

# How Benefits Recipients Perceive Themselves Through the Lens of the Mass Media - Some Observations from Germany

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## Abstract

Dominant cultural representations of 'the typical benefits recipient' – notably in reality television and the tabloids – have been marked by an increasing focus on the character and alleged moral defects of individuals. Drawing on interviews from a large-scale German qualitative longitudinal study, this article explores how benefits recipients respond to such negative media images. Our analysis of interviewees' 'identity work' finds that they have internalised and replicate negative public discourses to a surprising extent. The figure of the 'typical' benefits recipient constructed in the media emerges as both a threat to recipients' self-identities, and as a central reference point in the strategies through which they attempt to defend their respectability. The article concludes with some thoughts on the relationship between such negative representations and the political legitimacy of welfare reform.

**Keywords:** *Benefits Recipients, Welfare Reform, Hartz IV, Stigma, Respectability, Media*

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## Introduction

- 1.1 Channel 4's 'Benefits Street' is exemplary of a type of media representation central to public debates on poverty and welfare throughout Europe. Blaming the poor accompanies the implementation of neoliberal welfare reforms, like Universal Credit in the UK or the German 'Hartz' reforms. Reflecting their common roots in the 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998), recent reforms in both countries share a focus on making access to benefits conditional on behavioural compliance, activation measures, and harsher sanctions (Dingeldey 2007). Media representations of welfare recipients that reinforce the moralised image of the 'undeserving' poor arguably serve an essential function with respect to such punitive reforms, conferring plausibility on their approach and giving them moral legitimacy (Somers & Block 2005). But very little is known about the impact of such cultural representations on welfare recipients themselves. This paper contributes to filling this gap by exploring how benefits recipients respond to what can arguably be seen as a new 'common sense' (Hall *et al.* 2013) on welfare articulated by the media. The focus here is on Germany since the 'Hartz IV' reforms (2005), but interesting parallels can be drawn with the British case.

### The policy context: 'Hartz IV'

- 2.1 The reforms to the German labour market and benefits system culminating in the Acts on Modern Labour Market Services – commonly known as the 'Hartz' Laws<sup>[1]</sup> – mark an institutional and normative repositioning of the unemployed in the German welfare state. 'Hartz IV', as the new Social Code II (SGB II) is known, combined benefits for the long-term unemployed (*Arbeitslosenhilfe*) with social assistance (*Sozialhilfe*) into a single, more stringently means-tested benefit, reduced entitlements to unemployment insurance, lowered the standards for 'reasonable' offers of employment, and introduced a spate of 'activation' measures directed at moving people out of the benefits system into a newly deregulated labour market. The reforms marked a final

departure from the insurance logic (Mau 2004) underlying the traditional conservative model of social citizenship, which aimed to preserve achieved social status and standards of living (Fleckenstein 2008). There unemployment and incapacity were treated as social risks from which individuals were to be safeguarded, by entering a community of risk sharing.

2.2 'Hartz IV', by contrast, enacts the assumption that unemployment is in the first instance a matter of individual responsibility, rather than of structural or demand-side problems. Recipients of 'Hartz IV' are no longer designated as 'unemployed', but are legally defined as those 'capable of employment entitled to assistance' (*erwerbsfähige Leistungsberechtigte*). 'Hartz IV' recipients are thus implicitly presented as capable of but – so it is implied – unwilling to enter employment, and hence to 'make a contribution' to society (Haylett 2001). This places the working-age poor under generalised moral suspicion – of being unable or unwilling to 'take responsibility', of having faulty motivations or values, or of being 'scroungers' (Brettschneider 2008: 47). Following the guiding principle of 'Fördern' (supporting) and 'Fordern' (demanding individual effort from jobseekers) (§2 and 14 SGB II), 'Hartz IV' measures seek to develop individual employability, which involves addressing alleged deficiencies in individuals' values and motivation directed at (even precarious) employment. This brings the German system more in line with the UK's 'liberal' welfare system, both in terms of concrete policies centred on activation and conditionality (Seeleib-Kaiser & Fleckenstein 2007) and in terms of its underlying normative expectations (Mau 2003, 2004). Rather than being perceived as 'threatened persons', the unemployed and poor are now considered 'threatening persons'.

### Cultural representations of welfare recipients in Germany

3.1 This shift is reflected in the language of official government reports and public statements by senior politicians. Gerhard Schröder, then chancellor, set the scene for the reforms with the comment that there was no 'right to laziness' in the German welfare state (Schröder 2001). A 2005 ministerial report presenting plans to combat 'abuses, "rip-offs", and self-service' in the welfare state explicitly accused recipients of unemployment benefits of a 'free-rider mentality'. The minister for the economy and labour at the time, Wolfgang Clement, compared fraudulent claimants to 'parasites' (BMWA 2005). Such comments represent the unemployed and benefits recipients through a lens of radical alterity, and construct a sharp symbolic divide between 'hard-working tax payers' and 'lazy' welfare recipients, in a manner similar to David Cameron's (2012) claim to have 'lost count of the number of people who've said: "I go to work early in the morning and on the way I pass neighbours with their curtains closed, lying in because they've chosen to live on benefits."' In the context of a welfare state under pressure, satisfying the allegedly unreasonable demands of benefits recipients is presented as a luxury society can no longer afford (Haylett 2001: 49).

3.2 Media representations of the poor, especially of those receiving welfare benefits, dovetail with such political discourses, providing images and 'evidence' to back up the ideological representations in the political arena (Fairclough 1999). The label of 'Hartz IV' is widely used as an expression of contempt (cf. Lawler 2005: 802), similar to the term 'Chav' in the UK (Jones 2011). Like 'Chavs', 'Hartz IV' recipients appear in the dominant (media) discourse as lazy, bad parents, and excessive consumers marked by poor taste. Reality TV programmes like 'Gnadenlos gerecht – Sozialfahnder ermitteln' ('Mercilessly fair – the welfare detectives investigate'; Sat.1) focus attention on benefits fraud: the 'welfare detectives', employees of a social welfare office, articulate the 'righteous' indignation of a taxpaying majority, which has to defend itself from 'scroungers'. In 'Familien im Brennpunkt' ('Families in problem areas'; RTL), a popular daytime television programme, amateur actors present fictional storylines centring on dramatic family conflicts, bad parenting, teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, and poverty in a way that simulates heightened authenticity. There are clear parallels in style and content between such formats and British programmes like 'Benefits Street' (Channel 4), 'We All Pay Your Benefits' (BBC), or 'Benefits Britain 1949' (Channel 4). Such programmes focus on the alleged moral deficiencies of their subjects, sometimes subjected to transformative interventions. The fact that many amateur actors come from a similar background as the characters they portray contributes to this blurring of the boundaries between media constructions and reality.

3.3 Such reality and pseudo-reality formats can be understood as confronting 'Hartz IV' recipients with a symbolic challenge. They position recipients as members of a socially and morally deviant 'underclass' (Chassé 2009; cf. Noite 2004 for an example of the use of this category on the German right).<sup>[2]</sup> Simultaneously, the 'Hartz IV' system itself arguably demands that individuals present themselves as proactive, work-oriented individuals (cf. Woolford & Nelund 2013). In line with the language of the 'Third Way' (Haylett 2001) – a discourse shared between Britain and Germany –, they are called to take 'personal responsibility' for their situation, as reflected in a shared statement by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder (1999), which stressed the need to 'transform the safety

net of entitlements into a springboard to personal responsibility.' Following Skeggs (2004, 2009), the challenge facing individual recipients of 'Hartz IV' can thus be described as that of having to engage in self-legitimation and self-performance in a setting where they are inscribed as deficient subjects.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Researching images of welfare: data and methods

- 4.1 To investigate how such dominant cultural representations of the poor are interpreted and negotiated by welfare recipients, this paper draws on data from a large-scale qualitative longitudinal study (Neale 2011) conducted by the German Federal Employment Agency's Institute for Employment Research (IAB) since 2007.<sup>[4]</sup> Entitled 'Poverty Dynamics and Labour Market – Origins, Stabilisation, and Exits from the Benefits System', the study traced 'Hartz IV' recipients' everyday experiences of the welfare system, (employment) biographies and conceptions of social structure through semi-structured, biographical-narrative interviews. It comprises four waves of interviews with around 150 respondents in or at the margins of the benefits system, including low-income earners receiving top-up benefits, individuals who exited the benefits system over the course of the study, as well as the short- and long-term unemployed (cf. Hirsland 2013 for details of panel design).
- 4.2 Where possible, interviews took place in respondents' homes and were audio-recorded. Participants received €25 to thank and compensate them for their time and expenses. However, wanting to tell their stories seemed at least as important a motive for continued participation. In recognition of the fact that the study involved vulnerable individuals subject to routine institutionalised scrutiny, great care was taken to ensure informed consent. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, particularly in relation to the welfare authorities. This was particularly important given the detailed information about respondents' lives revealed over the course of up to four interviews in the context of an increasingly familiar interviewer/respondent relationship (Corden & Millar 2007). The high levels of trust established between interviewers and participants also helped to prevent the situational definition of the interviews from merely replicating the moral challenges that recipients face in their interactions with the welfare administration; many in fact appeared to value the interviews as a positive space in which they were free to reflect on their situation and biographies (Bohrbeck 2014).
- 4.3 Interview transcripts were coded using a mixture of deductive and inductive strategies. The aim was to understand how benefits recipients engage with, resist, strategically adopt or even internalise public discourses in the interviews, understood as settings for 'self-performance' (Skeggs 2004: 80), and attempt to construct positive self-identities in the lights of their negative 'discursive positioning' (Davies & Harré 1990). Initial coding themes were drawn from the literature on discourses on welfare, and from reflexions on how 'Hartz IV recipients' are presented in the German media. At the same time, the coding process remained open to contrasting moments emerging from respondents' spontaneous utterances and relevancies, which were captured using open coding. This paper reflects on a selection of characteristic passages where respondents made reference to media representations of 'Hartz IV'.

## Appeals to media representations: the spectre of the 'typical Hartz IV recipient'

- 5.1 Questions concerning public representations of 'Hartz IV recipients' were not generally introduced into discussions by interviewers. Nonetheless, the (scripted) 'reality' of 'Hartz IV' and poverty constructed in the media emerged as an important point of reference for those who themselves receive welfare benefits. A large majority of respondents demonstrate tacit knowledge of these negative images of the 'typical' 'Hartz IV' recipient; many make explicit reference to the 'the people you see on TV', 'media images', and 'talk shows'. Throughout the interviews, respondents refer to the 'typical Hartz IV recipient [...] who sits at home because he says to himself, "I am not going to work for peanuts"' (Mrs Klein). They react to and position themselves in relation to such images, reproducing these perspectives on welfare recipients and the underlying normative orientations in the process.
- 5.2 The 'typical' Hartz IV recipient is accepted to be someone who is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for changing their situation:

'So I once watched a talk show, and there was a guy, he was meant to work for €1.50 and says, he is above working for €1.50<sup>[5]</sup>. What's that supposed to mean? [...] it really ticks me off [...] I also used to...But now, I say, it may just be for €1.50, but I work, I am doing something.' (Mrs Kohl)

- 5.3 In her condemnation of the talk show participant, Mrs Kohl echoes the social demand that a benefits recipient must not feel to be above *any* form of 'employment', even the pseudo-employment of '€1 Jobs'. This reflects a normative expectation that individuals should value work apart from its financial rewards, an extra-economic notion of work as virtue (Haylett 2001: 48-49).

5.4 Interestingly, the frequent references to the 'scrounger' type are rarely rooted within respondents' immediate personal experience but rather within the media, notably 'reality' shows on private daytime television:

'...the only thing I condemn is, when they show such cases on TV: a five-person family can't make do with the Hartz IV rates and the mother cries "[...] we can only have pasta at the end of the month". Yes. But [...] where they both sat on such a grimy corner seat – I find those disgusting anyway, corner seats – [...] each of them had two tins in front of them: a tin of tobacco, a tin of filters, and there they were rolling, smoking during the interview [...] But they don't buy something decent to eat for the kids: that, I condemn.' (Mrs Schmidt)

5.5 Mrs Schmidt unquestioningly accepts the representation of a 'Hartz IV' family's poverty as rooted in moral decay. Her account draws on tropes central to the 'underclass' discourse (Murray 1990): bad parenting, child neglect, and unhealthy consumption as indicated by heavy smoking, a habit in contravention to middle-class values of healthy living (Williams 1995).

5.6 The truth of the media representations of benefits recipients on which such strategies of symbolic distancing draw is generally not questioned by respondents. In fact, it is arguably not important, as long as the image of the 'typical' 'Hartz IV' recipient functions as a shared point of reference to present *oneself* as different.

'... as I said, the cliché of the jobless person who sits in the pub all day is circulating, but I think there aren't many of those anymore. Hm, there are people who, I know based on hearsay, that there are people who really enjoy being unemployed, sleeping in till 11 every day, and doing nothing at all, but I am not one of those, well.' (Mr Eichinger)

5.7 The 'spectre' of the lazy unemployed, rooted in hearsay, cliché and appeals to an assumed common sense, is hard to pin down and hence becomes difficult to falsify. It materialises in the media, thereby becoming a shared reality.

### Identity work: media images as threat and resource

6.1 To the extent that the 'typical Hartz IV' has become part of a new common sense, the image is both a challenge to benefits recipients' self-identities and a discursive resource (Jamont & Molnar 2002: 168) they mobilise in their defence. As Mr Martin, another respondent puts it, being 'lumped together' with such 'black sheep'<sup>[6]</sup> constitutes a threat to respondents' moral integrity. Purely in virtue of their shared status as benefits recipients, respondents fear that they are seen to belong with such 'bad' benefits recipients:

'That is the difficulty, because [...] towards the others, towards the rest of society, I can never reveal myself, I can never say 'hey you, I am on benefits. I am just the same [...] as the junkie or the criminal or the anti-social.'" (Mr Engel)

6.2 Being a benefits recipient is a form of 'spoiled identity' in Goffman's (1963) sense. Respondents recognise that in virtue of their institutional positioning, they are difficult to distinguish from those 'bad' others, and assume that others see them through the lens of the negative cultural type. They hence see themselves accused of the irresponsibility, laziness, and bad character associated with it. This moral accusation, as well as the demands of 'responsibilisation' in the welfare state (Lessenich 2008; cf. Clarke 2005 with reference to New Labour reforms), constantly challenge benefits recipients to account for their behaviour and position. Since they are represented as living at the expense of the 'decent taxpayer', recipients see themselves as having to answer for themselves not only within the institutional structures of the benefits system itself but also towards society at large:

'And that is just the bad thing. And with Hartz IV it is just like that: You constantly have to justify yourself. [...] I am not the kind of person who says, Hartz IV is the lowest of the low, but we are seen that way, [...] And I am part of that, too.' (Mrs Kruger)

6.3 Using the image of the undeserving recipient as a foil is a common strategy used by respondents to meet this perceived need to justify themselves in the eyes of society. Condemning such 'typical' cases presented on television can be read as an attempt to reclaim a respectable position (Skeggs 1997) in the moral order. By distancing themselves from the bad type of benefits recipient, they seek to demonstrate that they, unlike the 'typical' case, have the motivations and goals required to be part of the circle of those with the 'right' values. Such strategies also allow respondents to demonstrate knowledge of the moral and quasi-aesthetic codes in terms of which distaste for the 'underclass' is expressed by the 'middle'<sup>[7]</sup> (Bourdieu 1984) – corner seats are 'disgusting' (Mrs Schmidt). They reflect efforts to perform an identity that positions them as part of the normative 'inside'. As Probyn (2000) argues, such expressions of disgust attempt to establish a moral common ground, to reassure both speaker and audience that the potential contamination that might arise from proximity (Douglas 2003) to the alleged underclass does not affect them.

6.4 Such self-positioning in relation to negative stereotypes is central to the narrative performances by means of which respondents attempt to demonstrate their respectability or employment orientation. Respondents display a tacit understanding of the demands of the welfare system and the underlying normative demands of society, stressing elements of their biographies or character considered valuable within this normative framework, in a manner parallel to what Woolford and Nelund (2013) describe in Canada. This is true across all four waves of the panel, independently of fluctuations in negative discussions in the media. Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) observe similar strategies in materially deprived individuals in England: in a discursive setting where the label 'poor' is associated with deeply negative ascriptions, they disclaim their labeling by relativising their material situation and engaging in moral distancing.

6.5 Condemnation of the bad type that dominates the hegemonic discourse also enables welfare recipients to demonstrate that their compliance with the demands of the welfare system is more than superficial. Where non-compliance is sanctioned, compliant behaviour is no longer enough to distinguish oneself as a 'deserving' recipient of support. As the implicit normative dimension of public discourses is concerned with the motivations and character of recipients, proving one's 'good character' and 'correct motivation' is central. Mrs Kohl, for instance, makes clear that she has been 'converted' and now has motivations in keeping with the demands of society: while she once 'used to' share the 'scrounger's' distaste for working in low-paid jobs, she now presents herself as eager for any work whatsoever. This is proof that her compliance with the demands of the welfare system is not simply the result of the threat of sanctions, but of a deep-rooted commitment to its normative expectations.

### The limits of self-justification

7.1 Yet such attempted rehabilitations are intrinsically limited. Given their symbolic positioning, it is impossible for 'Hartz IV' recipients to become respectable persons; at best, they can present themselves as exceptions from the stereotype. Even a 'deserving' benefits recipient is irrevocably on the wrong side of the divide between 'decent taxpayers' and benefits recipients (Brettschneider 2008: 47). Where unemployment and need are portrayed as the result of indolence, a lack of effort or will power, the benefits recipient will always remain morally deficient in the eyes of society. Rehabilitation is possible only via an exit from the system and a return to the position of a 'decent taxpayer' and worker. But in many if not most cases this is not a matter of individual choice: access to employment depends on external circumstances, a fact which the new benefits discourse tends to ignore.

[when] such opinions come to light [...] in which it is said that we, that Hartz IV recipients only have themselves to blame or are lazy or scroungers or something like that, that does affect me, because I do take that to apply directly to me, and I then think that the people who know me and know that I get Hartz IV have that sort of opinion of me or that the broad majority of society is of the opinion that people who have no job are to blame for that. There are millions of people who, where there are always reasons, it has a reason for everyone in the end.' (Mr Zimmermann).

7.2 The reasons, identities, and achievements which subjects appeal to in attempting to articulate positive self-identities – in creative and potentially 'locally' successful ways – are simply not recognised in a hegemonic discourse that associates receiving 'Hartz IV' with moral deficiency.

### Conclusions

8.1 The 'fabrication' (Goffman 1963: 83) of dominant representations of 'the poor' in the media fulfils a dual role in relation to the types of 'responsibilising' welfare reforms prevalent in Britain as well as Germany. They address the working majority of society, whom they position as the 'decent taxpayer' while benefits recipients are discredited as the moral other. The basis for this divide can be found in the neoliberal discourse which fosters a notion of unconditional self-responsibility as a standard of moral judgment (Haylett 2001). This makes it difficult for those currently in employment to sympathise with the unemployed, and legitimates reduced social protection and disciplinary measures. At the same time, as our findings demonstrate, negative cultural representations are (made) highly salient to the self-images of welfare recipients. Receiving 'Hartz IV' is not simply associated with material poverty, but also, centrally, a form of status poverty: a moral classification experienced as a challenge to individual dignity. In attempting to distance themselves from the 'typical Hartz IV recipient', a figure that seems to take shape only within the media, 'Hartz IV' recipients contribute to reproducing the 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 2001) they are subjected to. Identity politics directed against individuals thus displaces structural politics directed at imbalanced economic and political power relations. Media representations of the poor are part of this power game, deeply politicised while preventing a debate on societal and economic causes of poverty and thus the politicisation of poverty itself. Their effect is to undermine solidarity between the working and non-working population, as well as among benefits recipients. 'Benefits Street', it seems, is neither an exclusively British

## Notes

- 1 The reforms are named after *Volkswagen* executive Peter Hartz, who chaired the Committee that submitted the underlying recommendations to the government.
  - 2 The new prominence of this category reflects a convergence of the German discourse with the moralist,□ cultural perspective on poverty of parts of the Anglo-American discourse (Murray 1990, Mead 1986).
  - 3 It would be highly desirable to explore the parallels between (pseudo-)reality television §keggs 2009) and the 'Hartz IV' system as settings requiring such efforts in greater detail.
  - 4 This research is part of the mandatory research on the German Social Code II (§ 55 SGB II) and is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Until 2012, the IAB collaborated on the panel with the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and the Institute of Social Research Munich.
  - 5 This is a reference to the so-called 'working opportunities' (*Arbeitsgelegenheiten*) or 'One-Euro Jobs', which do not constitute a regular employment relationship, but are a measure as part of the benefits systems.□ They can be imposed on recipients in order to maintain and improve employability, with participants receiving an allowance of between one and two Euros an hour. Hence a simple refusal to work under those conditions is arguably not possible. The benefits for labour market integration of such 'opportunities' are questionable□ (Hohmeyer & Wolff 2012).
  - 6 We are aware of the racist connotations of the phrase; however, in this context the implications appear unintended. More generally, the media image of the 'typical' German welfare recipient is not racialised in the same way as in the United States (Gilens 1999).
  - 7 The motif of (belonging to) the 'middle' is central to the self-representations of benefits recipients. The□ middle, in the German everyday discourse, is to be understood as a location in a normative as much as in a socio-economic order; it should not be read as 'middle class' in the British sense.
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