psychological costs upon target populations (Herd and Moynihan 2018). We draw from these theoretical perspectives to examine if benefit recipients experience psychological costs when they are negatively construed as being undeserving of social welfare in the public debate. More specifically, we argue that social constructions according to which welfare clients are undeserving are likely to be felt as stigmatizing and in turn induce stress, anxiety, and depression among those who are the target of the constructions.

We study this question in the context of the Danish welfare system. The Danish case has a number of advantages in helping to causally isolate the effects of deservingness messaging on mental health. First, the nature of the case overcomes some of primary difficulties in asserting causal effects of deservingness messaging in a field setting. One challenge is that any particular message will be endogenous to the environment that creates it. For example, Reagan's "welfare queen" characterization is memorable, but occurred in a broader conservative characterization of welfare recipients, making it difficult to separate out the effects of a specific message from the broader milieu. Furthermore, tropes about the undeserving poor are so prevalent in many settings that it is difficult to assert that any particular political framing makes much marginal difference for beneficiaries. Another challenge is that deservingness messaging often coincides with other changes in the life situations of welfare recipients. For instance, large-scale reforms of welfare benefits signal changes in the deservingness of target groups but may also have a more direct impact in the mental wellbeing of such groups due to changes in benefit rates or accessibility to benefits. To separate out the effects of deservingness messaging requires an experiment where deservingness messaging achieves widespread dissemination and legitimacy in a way that is a substantial break from the past and where the messaging does not coincide with changes in

welfare caused by, for instance, reduced welfare benefits. Such examples are rare, but in 2011, the case of "Poor Carina," provided such an incident. "Carina" sparked criticism of Danish welfare recipients who were perceived as receiving excessively generous benefits while not seeking work. A politician at the center of the debate welcomed the case as a new opportunity to advance a more critical tone against the welfare state: "for a very long time it has been taboo to talk about the Carinas" (Daley 2013). Carina was followed by "Lazy Robert" an unemployed man who explicitly preferred welfare to low-income work. The "Poor Carina" and "Lazy Robert" cases were powerful: in their aftermath approximately four out of ten Danes changed their opinions on social assistance benefits, generally becoming less supportive (Hedegaard 2014), and framing of welfare recipients as undeserving became more prevalent in Danish media (Esmark and Schoop 2013).[ii]

The second and related value of studying a Danish case is that it generally represents a hard test of the question about whether demonizing welfare recipients has mental health effects. Denmark features a strong historical consensus support for a generous welfare state. Further, the case avoid the racialized context of the US welfare system. As Gilens notes in *Why Americans Hate Welfare* (2009, 68): "The most salient contemporary images of the poor – the homeless beggar, the welfare queen, the teenage ghetto gang member, the heroin addict shooting up in an abandoned building – are strongly associated with minorities in both the mass media and the public imagination." Third, we can observe the effects of political messaging by taking advantage of extraordinary administrative data not available elsewhere.

The empirical analysis estimates whether recipients of welfare benefits were more likely to receive anti-depressives (SSRI medication) in the aftermath of media coverage of the case. This is the first empirical test of the claim that negative social constructions created through deservingness messaging might deteriorate the mental wellbeing of target groups. As we note in the literature review there are a variety of literatures that raise effects of negative social constructions on target groups as a possibility though without explicitly linking the constructions to mental health. After reviewing this work, we draw on research in public health to establish such a link. We then summarize the case setting, and the data and methods, before presenting and reviewing the results.

Social Constructions of Welfare Clients

Several theories are based on the fundamental idea that certain groups of welfare clients are perceived as undeserving by political actors and the mass public, and that such perceptions are consequential to both how target populations are treated as well as their own behavior. The trope of the 'undeserving' poor goes back to the origins of the social welfare state, embedded, for example, in the English Poor Law system (Katz 1989; Somers and Block 2005). In social welfare policy, while older adults, the unemployed, and the sick and disabled are generally framed as "deserving", other groups in poverty are viewed more negatively, especially if they are viewed as able-bodied enough to resolve their state (Oorschot 2006). In short, the poor are blamed for their conditions; their poverty a function of inadequate effort rather than structural economic conditions (Haney 2002; Somers and Block 2005).

Social construction theory (Schneider and Ingram 1997) argues that constructions in the popular debate of social groups as being either deserving or undeserving are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and civic participation. Such social constructions help to explain "why some groups get benefits and others get burdens" (Schneider and Ingram, 1997, 3). Some groups are socially constructed as dependents: those with lower power, but who enjoy some empathy. They receive statements of sympathy, but in practice are provided inadequate benefits and may be subject to hidden burdens. Another category, the deviants, have both low power and receive little sympathy, making it difficult for them to claim even meagre benefits. In the social construction literature, deservingness messaging can affect the political orientation and participation of target populations, allowing for policy design to "feed forward" onto target populations, altering their understanding of self (Ingram et al., 2007).

The logic of social construction overlaps with framings of policy feedback theory, which suggests that policies reconstruct target populations partly through the provision of resources that provides reason for mobilization, as well as via the civic lessons that policies teach those they reach: "Policies convey messages about group characteristics directly to members of a target group and to a broader public audience. Treatment under a given policy can make a group appear powerful or weak, trustworthy or devious, morally virtuous or morally repugnant" (Mettler and Soss 2004, 61).

Social constructions are dynamic, and so deservingness messaging might succeed in converting dependents into deviants, by making claimants appear less sympathetic. To this end, stereotypes such as the welfare queen are powerful: they project the welfare claimant as part of a lazy and amoral out-group, paving the way for a less generous and more conditional welfare state (Gilens 2009; Hancock 2004). Such changes are possible, argue Schneider and Ingram (2005), in a variety of situations. This include significant events and skillful manipulation of those events by policy entrepreneurs.

Media portrayals reflect and reinforce notions of deservingness. For example, while blacks are the minority of those in poverty in the US, they occur more frequently in media coverage of the issue, and are more likely to be portrayed as non-working or even criminal (Gilens 1996; Clawson and Trice 2000). And there is evidence that deservingness messaging shapes public support or opposition to social welfare policy (Applebaum 2001; Kootstra 2016). For example, in the U.S., alterations in the wording of survey questions tap into the negative social constructions people have toward welfare recipients. The General Social Survey has asked, since 1972, whether "too little, too much, or just the right amount" is spent on a range of different social programs, asking separate questions about spending on "welfare" and on "assistance to the poor." While over time, 40 to 60 percent of people agreed that we spend too much on welfare, only about 10 percent say the same regarding assistance to the poor (GSS Data Explorer 2019). Similar findings apply in other countries. There is also evidence that perceptions of deservingness affect street level bureaucratic discretion when interacting with individuals seeking assistance (Schram et al. 2009; Bruch et al 2010; Altreiter and Leibetseder 2014; Jilke and Tummers 2018).

The Psychological Costs of Social Constructions

Social construction theory emphasizes the role of formal policy design, and how policies are conveyed. Policies send messages to people. Policy feedback theory puts more emphasis on the effects of resources received, as well as messages conveyed. Political communication theory treats such messaging about populations as forms of framing (Chong and Druckman 2007), designed to elicit a behavioral response. While the desired behavioral outcome is to move mass public opinion on welfare (Slothuus 2007), one potential additional outcome is a change in how target populations see themselves.

The question then is how and why the self-image of target populations might be affected by social constructions. Negatively construed groups may accept the constructions and, in the words of Schneider and Ingram (1993) "buy into the ideas that their problems are not public problems, that the goals that would be most important for them are not the most important for the public interest, and that government and policy are not remedies for them" (p. 344). In other words, negatively construed groups will tend to internalize negative beliefs and stereotypes.

From this perspective, deservingness framings such as "welfare queen" may have stigmatizing effects on target populations. Likewise, administrative burden theory (Herd and Moynihan 2018) proposes that citizens can experience psychological costs as they interact with the state. Psychological costs include the stigma of being associated with negative programs, experiences of loss of autonomy via disempowering processes, and stresses arising from the experience of administrative processes or the potential loss of benefits or rights. Stigma more broadly can be defined as "the co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination in a context in which power is exercised" (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, and Bruce 2013: 813). This definition corresponds very well with the concept of negative social constructions since negative social constructions depends very much upon processes of labeling, stereotyping, and status loss.

There is evidence from public health research that the experience of stigma is associated with lower mental health (Link and Phelan 2006; Mak et al. 2007) and might be a source of increased stress (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, and Bruce 2013). A key assumption about stigma is that it is 'internalized' (Corrigan and Watson 2002; Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). A meta-analysis found that stigma, linked to conditions ranging from disability and obesity to gender and race, negatively affected mental health (Mak et al. 2007, see also Pietersen et al 2012 on race). Interestingly, the results were more robust in studies conducted in Europe than in North America. A key limitation to this work, however, is that these studies typically are not based on experimental designs but rather feature associations.

Within the social welfare literature, however, there is limited evidence as to the psychological impact of 'undeservingness'. Indeed, the largely qualitative literature argues that target populations may simultaneously resist and concur with such frames, accepting that welfare recipients are undeserving, but regarding themselves as 'exceptions' to the rule (Bullock 2006; Rank 1994). Such defensive reactions might offer a protective psychological mechanism that allows people to participate in welfare programs but avoid a sense of personal stigma. If so, deservingness messaging should have limited psychological costs.

In sum, while a number of literatures emphasize the importance of deservingness messaging, there is little evidence on whether target populations internalize it. Public health research gives reason to believe that negative framing can be internalized, but social welfare literature suggests that recipients might employ protective psychological mechanisms to avoid internalization. There is, therefore, a need for research in which robust causal conclusions can be drawn outside the lab on this topic.

The Case Setting: Poor Carina

Beliefs about target populations are conveyed by using stereotyped individuals to establish and exploit heuristics about a broader group (whether or not the stereotype of the individual is more broadly representative). In the context of welfare, the media and political actors can exploit a deservingness heuristic – widely-agreed upon beliefs that certain attributes makes one more or less deserving of welfare support. In the context of unemployment policies, frames typically associated with constructing an undeserving population are lack of motivation and amoral behavior (Esmark and Schoop 2017). The criteria for deciding whether target groups are deserving recipients of welfare include the extent to which people are seen as responsible for their own situation (the control criterion), their need (the need criterion), their proximity to the rich (the identity criterion), their attitudes to and gratefulness for support (the attitude criterion), and the extent to which they have earned support (the reciprocity criterion) (Van Oorschot 2000: 36). Any criterion may be used in frames to construct the deservingness of target groups.

To test our proposition that negative social construction may affect the mental health of target group members, we need a case where a significant change has happened in the perceived deservingness of target groups and where this change does not coincide with other important changes in living conditions of the encompassed target groups. We therefore turn to a media incident, known in Denmark as the "Poor Carina" case. The case centers on the deservingness of unemployed recipients of Danish social assistance benefits (kontanthjælp).

On November 28th 2011, a 36-year old single mother given the pseudonym of Carina was visited by two members of the Danish parliament. A representative of the Socialist People's Party, at that time part of the government coalition in Denmark, had sought out Carina as an example of someone who was on benefits but was still needy. Her counterpart from the Liberal Alliance opposition party was part of a movement that argued for a new formal definition of poverty, and had argued that no-one on welfare was truly poor. As details of Carina's case was debated between the two politicians on national television, it became harder to sustain that Carina was poor in an absolute sense. She was earning about $2,700 per month after tax including subsidized housing which was far above the official OECD poverty limit.

Carina's stated lack of desire to engage in employed work, her ungratefulness for benefits, and higher disposable income than some groups of people in low-income jobs touched upon some key criterion by which deservingness are established. The backlash picked on details such as her flat-screen TV, her use of cigarettes, and her reluctance to ask her family for support. Several examples appeared in the media of people in full time work with lower disposable incomes. On welfare since 16 and hoping to be awarded disability benefits because of anxiety, Carina was

compared unfavorably to the working poor. The nickname "Poor Carina" was intended to be ironic. Even those who argued for the welfare state, including the MP who had chosen Carina as an example, conceded she was not truly poor, and that her case reflected problems in the welfare system. The Minister of Social Affairs at the time said: "Many Danes need to seriously re-address their own value system and again take a pride in managing in their own lives. We have to stop considering society as a 'smorgasbord' that we don't need to contribute to, and that's a debate I'd like to see high on the social welfare agenda."[iii] The Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt said: "It is absolutely not one of the successes of the welfare state if a person has been on cash welfare benefits for 20 years – quite the opposite."[iv]

Carina had some defenders, given her status as a single parent. The same could not be said of Robert Nielsen, a 45-year-old man who was interviewed on Danish television the following September. Unlike Carina, Nielsen did not shield his identity. Rather, he seemed to revel in the public attention. He described himself a "lazy bastard" and the name "Lazy Robert" stuck. Nielsen had been on welfare for over a decade and explicitly rejected the idea that he should work in a low-income job he considered demeaning: "Luckily, I am born and live in Denmark, where the government is willing to support my life" (Daley 2013). At the time, the Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning Smith responded by saying: 'if there are people like 'Lazy Robert' out there, then there will be stricter requirements for such "Lazy Roberts"' (Søndberg, 2012, 7).

"Lazy Carina" and "Poor Robert" became tropes, widely familiar in Denmark, and generating unprecedented public discussion of the deservingness of welfare claimants (Daley 2013). The incidents were certainly not the sole basis for public discussion about welfare. Indeed, the whole point of the Carina visit was to inform a broader debate about poverty measures. But they transformed and personalized the framing of welfare recipients in a way that dry discussions about absolute and relative poverty measures or changing demographics could not. Carina and Robert became representative examples in that they captured a stereotype that people could easily recall when considering welfare, even if they were not representative of the actual welfare population.

The two cases changed how Danes viewed the welfare state. Prior to the cases, 23 percent of respondents in a two-wave panel study said that the Danish welfare state spends too much on social assistance, while after the cases this number increased to 29 percent. There was also a four point increase in the number of people who expressed uncertainty about the right approach. While the drop in support was small in the aggregate, it facilitated polarization on the topic, with people interpreting the cases to fit with their pre-existing biases. People with more anti-egalitarian values developed stronger opposition to the welfare system (Hedegaard 2014). There was also a clear spike in media discussions of social assistance after the cases became public (Hedegaard 2014). Not only was there more attention to the topic, the tone of the coverage changed, reflecting the growing narrative of undeserving claimants. A cross-time analysis of Danish media coverage of welfare issues (which itself directly reflects political attitudes and statements) found markedly higher reliance on tropes of undeservingness in 2013 relative to a previous discussion of welfare reform in 2005. In 2005, there was about equal use of language to convey deservingness and undeservingness, but in 2013, undeservingness language was twice as prevalent as deservingness frames (Esmark and Schoop 2017).

None of this tells us much about how welfare recipients experienced the deservingness messaging around Carina and Robert, with the exception that Hedegard's (2014) panel study in which he finds that those who were likely to be more dependent on welfare were less likely to be have their attitudes towards the generosity of the welfare state affected by the cases. In this respect, the target population resisted political messaging, but as Hedegard points out, it is in their interest to do so, and so we are left none the wiser about whether they internalized the negative framing of their status.

In the analysis that follows, we focus on the effects of the Carina case. We take this approach for two reasons. First, the Carina case preceded the Lazy Robert case. The scale and novelty of the coverage compelled welfare recipients to update their beliefs about how they were viewed by politicians, the media, and society more broadly. For the Lazy Robert case, coming less than a year later, there was an obvious precedent in the Carina case, and less reason to update beliefs because the Carina case had already demonstrated widespread criticism to a somewhat more sympathetic figure. Second, the Lazy Robert case coincided with the passing of legislation that had a direct impact on the size of social assistance benefits, and this making it hard to isolate the impact of messaging associated with Robert from changes in actual resources available to recipients as a result of policy change.

Data and Methods[v]

Data Source

To test the effects of changes in the social construction of social assistance recipient deservingness, we use individual level register data collected by Statistics Denmark on Danish social assistance benefit recipients in the year of 2011 and compare the trend in the outcome variable to the trend in previous years. Permission to use the data for this study was granted by Statistics Denmark, the Danish Data Protection Agency, and the Danish Health Data Agency. The anonymized data can only be accessed on a password protected server managed by Statistics Denmark.

Outcome Variable

Given our interest in the consequences of negative social constructions on mental health and prior evidence that stigma can induce stress (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, and Bruce 2013), our analysis estimates whether social assistance recipients were more likely to receive anti-depression medication in the aftermath of the Carina TV interview. Specifically, we focus on whether recipients were more likely to receive anti-depressives of the types N05 and N06 in the Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical Classification (ATC) System. These drugs include the so-called SSRI-drugs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors drugs) which are widely used to combat symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. In Denmark, this kind of medication is prescribed by general practitioners based on medical assessments. Access to general practitioners is free of charge in Denmark.[vi] Each Dane is attached to a general practitioner and can book time for services in the consultation hours of the general practitioner.

Establishing the Time Series

To study how social assistance recipients are affected by the Carina case, we focus on people who received benefits both prior to and after each of the media incident. Since the "Poor Carina" incident took place November the 28th 2011 and since new rules on social assistance benefits came into effect as of January 1st, 2012 (BEK no. 190 2012), we have to limit our analysis to the time period before January 1st 2012 to obtain an estimate which is unaffected by the implementation of the new rules. We therefore study the impact of the media incident by examining changes in medical prescriptions in a time frame from four weeks before to four weeks after the incident. One drawback of this strategy is that the debate about the poor Carina case continued in the media for several weeks and months. Limiting our focus to the short-term effects by only examining the four weeks immediately after the event means that we are presumably unable to get at the full scale of the effects on a longer run.

We generated a time series coding on a weekly basis for each individual in our data set whether anti-depressants were prescribed to them. Thus, each observation contains information on the number of prescriptions of anti-depressants in a given week for each recipient of social assistance benefits. Since we are interested in whether anti-depressants were prescribed rather than the number of times this happened, we recode the outcome variables to dummy variables taking the value 1 if the medication was prescribed and 0 if not.

Since November the 28th was a Monday, the time series was organized such that each week in the dataset begins on a Tuesday, ensuring that the first post-interview week begins the day after the airing of the "Poor Carina" interview.

Estimation strategy

Our identification strategy exploits variation in outcomes before and after the media incident, treating the incident as a relatively exogenous event that has the potential to alter how welfare recipients see themselves. Still, even if the event is exogenous, a pure interrupted time series design is insufficient to deal with seasonal trends in stress and health related problems. Moreover, we cannot rely on a regression discontinuity design. While the date of the interview on the one hand creates an as-if exogenous condition, random fluctuations and the fact that some people may not respond immediately to stress makes this design less ideal for our purposes. To deal with these issues, we therefore turn to a design with comparative interrupted times series. The logic of the design resembles that of a difference-in differences (DiD-design).

We compare the difference in outcomes before-after the media incident for the treatment group (i.e., those who received benefit recipients) with the difference in placebo groups to examine whether possible changes in the outcome variable differ between recipients of benefits and the placebo group as we would expect.

The difference in trends between the treatment and placebo group can then be ascribed to the media incident if a) the media incident did not coincide with other major events of relevance to either the treatment or placebo group that could plausibly lead to mental health deterioration, b) the placebo group was not plausibly affected by the media incident, and c) the treatment and placebo groups exhibit approximately parallel trends in the outcome variable prior to the media incident.

We rely on two different strategies to create placebo groups that live up to these criteria – both assuming an immediate impact of the interview. First, we compare the trend over the eight week period in the treatment group to the trend in the same eight weeks in placebo groups consisting of the same individuals as in the treatment group but just observed in the years 2007-2010. This strategy builds on the fact that the individuals could not have been affected by the "Poor Carina" interview in previous years and it enables us to reduce noise considerably by exploiting a fully balanced panel. However, a disadvantage of this strategy is that it does not allow us to control for events that were specific for the year 2011. For instance, the weather or other circumstances unrelated to the media incident may influence results and create differences between 2011 and previous years.

Second, we therefore supplement our analysis with another placebo group analysis in which we compare the treatment group with a placebo group of non-recipients of social assistance benefits. A solid match on background characteristics is unlikely in this case. Instead, the second placebo analysis therefore focuses on a group of individuals who used to receive social assistance benefits 1.5-0.5 years before the "Poor Carina" interview but who did not receive these benefits within the last half year leading up to the "Poor Carina" interview or in the four weeks following the interview. We use prior recipients of social assistance benefits in the placebo group to increase comparability between the treatment and placebo group and to ensure parallel trends in outcomes prior to the interview.

For both placebo analyses, we use a simple interaction term between the treatment variable and a dummy denoting whether the week in question is before or after the date of the "Poor Carina" – interview. Positive and statistically significant interaction coefficients is evidence that coverage of the incident increased the use of anti-depressants among welfare recipients.

Analysis

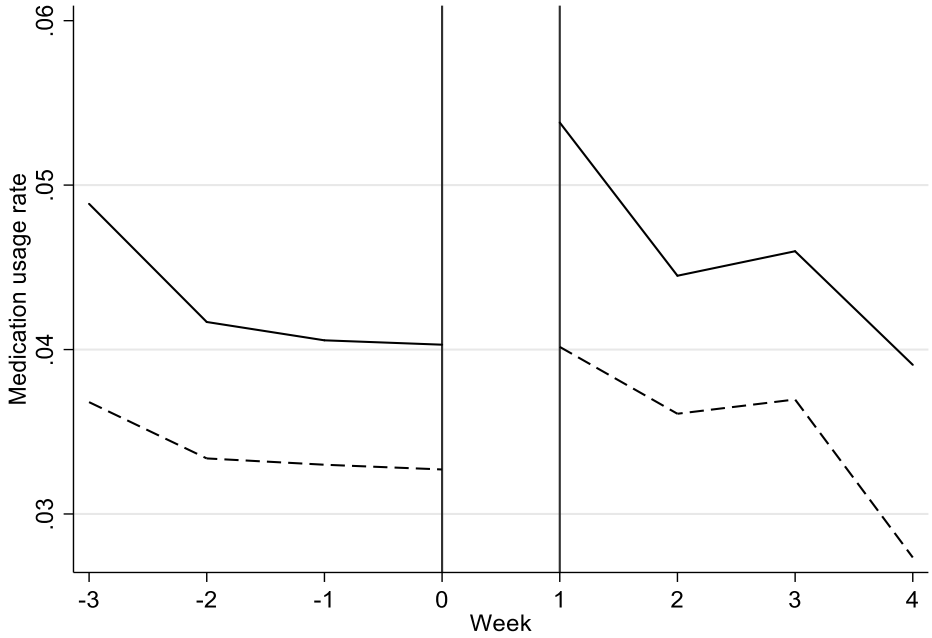
Placebo analysis 1: Comparing treated individuals with themselves in previous years
For individuals in the treatment group, we limit the analysis to include only those who received social assistance benefits in all eight weeks in our time frame and who were not part of any education or job training program during this period. This amounts to a total of 101,328 individuals who are observed over eight weeks in five different years. Thus the analysis is based on more than 4 million observations in total. In robustness analyses, we obtain similar results, even if we use more flexible approaches where, for instance we include individuals even if they only received benefits in one or more of the weeks after the TV interview.

Figure 1 presents the trend in outcome variables in the treatment group (the year 2011) and the placebo group (2007-2010). The "Poor Carina" interview was conducted the very last day of "week 0" and thus we should focus mainly on comparing the difference between the two trend lines before and after this point in time.

One first observation is that trends in outcomes before the interview indeed are very alike. Another thing to notice is that the difference between the trend curves generally seems to be larger in the weeks 1-4 than in the weeks -3-0, indicating that the incident indeed brought about a

relative increase in medication usage in the treatment group. A further thing to notice is that this increase seems quite stable over all four weeks after the incident. As is evident from Figure 1, the difference in trends estimator is overall statistically significant. From a substantive point of view, the effect is weak: In the treatment group the weekly likelihood of receiving anti-depressives increases by 0.3 percentage points in the treatment group and 0.1 percentage points in the placebo group amounting to a 0.2 percentage points larger increase in the treatment group. This may be unsurprising given that we examine very severe and relatively rare (on a population-level) outcomes and given that we study the effects in a very short time span after the TV interview took place. Also it should be kept in mind that this is measured on a weekly basis and thus the total difference over the full period amounts to 0.8 percentage points.

Figure 1: Usage of anti-depressants in treatment and placebo (2007-2010) groups.



Note: Solid line = 2011 (treatment group); Dashed line = 2007-2010 (placebo group). Horizontal lines added to indicate difference between weeks before and after TV interview.

Table 1: Difference in difference estimators with different placebo comparisons

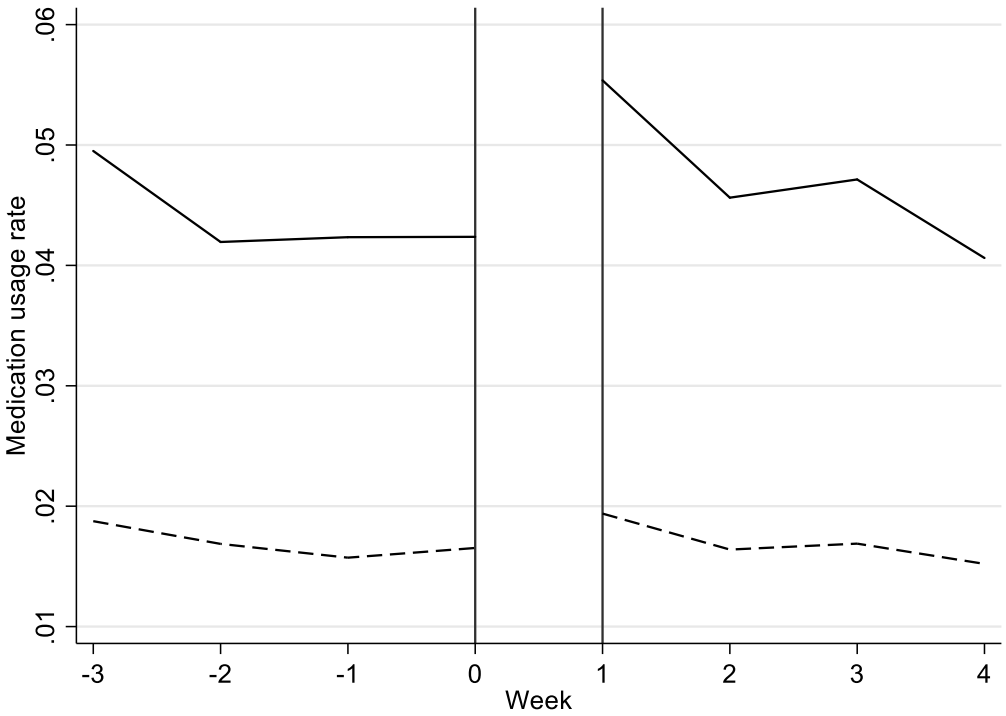
Placebo group	2007-2010	2010 only	2009 only	2008 only	2007 only
After date of interview (dummy)	0.04 (0.00)**	0.07 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**	-0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Treatment group (dummy)	0.24 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.01)	0.20 (0.01)**	0.31 (0.01)**	0.48 (0.01)**
After date X treatment group	(0.04) (0.01)**	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.09 (0.01)**	0.07 (0.01)**

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients. Individual cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. **: $p < 0.001$

Moreover, if we compare the trend in the treatment year 2011 to only one of the placebo years 2007-2010 at a time rather than the treatment years combined, we only identify statistically significant differences in trends for the comparisons with the years 2007 and 2008 (see Table 1) thus causing some concern about the robustness of our results.

Placebo analysis 2: Comparing treated individuals with non-treated individuals
The second placebo analysis produces an increase of 0.3 percentage points in the treatment group as compared to a 0.0 percentage point increase over the exact same eight weeks among the placebo group consisting of prior recipients of social assistance benefits. Overall, this analysis thus lends support to the proposition that the interview led to increased usage of anti-depressants among the target population. As can be seen from figure 2, however, trends prior to the date of the TV-interview are not completely parallel and thus conclusions should be drawn with some caution here as well.

Figure 2: Usage of anti-depressants in treatment and placebo (prior recipients) groups.



Note: Solid line = Treatment group; Dashed line = Placebo group (prior recipients). Horizontal lines added to indicate difference between weeks before and after TV interview.

Discussion - *To be extended!*

Our preliminary findings provides evidence for the claim that deservingness messaging is internalized by target populations. Specifically, in the four weeks after the "Poor Carina" coverage, welfare recipients became more likely to increase their use of stress/anxiety-reducing medication. Relative to subjective self-reports of mental health, the findings provide objective

indicators that recipients felt sufficiently motivated to seek out medical health, and that medical professionals felt their condition warranted additional prescription medication.

A couple of cautions should be mentioned. First, the substantive effect sizes are limited. This is unsurprising bearing in mind the limited variation on the dependent variable. It is also the case that we examine an extreme indicator of psychological costs, the consumption of anti-depressants. We do not know how many more experienced milder negative psychological effects. Furhermore, it is relevant to mention that effect sizes are large enough to affect hundreds of people's lives even though we only examine a very short time frame. Another concern has to do with the fact that while we identify significant effects in most placebo analysis, we actually do not find significant effects when comparing 2011 with either of the two previous years.

Overall, our results extend research on social constructions, administrative burden, and policy feedback by demonstrating that some of the implications sometimes suggested to follow in the footsteps of policies targeted the poor may also be relevant for media incidents. Moreover, it speaks to research on (deservingness) framing by adding an important behavioral component.

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[i] The "welfare queen" in question was Linda Taylor. Reagan exaggerated some of the details, but her story was both darker and less representative than Reagan portrayed. Taylor did engage in welfare fraud, and did indeed drive a Cadillac and wear a fur and expensive jewels as Reagan suggested. Welfare fraud appeared to be the least of her crimes, which likely included child trafficking, kidnapping, and murder. While this information would not have been available to Reagan at the time, it undercuts the idea she was in some sense representative of a broader welfare population. One of her own lawyers described her as "a scam artist like I have never run across since." In one particular irony for the unspoken implication by Reagan that Taylor was black, she is recorded as white as a child in the census (Levin 2013).

[ii] In this paper, we only study the poor Carina case but we plan to include the Lazy Robert case at a later stage.

[iii] https://uniavisen.dk/en/poor-carina-only-dkk-15000-a-month/

[iv] http://cphpost.dk/news/politics/poverty-media-stunt-backfires.html

[v] While we did not formally pre-register, our hypotheses and design were explicitly proposed in a funding proposal to the Horizons 2020 program before the analysis was undertaken.

[vi] There are a few exceptions to this general rule. For instance, certain types of vaccines are charged.