

Crowding Out Culture:

Scandinavians and Americans Agree on Social Welfare in the Face of Deservingness Cues

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ABSTRACT

A robust finding in the welfare state literature is that public support for the welfare state differs widely across countries. Yet recent research on the psychology of welfare support suggests that people everywhere form welfare opinions using psychological predispositions designed to regulate interpersonal help-giving using cues regarding recipient effort. We argue that this implies that cross-national differences in welfare support emerge from mutable differences in stereotypes about recipient efforts rather than deep differences in psychological predispositions. Using free association tasks and experiments embedded in large-scale, nationally representative surveys collected in the United States and Denmark, we test this argument by investigating the stability of opinion differences when faced with the presence and absence of cues about the deservingness of specific welfare recipients. Despite decades of exposure to different cultures and welfare institutions, two sentences of information can make welfare support across the U.S. and Scandinavian samples substantially and statistically indistinguishable.

Key words: welfare attitudes, cross-national differences, deservingness, political psychology, psychological predispositions

Social welfare spending and public support for social welfare benefits vary widely throughout the Western world (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Larsen, 2006; Rothstein, 1998).¹ A key finding in the welfare state literature of particular relevance is the existence of a transatlantic divide such that electorates in Europe, and especially Scandinavia, are much more in favor of providing assistance to individuals in economic need than the American electorate. In explaining such stable, cross-national differences in support for welfare, scholars have often emphasized the importance of deep-seated cultural differences, socio-structural differences (particularly related to ethnic homogeneity), and institutional path dependencies (e.g., Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Jæger 2009; Larsen 2008; Lipset 1996; Rothstein 1998).

At the same time, the empirical support for these explanations in the comparative welfare state literature is mixed. Some studies find a link between a proposed explanatory factor and cross-national variation in welfare support (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Andreß and Heien, 2001, 348–9; Larsen 2006), others emphasize the weakness of the link (Bean and Papadakis 1998, 229; Svallfors 1997, 2003), while others yet fail to find any link (Gelissen 2000, 285; see also discussion in Larsen 2006). In order to explain these contrasting findings at the macro level, some researchers in the welfare state literature have identified problems in how cross-national differences in support and proposed explanatory factors are measured (Jæger 2009). Solving measurement problems is certainly key in order to acquire further knowledge. Still, we suggest here that another hindrance for progress is at the level of theory. Hence, to understand dynamics at the macro level, researchers are increasingly calling for attention to dynamics at the micro level—that is, the psychological processes through which welfare opinions are formed. Thus, as Korpi and Palme (1998, 682) already emphasized, “the macro-micro links among institutions and the formation of

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interests and coalitions provides a major challenge” for the comparative welfare state literature. Ten years later, the situation had not changed. Brooks and Manza (2007, 8), for example, argue that “mass opinion has been largely absent in the major theoretical approaches to understanding welfare states.” And Larsen (2006, 2) and Jordan (2010, 863) explicitly suggest that the mixed results of state-of-the-art research on welfare states may reflect that prior research has not adequately captured the complexity of public opinion on social welfare.

In line with these calls, political psychologists have recently uncovered important features concerning the psychological predispositions underlying public opinion about welfare state issues (Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2006; Gilens 2000; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011, 2012; Skitka and Tetlock 1993; Weiner 1995). Importantly, whereas the macro-oriented welfare state literature has emphasized cross-national *differences* in welfare state support, this micro-oriented public opinion literature has found the existence of cross-national *similarities* in the psychological predispositions underlying welfare state support (Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2006; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011, 2012). In essence, utilizing a “deservingness heuristic,” individuals across cultural divides, welfare state regimes, ideology, and political sophistication support welfare benefits for recipients who are perceived as hard-working and reject welfare benefits for recipients who are perceived to be lazy.

This article reviews these recent findings on the micro dynamics of welfare state support and integrates them into the macro literature on cross-national differences in welfare state support. Specifically, we argue that underneath these relatively stable cross-national differences, a general psychology of help-giving exists that prompts people to pay attention to whether welfare recipients are lazy or making an effort. On this basis, we predict that when confronted with relevant cues about individual welfare recipients, people across highly different welfare states easily come to agree on whether that individual deserves these benefits. We test this argument using survey experiments embedded in two large-scale, nationally representative web surveys collected in the United States and Denmark—two countries with very different welfare states, cultural values

regarding individualism, and levels of ethnic homogeneity. Despite numerous decades of exposure to different cultures of welfare, two-sentence descriptions suggesting whether a welfare recipient is lazy or genuinely making an effort render the opinions in the American and Scandinavian samples substantially and statistically indistinguishable. In the conclusion, we discuss how these findings can contribute to solving enduring puzzles in research on the macro patterns of welfare state support.

Support for Social Welfare across Nations

A key observation in the welfare state literature is that substantial cross-national differences exist in social welfare spending and public support for social welfare and that these differences have existed over long periods of time. In their analyses of social spending in the EU and United States since the late 19th century, Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote (2001) show that since the beginning of the 20th century, social spending has been lower in the United States than in Europe, and the gap between the two has increased over time. Furthermore, in a comparative study of 24 countries, Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003, 424) emphasize that “our main finding is that public attitudes toward welfare policies vary between nations” (see also Andreß and Heien 2001; Bean and Papadakis 1998; Edlund 2007; Lipset 1996, 74–5).

Many studies have focused on the differences in support between so-called liberal welfare states (with widespread use of means-testing and low benefit levels) and so-called social democratic welfare states (with generous programs and benefits granted as a matter of right) (Esping-Andersen 1990). These classes of welfare states constitute opposing poles with regard to levels of redistribution and market intervention and, as evidenced in the literature on welfare support, also with regard to the extent of public support. Svallfors (1997) and Edlund (1999), for example, observe that social democratic welfare states (concentrated in Scandinavia, including Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) are characterized by strong support for welfare state intervention, whereas liberal welfare states such as the United States are characterized by low support for

government redistribution. Many other studies echo this conclusion (e.g., Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; Andreß and Heien 2001; Larsen 2006; Rothstein 1998; Svallfors 1997, 2003).

Prior research has emphasized a number of factors driving such cross-national differences in support of social welfare. One prominent hypothesis in the welfare state literature is that welfare regimes constitute socializing forces affecting public opinion (Jæger 2009; Larsen 2006; Rothstein 1998). According to this perspective, depending on their design, welfare institutions may either build large majorities supporting their development or produce opposition to further expansion of the welfare state (Jordan 2010, 863; Korpi and Palme 1998; Rothstein 1998; see also Arts and Gelissen 2001; Edlund 1999; Larsen 2008; Jæger 2009; Pierson 2001). Given the widespread use of rights-based welfare programs, the Scandinavian benefit schemes extend to the middle class, producing broad, vested interests in the continued existence of the welfare state (Pierson 2001). In the United States, by contrast, the direction of benefits to those with greatest need creates opposition against the welfare state among a middle class that does not benefit (Korpi and Palme 1998). In addition to this political logic, other institutionalist explanations have argued that different institutions foster different moral logics (Rothstein 1998). In particular, the widespread use of needs-testing in liberal welfare states is argued to prompt the public to keep a watchful eye on whether recipients deserve the benefits they receive and, by implication, induce higher levels of welfare skepticism (see also Larsen 2006).

Other research has emphasized the long-term role of religion and cultural values and traditions in shaping patterns of welfare state development and attitudes toward social welfare (e.g., Jordan 2010, 863; Larsen 2008, 146; Lipset 1996). Zaller and Feldman (1992, 272–3, 299) thus emphasize how conservatives in the United States can easily defend opposition to social welfare by appeals to values of individualism and limited government, whereas liberal supporters of the welfare state lack a clear ideological justification for their position (*ibid*, 297, see also Gould and Palmer 1988, 428). In contrast, according to this perspective, the high levels of support in the Scandinavian welfare states reflect a deep culture of collectivist elements that underlie the emphasis

on equality and egalitarianism (Twigg 2010, 1691).

Finally, a third approach explains cross-national differences in social welfare attitudes with differences in the degree of ethnic homogeneity (e.g., Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Gould and Palmer 1988; Soroka, Johnston, and Banting 2007). In this perspective, the massive support for social welfare in Scandinavian countries is linked to their high levels of ethnic homogeneity, meaning that redistribution is a within-group phenomenon between similar individuals. In the United States, conversely, skepticism regarding the welfare state reflects that redistribution is a between-group phenomenon, where a “we” is required to transfer benefits to an ethnically and racially different “them.”

In sum, the literature on understanding the factors shaping cross-national differences in support for social welfare points to explanations that emphasize stable path dependencies and the importance of deep-seated cultural and socio-structural differences.

The Deservingness Heuristic and Welfare Attitudes across Nations

In his seminal book on public opinion, Zaller (1992, 6) characterizes opinions as a “marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it.” In this terminology, differences in support of social welfare across countries could originate either from cross-national differences in predispositions or from cross-national differences in the information available in opinion formation. The emphasis on institutional, cultural, and structural factors as explanations of cross-national differences in support of social welfare suggests that cross-national differences in support of social welfare are predispositional; that is, deep-seated and difficult to change. At the same time, a recent but growing body of evidence on the psychology underlying social welfare attitudes has emphasized—as reviewed below—the high degree of similarity across cultures at the level of predispositions with regard to opinions about who deserves welfare and who does not (Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2006; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011, 2012). This possibly suggests that

cross-national differences in welfare support stem more from differences in available information, such as media stories and mental pictures, than from differences in the psychological predispositions used to process this information. If valid, then cross-national differences in welfare support are mutable despite deep institutional, cultural, and structural differences and can, under the right circumstances, quickly change. In this section, we develop this argument in detail.

The Deservingness Heuristic

In their everyday lives, people continuously judge whether to help others in need (e.g., the beggar on the street, their friend who is in need of money, their overburdened colleague). Psychologists have shown that such judgments are highly structured: needy individuals who are viewed as being responsible for their own plight are judged as undeserving of help, whereas those who are viewed as victims of circumstances beyond their own control are judged as deserving (Feather 1999; Weiner 1995). Within political science, there is growing recognition of the importance of heuristics in political attitude formation (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). On this basis, studies have argued that this “deservingness heuristic” (cf. Petersen 2012) not only influences everyday judgments about interpersonal help-giving but also constitutes a key psychological basis for judgments about political help-giving; that is, social welfare (Gilens 1999; Larsen 2006; Oorschot 2000; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2012; Skitka and Tetlock 1993).

Psychologists have studied and verified the operations of the deservingness heuristic across numerous cultures, including the United States (Weiner 1995), Canada (Meyer and Mulherin 1980), Japan (cf. Weiner 1995), and Germany (Appelbaum 2002). Summarizing such studies, Weiner (1995: 166) concludes that the deservingness heuristic is a “pancultural” mechanism for regulating help-giving. Consistent with this, studies in political science have found that social welfare is rejected for recipients perceived as lazy but supported for recipients perceived as unlucky across highly different countries (see, e.g., Oorschot 2000; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2012). In one large analysis, for example, Petersen et al. (2012) showed the existence of a positive correlation

between laziness perceptions and welfare opposition in 49 out of 49 studied countries from around the world (including the United States, Peru, Germany, Russia, South Korea, Australia, and Nigeria), and the correlation was significant at conventional levels in all but a single country.² According to research on the deservingness heuristic, people across cultures are against providing welfare to those who are unwilling to invest effort to improve their circumstances (“the lazy”) but are supportive of welfare benefits to those making an effort and trying but failing due to forces beyond their control (“the unlucky”).

Input to the Deservingness Heuristic: Stereotypes versus Cues

In the above perspective, citizens everywhere partly form welfare opinions on the basis of a deep-seated heuristic: the deservingness heuristic. This invites the hypothesis that cross-national differences in welfare support emerge not from different psychological predispositions but from different perceptions of those benefitting from the welfare system. In many ways, this argument aligns with the recent focus in parts of the welfare state literature on the role of stereotypes (Gilens 2000; Larsen 2006; Rothstein 1998). In this literature, it has been argued that a country’s welfare institutions and levels of ethnic homogeneity influence welfare support, because these factors influence the stereotypes that individuals tend to form. For instance, Larsen (2006; Larsen and Dejsgaard 2013) argues that the Scandinavian welfare states foster the stereotype that welfare recipients are making an effort but fall victim to forces beyond their control (and, hence, prompt people to categorize them as “deserving”), whereas the U.S. welfare state fosters the stereotype that welfare recipients are lazy (hence, prompting people to categorize them as “undeserving”) (see also

²To account for this universal existence of the deservingness heuristic, recent research has utilized principles from evolutionary psychology and argued the deservingness heuristic could reflect biological adaptations designed to regulate help-giving in human evolution (see Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2012).

Rothstein 1998).³

According to the standard definition, stereotypes are “beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups” (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996, 240). Social psychologists commonly characterize stereotypes as resource-saving devices that are used in human cognition to simplify information processing and attitude formation (e.g., Allport 1954; Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein 1987; Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994). In particular, psychologists have argued that stereotypes are cognitive devices used for making judgments under *informational uncertainty* (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994).⁴ Through the assignment of individuals to meaningful social categories, stereotyping simplifies judgment when other cues are limited, because it provides an alternate source of information in the form of the content of stereotypes (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994, 37). In other words, stereotypes provide people with a substitute for more specific cues when making judgments about people with whom they are not acquainted. Consistent with this, prior research in psychology demonstrates that, in the face of clear cues about the motivations and habits of specific people or groups, people tend to rely much *less* on relevant stereotypes when forming impressions of them (Crawford et al. 2011;

³While there is evidence of the association between institutions and stereotypes, the exact mechanisms behind these associations are less clear. One potential mechanism relates to the higher benefit levels of universal welfare states, which makes social welfare recipients more able to dress and behave in line with the majority population and, hence, seem like “one of us” (Larsen 2006). Another potential mechanism relates to public discussions, where the existence of means-testing in liberal welfare states makes it easier for media and political elites to create a discourse about some recipients being undeserving (i.e., not meeting the criteria for eligibility) (see Larsen and Dejgaard 2013; Rothstein 1998). Yet another mechanism could relate to self-reinforcing dynamics from the effects of so-called “stereotype threat” (see, e.g., Spencer and Castano 2007). Stereotype threat relates to the observation that knowledge of negative stereotypes in itself drives down the performance of the stereotyped group and, hence, if negative stereotypes about the performance of welfare recipients are established in liberal welfare states, these could be self-reinforcing.

⁴This, of course, does not mean that stereotypes are accurate. The accuracy of stereotypes depends on the accuracy of the information on which they are formed. In the context of social welfare, for example, Gilens (2000) has documented widespread bias in the information provided by media sources.

Krueger and Rothbart 1988; Kunda and Sherman-Williams 1993; for further discussion, see Petersen 2009).

If welfare support indeed emerges as the interplay between stereotypes about the efforts of welfare recipients and the universal deservingness heuristic, these observations have important implications for our understanding of cross-national differences in welfare support. Specifically, it suggests that despite lifetimes of exposure to different welfare institutions, cultures, and socio-structural conditions, people from different countries should easily come to agree on issues of social welfare. If cross-national differences rely on differences in available stereotypes about whether most welfare recipients are lazy or unlucky, these differences should disappear when individuals are asked to make judgments on the basis of new, clear cues suggesting that a specific recipient is the one or the other. That is, while Americans believe that most welfare recipients are lazy and Scandinavians that most are unlucky, people across these highly different regions should provide *convergent* opinions when directly confronted with clearly lazy or clearly unlucky recipients. These individuating cues should (1) be picked up by the deservingness heuristic, (2) deactivate the stereotypes underlying national differences, and (3), as a consequence, cause opinions to converge across nations.

Research Design and Data

To test this argument, we collected two parallel online web surveys in the United States and Denmark (n = 1,009 in the United States and 1,006 in Denmark). In both countries, the data were collected by the YouGov survey agency. Approximately nationally representative samples of citizens were drawn from the agency's standing web panels. The samples were randomly selected from the web panels with stratified sampling used to match the sample proportions to national proportions on the dimensions of gender, age (≥ 18 , ≤ 70), and geography (state in the U.S. case, region in the Danish case).

We focus on the United States and Denmark as our sites of study, as these two

counties differ substantially on all of the factors that previous research has deemed important in explaining cross-national differences in welfare state support: the structure of welfare state institutions, degree of individualism, and levels of ethnic homogeneity. First, the United States is regarded as the prime example of a liberal welfare state, whereas Denmark is a classic example of the Scandinavian social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). Compared to the liberal U.S. welfare state that relies on means-testing on a substantial scale, the Danish welfare state is characterized by universal benefits granted as a matter of right. Furthermore, compared to the liberal welfare state in the U.S., the universal Danish welfare regime is characterized by relatively high social transfer regimes (including unemployment benefits) (Jensen 2008). Still, it should be noted that the Danish welfare state, despite its universalistic nature, does require unemployed people to engage in job-seeking activities and labor market activation schemes in return for their unemployment benefits (Vikström, Rosholm, and Svarer 2011: 6-7). Compared to liberal welfare state regimes like the UK and the U.S., however, the Danish welfare strategy has been implemented with a focus on “empowerment rather than control and punishment” (Torfing 1999: 5). Thus, in welfare regime terms, the United States and Denmark differ on fundamental parameters as central examples of the liberal and universal welfare states, respectively. Second, the United States has a highly individualistic culture (Gilens 2000; Lipset 1996), whereas Danish culture is marked by a number of collective elements (Nelson and Shavitt 2002). Finally, the United States is characterized by considerable ethnic fragmentation (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001), whereas Denmark is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in the Western World (Fearon 2003). From this perspective, the United States and Denmark constitute a Most Different Systems Design (see also Petersen 2012).

Testing our arguments requires three measures: 1) a measure of default stereotypes about welfare recipients’ efforts, 2) a measure of welfare opinion when people form opinions about social welfare under informational *uncertainty*, and 3) a measure of welfare opinion when people form opinions about social welfare under informational *certainty*. We predict that people in the

United States and Denmark will have markedly different default stereotypes about welfare recipients and that these stereotypes create differences in welfare support in the face of limited information. In the face of clear cues about the deservingness of welfare recipients, however, the influence of stereotypes should be strongly reduced and cause cross-national opinions to converge.

To measure stereotypes about social welfare recipients, we rely on answers from a free association task. Specifically, respondents were asked to write the words they would use to describe people who receive social welfare in up to 20 boxes, one word in each box. As part of a larger coding scheme, two student coders then coded the content of the respondents' associations. Based on the control dimension identified by van Oorshot (2000), the coders registered the number of words for each respondent suggesting that welfare recipients are associated with being lazy and the number of words suggesting that recipients are associated with being unlucky but industrious.⁵ We focus on stereotypes related to being lazy and unlucky, respectively, as they constitute the key input to the deservingness heuristic (Gilens 2000; Oorschot 2000; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2012). From the student codings of the number of laziness and unluckiness associations, we created three measures capturing respondents' stereotypes of social welfare recipients. First, we counted the number of laziness-relevant associations returned by the individual respondent to obtain a measure of the degree to which welfare recipients are stereotyped as "lazy" (mean = 0.55, std. dev = 0.95). Second, we counted the number of effort-relevant associations returned by each respondent to obtain a measure of the degree to which they are stereotyped as "unlucky" (mean = 0.35, std. dev. = 0.60). Third, we created a measure of the overall dominance of stereotypes of welfare recipients being lazy relative to unlucky by subtracting the number of "unlucky" associations from the number of "lazy" associations (mean = 0.20, std. dev. = 1.13). This measure provides an easily interpretable summary measure of the content of respondent's stereotypes.⁶

⁵Each respondent on average listed 3.37 meaningful associations in the free association task (std. dev. 2.90).

⁶A key added advantage of this summary measure relative to other potential ways of calculating a summary measure is that the present calculation allows us to keep the entire sample in the analyses. An obvious alternative would be to use

We rely on an experiment to investigate how people form welfare opinions in the face of certain and uncertain information, respectively. The unique strength of the experimental method is that it maximizes control and consequently allows for causal inferences. In the experiment, the respondents were asked about their support for a specific welfare policy—social welfare benefits—after they had been exposed to one of three descriptions of a social welfare recipient. In the three descriptions, we manipulated the presence of clear cues about social welfare recipients’ deservingness (present vs. not present) and the direction of those cues (i.e., depicting social welfare recipients as lazy vs. unlucky). Specifically, the experiment included the following three conditions (from Petersen et al. 2012), each depicting a social welfare recipient: “Imagine a man who is currently on social welfare” (the “Recipient with No Cues” condition); “Imagine a man who is currently on social welfare. He has always had a regular job, but has now been the victim of a work-related injury. He is very motivated to get back to work again” (the “Unlucky Recipient” condition); and “Imagine a man who is currently on social welfare. He has never had a regular job, but he is fit and healthy. He is not motivated to get a job” (the “Lazy Recipient” condition). Each respondent was randomly assigned to read one of these descriptions. To measure opposition to social welfare, respondents were then asked, “To what extent do you disagree or agree that the eligibility requirements for social welfare should be tightened for persons like him?” Answers were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” (mean = 0.56 on a scale ranging 0–1, std. dev. = .35). “Don’t know” answers were also recorded and subsequently excluded from the analyses.⁷

the ratio between the number of laziness and unluckiness associations. However, as some respondents did not list any laziness or unluckiness associations, this calculation would generate a high number of missing observations caused by attempting to divide by zero. This would decrease the generalizability of the findings. Importantly, all of the findings reported using the difference measure of dominance of laziness stereotypes can be replicated using the alternative ratio measure (see the online appendix).

⁷A randomization check was conducted to see that the treatment and control groups were balanced and did not differ on demographic background variables. No significant differences were found across the experimental groups with regard

Finally, we also measure relevant demographic control variables including gender, age, and education. Due to differences in the national education systems, education is categorized on a 5-point scale in the U.S. sample and a 7-point scale in the Danish sample. In both samples, the education measure was recoded to vary between 0 and 1, higher values indicating higher education.

Results

We began the analyses by testing the classical expectation that clear cross-national differences exist in stereotypes about welfare recipients. To test this prediction, we rely on an independent sample t-test to test the mean difference between U.S. and Danish respondents in the number of associations related to welfare recipients being lazy and unlucky, respectively, and the overall measure of the dominance of the former types of stereotypes of welfare recipients being lazy rather than unlucky. The findings are illustrated in Figures 1–2.

-Figures 1–2 about here -

As Figure 1 illustrates, the American respondents on average list .61 “lazy” associations about social welfare recipients, whereas the Danish respondents list only .49. Thus, the American respondents on average list .12 more “lazy” associations than the Danish respondents ($p = .005$). Conversely, the American respondents on average list only .29 associations depicting social welfare recipients as hard-working but unlucky, whereas respondents in the Danish sample on average list .42 such associations. Thus, the Danish respondents on average list .13 more “unlucky” associations than respondents in the American sample ($p < .001$). Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 2, the American respondents on average list .32 more “lazy” than “unlucky” associations when describing social welfare recipients. In contrast, the Danish respondents on average only list .07 more “lazy” than “unlucky” associations. This implies that the dominance of laziness stereotypes is more than

to distribution on age ($\text{Chi}^2(104) = 96.34, p = 0.691$), gender ($\text{Chi}^2(2) = 3.77, p = 0.151$) and education ($\text{Chi}^2(16) = 14.05, p = 0.595$). These findings support that the randomization was successful.

4.6 times larger in the American sample than the Danish sample. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$).⁸

Thus, the findings in Figures 1–2 are consistent with the classic expectation of clear cross-national differences in stereotypes about welfare recipients. In line with prior research, we observe that individuals coming from a liberal welfare state regime depict social welfare recipients as predominantly lazy, whereas individuals from a social democratic welfare regime are much more likely to describe social welfare recipients as people who are making an honest effort but have fallen victim to bad luck.

This preliminary finding leads us to the question of the effect of clear cues about social welfare recipients' deservingness on these cross-national differences. We suggest that people will agree on social welfare across institutional and cultural differences when cues about recipients' deservingness are present. To test this, we use OLS regression and, for each experimental condition, estimate the effect of the respondent's country on opposition to social welfare controlling for age, education, and gender. The findings are reported in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 3. Opposition

⁸There is an interesting overlap between these results from the literature on the deservingness heuristic and the broader psychological literature on person perception. As Fiske et al. (2007) summarize, person perceptions vary across two dimensions: a dimension of warmth (are social intentions good or bad?) and a dimension of competence (is the person able to carry out these intentions?). The perceptions along the first dimension are formed first, more quickly, and with more behavioral implications. There is a close fit between the dimension of warmth and the perceptions that the deservingness heuristic takes as input. Consistent with the primacy of this dimension, previous research shows that deservingness judgments on social welfare are uniquely tied to perceptions of the motivations of welfare recipients—and not to perceptions of the competences (i.e., intelligence) of welfare recipients (Gilens 2000; Petersen et al. 2012). Analyses of the data in the present study provide additional support for the lower of importance of competence perceptions. Hence, while we find cross-national differences in the United States and Denmark on stereotypes about laziness, we do not find differences in stereotypes about competence ($t = -0.12$, $p = .90$). Similarly, in the control condition of the experiment, there are no correlations between stereotypes about competence and attitudes in the United States ($r = -.002$, $p = .96$) nor Denmark ($r = -.05$, $p = .43$). For description of the measure of stereotypes about competence, see the online appendix.

to social welfare ranges on a 0–1 scale, higher values indicate stronger opposition to social welfare. The United States is coded as 0 on the country variable, Denmark as 1.

-Table 1 and Figure 3 about here -

As can be seen in Table 1, Model I and Figure 3, Column 1, when no cues about the social welfare recipient are present, we again observe clear cross-national differences in opposition to social welfare. Specifically, consistent with the findings in Figures 1–2 and prior research, the findings demonstrate that respondents in the Danish sample are clearly less opposed to granting social welfare to the target person in the experiment than the American respondents ($b = -.09$, $p < .001$).

Importantly, however, the findings in Table 1, Models 2–3, and Figure 3, Columns 2–3 also demonstrate that these cross-national differences in opposition to social welfare are crowded out when cues about the deservingness of the social welfare recipient are directly provided. Thus, when the man on social welfare is described as lazy, both the American and Danish respondents alike are predominantly opposed to granting social welfare, and there is no significant effect of country ($b = .03$, $p = .182$). Likewise, when the man on social welfare is described as unlucky, both the American and the Danish respondents are largely in favor of granting social welfare, and again there is no significant effect of country ($b = -.01$, $p = .645$). Further analyses with regression models including interaction terms between country and experimental conditions show that these differences in the effects of country across the experimental conditions are significant ($p = .025$ and $p < .001$ for the country \times condition interaction for the “unlucky” and “lazy” condition, respectively). These observations support that clear deservingness-relevant cues about social welfare recipients can crowd out the national differences in social welfare attitudes, which prior research otherwise emphasizes as a product of deep-seated structural and cultural differences and long-standing institutional path dependencies.⁹

⁹According to our argument and the analyses presented in Figures 1 and 2, Americans should be more likely to perceive the lazy welfare recipient as “typical,” whereas Danes should be likely to perceive the unlucky welfare recipient as

These findings lead us to the question of the effect of clear cues on the impact of stereotypes on social welfare attitudes. We expect that the availability of certain information makes cross-national opinions converge, because this availability makes reliance on stereotypes superfluous for making judgments about recipient deservingness. Hence, the availability of cues about welfare recipients should crowd out the effect of stereotypes in the opinion formation process. To test this, we regress opposition to social welfare on the experimental conditions and the dominance of laziness stereotypes, controlling for gender, education, and age in the U.S. and Danish samples. “A man on social welfare” is coded as reference category on the experimental variables. Again, opposition to social welfare ranges on a scale from 0 to 1, the higher values indicating stronger opposition to social welfare. Higher positive values on the measure of dominance of “lazy” relative to “unlucky” stereotypes indicate the higher dominance of “lazy” stereotypes, and negative values indicate a dominance of “unlucky” stereotypes. The findings are reported in Table 2, Models I–II and illustrated in Figure 4, Panels A–B.

Table 2 and Figure 4 about here

As can be seen from the findings in Table 2, the effect of stereotypes on opposition to social welfare is significantly conditioned by the experimental treatments in both the U.S. sample ($b = -.05$, $p = .008$ and $b = -.07$, $p < .001$) and Danish sample ($b = -.06$, $p = .003$, $b = -.07$, $p < .001$). As illustrated by the solid gray lines in Figure 4, Panels A–B, when no cues regarding the deservingness of the social welfare recipient are present, there is a clear and significant effect of stereotypes on opposition to social welfare in both the U.S. and Danish samples ($b_{U.S.} = .08$, $p <$

“typical.” The analysis in Figure 3 provides some additional evidence for this. Hence, the opinion difference between the control condition and the “lazy” condition is significantly smaller in the United States than in Denmark ($p = .03$).

Conversely, the difference between the control condition and the “unlucky” condition are significantly greater in United States than in Denmark ($p < .001$). The “lazy” welfare recipient seems, in other words, conceptually closer to

Americans’ typical response, whereas the “unlucky” welfare recipient is conceptually closer to Danes’ typical response.

Future research could address this more by asking people directly in such experiments about the degree to which they perceive the presented welfare recipient as “typical” and whether such ratings differ cross-nationally.

.001 and $b_{\text{Denmark}} = .11$, $p < .001$). As evidenced by the relatively steep slope of the solid gray line in Figure 4, Panels A–B, the more respondents' stereotypes are dominated by laziness associations, the more they are opposed to granting social welfare to the target person.

Importantly, however, as can also be seen from the flat slope of the dotted and dashed black lines in Figure 4, Panels A–B, when minimal cues are provided about the laziness or misfortune of the target person, the effect of stereotypes on opposition to social welfare is significantly crowded out among the American and Danish respondents alike. Among the American respondents, the effect of stereotypes is reduced from $b = .08$ ($p < .001$) to $b = .03$ ($p = .044$) when respondents are presented with clear cues about the laziness of the target person, and to $.004$ ($p = .795$) when respondents are presented with clear cues depicting the welfare recipient as unlucky. This corresponds to reductions in the effect of stereotypes of 63% and 96%, respectively, and these reductions are statistically significant ($p = .008$ and $p < .001$). Likewise among the Danish respondents, the effect of stereotypes is reduced from $.11$ ($p < .001$) to $.05$ ($p < .001$) when respondents are presented with cues depicting the welfare recipient as lazy, and to $.04$ ($p = .002$) when they are exposed to cues describing him as unlucky. These effects correspond to a reduction of the impact of stereotypes of 55% and 64%, respectively, and these reductions are statistically significant ($p = .003$ and $p < .001$). Thus, across the American and Danish samples, the findings consistently support our argument: across national differences, cues about recipient efforts crowd out the effect of stereotypes on social welfare opinion.

Conclusion

The welfare state literature has increasingly called for attention to the micro dynamics underlying welfare state support (e.g., Larsen 2006, 2; Jordan 2010, 863). Importantly, these calls have in many ways been met in recent psychologically oriented studies outside the core literature on welfare states. In this article, we have for the first time directly integrated the insights from these micro

studies into the well-established literature on cross-national levels of welfare state support and the transatlantic divide. Whereas the classical literature on these levels of welfare support has been interested in identifying cross-national differences in welfare support, the psychological literature suggests that underneath these differences—at the level of predispositions—people are basically the same everywhere. On this basis, we have argued and predicted that cross-national differences in welfare support emerge from differences in default perceptions about recipients’ deservingness (i.e., stereotypes) rather than deep differences in predispositions. By implication, when individuals across countries are directly provided with cues that push these perceptions in a particular direction, people everywhere react in the same way to these cues and cross-national agreement emerges.

Using an experimental design, we demonstrated (1) that individuals in two highly different welfare states—the United States and Denmark—have different default stereotypes about whether welfare recipients are lazy or unlucky; (2) that these differences in stereotypes create differences in support for welfare benefits to a recipient when no clear information about the recipient is available; (3) but that the effects of these default stereotypes are crowded out when direct information is available and, hence, support among Americans and Danes becomes substantially and statistically indistinguishable—despite a lifetime of exposure to different welfare state cultures.

When generalizing from the current study, it should be noted that the conclusions are based on a comparison of the United States and Denmark. According to Esping-Andersen (1990), these two countries are two “worlds” apart when it comes to the welfare state. Hence, as emphasized in the introduction and methods section of the paper, these countries are commonly viewed as key examples of the liberal and universal welfare states, respectively. At the same time, there are similarities between Denmark and the United States. First, as discussed in the methods section, requirements for job search activities and labor market activation schemes for unemployed workers are part of the Danish model. This active workfare strategy might reinforce the effect of the laziness cues in the Danish case (relative to the ideal type universal welfare state), because it

implies that the lazy welfare recipient is breaking the (spirit of) Danish law. As prior research emphasizes, however, the workfare strategy has been rearticulated within the Danish universal welfare state to focus on empowerment as opposed to control and punishment. This constitutes an important difference to the liberal welfare state (Torfing 1999: 6). Nonetheless, it would further strengthen the robustness of the conclusions if the results could be replicated in a comparison involving other examples of liberal and universalistic welfare states as well as comparisons to conservative welfare states (e.g., Germany). Second, while Denmark and the United States are different in terms of individualism and collectivism at the level of broader culture (Nelson and Shavitt 2002), they are not opposite extremes within the universe of possible cultural pairings. United States and Denmark both belong to the cluster of countries recently nicknamed WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic societies) (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan. 2010), and a significant proportion of Americans are even of Scandinavian descendant. In this way, while there are significant cultural divides between the United States and Denmark, our results cannot necessarily be generalized to other, even broader cultural divides. At the same time, it is important to note that past studies have validated the cross-cultural operations of the deservingness heuristic and shown that people form attitudes about social welfare on the basis of deservingness judgments well outside the WEIRD societies (see the theory section and, in particular, Petersen et al. 2012). This constitutes a *prima facie* reason to expect broader cultural differences to be reduced—if not entirely obliterated—in the face of deservingness cues. The validity of such expectations should be tested in future studies conducted in, for example, Asia or Latin America.

These caveats notwithstanding, we believe that the present findings have important implications for our understanding of puzzles in the literature on cross-national differences in welfare state support. Previous research has yielded mixed results, sometimes finding very large cross-national differences in support and at other times finding smaller differences (for an overview, see Larsen 2006). To the extent that cross-national differences in welfare state support emerge from very stable differences at the level of psychological predispositions, this inconsistency is puzzling.

Given the findings of the present paper—that cross-national differences emerge from an interplay between differences in available information and shared psychological predispositions—such a pattern of findings becomes intelligible. The context-sensitivity of welfare support implies that cross-national differences will wax and wane. For example, from time to time, external shocks with relevance for public perceptions of the efforts of welfare recipients will simultaneously affect several countries and reduce national gaps in welfare support. One such shock that has received attention in the literature is rising unemployment rates. Studies suggest that the public uses rising unemployment rates as a cue that unemployment is not a reflection of laziness but of bad luck and that the public consequently grows more supportive of welfare under conditions of high unemployment (Blekesaune 2007; Gilens 2000; Kam and Nam 2008). Macro studies have also documented that when unemployment is high, cross-national macro factors related to government or the welfare state regime matter less for public support for the welfare state (e.g., Jensen 2007). Essentially, under conditions of unemployment, opinions about the welfare state become more uniformly positive and cross-national distinctions become blurred. Other types of shocks that simultaneously affect multiple countries and provide clear cues concerning the efforts of welfare recipients—such as the onset of war in third countries and resulting inflows of refugees or the occurrence of natural disaster (Rao et al. 2011)—could have similar effects on cross-national differences and help explain some of the mixed findings of past research. More generally, these findings are in line with recent research that gives greater priority to the role of short-term factors at the expense of structural features in forming public opinion (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007; Zaller 1992). In short, politics matters. Because support for welfare benefits critically hinges on the available information about the beneficiaries, politicians can influence support for specific programs by emphasizing certain information at the expense of other information. Support for welfare benefits and programs becomes a context-sensitive phenomenon rather than something that is immutable given the culture, welfare state regimes, or socio-structural features of a society.

Because welfare support emerges from the interplay between available information and predispositions, macro and micro studies become equally indispensable. Neither knowledge about how different macro contexts generate differences in available information nor knowledge about the predispositions that make individuals seek out and respond to this information can be discounted. Attempting to privilege the one or the other would be tantamount to attempting to privilege the role of the oven or the batter in the baking of the cake—both factors are necessary and essential (for more on this metaphor, see Richerson and Boyd 2004). In this regard, the crucial benefit of a deep understanding of the psychological predispositions that underlie social welfare attitudes is that it provides clear-cut theoretical guidance in predicting which *specific* kinds of informational differences create and foster differences in support. Why, for example, is it cues related in particular to effort, need, gratefulness, group membership, and past contributions—as argued by van Oorschot (2000)—that influence welfare support? The perspective developed in this paper implies that this is because all of these kinds of information are relevant to the deservingness heuristic, which forms the roots of our help-giving psychology. As discussed elsewhere, other types of potentially relevant information, including the intelligence of welfare recipients, does not, in contrast, matter for welfare support, because the competence of others is less relevant for our help-giving psychology than their motivation to reciprocate (for detailed evidence and discussion, see Gilens 2000; Petersen et al. 2012). Ultimately, we foresee that by utilizing insights on the shared psychological dispositions underlying the massive variation in opinions and attitudes we observe across nations, we will be able to pinpoint the exact institutional, cultural, and structural differences that make a difference. Only in this way will we gain a full understanding of why and when welfare state support differs across nations.

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Table 1 Opposition to Social Welfare by Experimental Condition and Country

	“Recipient with No Cues” Condition (Model I)	“Lazy Recipient” Condition (Model II)	“Unlucky Recipient” Condition (Model III)
Constant	.63 (.05)***	.73 (.05)***	.41 (.05)***
Country (Denmark) ^a	−.09 (.02)***	.03 (.02)	−.01 (.02)
Female	.002 (.02)	.04 (.02)	−.03 (.02)
Age	−.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	−.002 (.001)*
Education	.01 (.04)	−.05 (.04)	.05 (.05)
R ²	.03	.01	.01
N	613	651	642

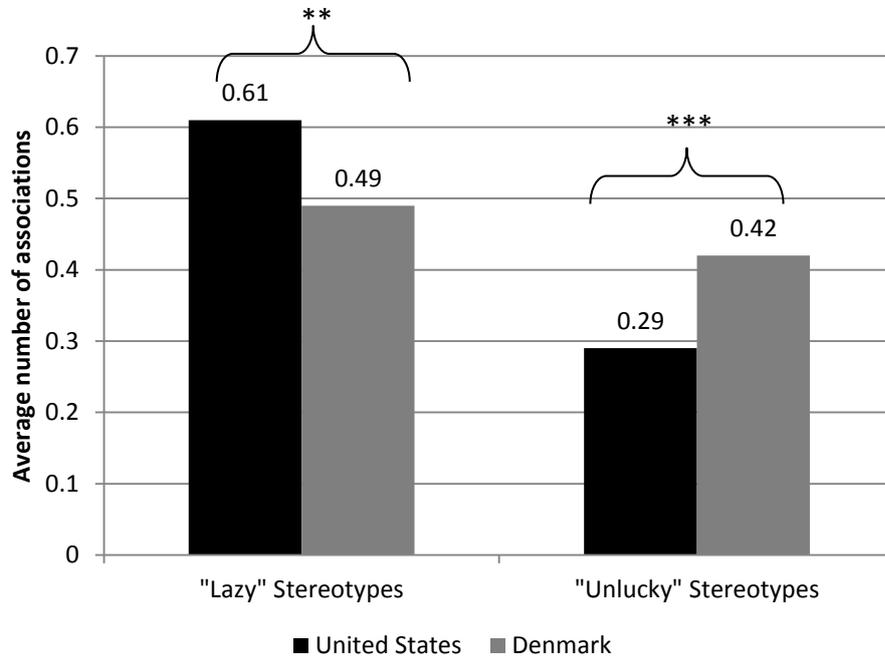
Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is opposition to social welfare, with higher values indicating more support for tighter eligibility requirements (i.e., higher values indicate a more opposition to social welfare). ^a Reference category for country variable is "United States". *** p < .001, **p < .01, * p < .05, two-tailed t-test.

Table 2 The Crowding Out Effect of Minimal Cues on the Impact of Stereotypes

	Opposition to Social Welfare	
	United States	Denmark
Constant	.57 (.04)***	.45 (.04)***
“Lazy Recipient” condition ^a	.21 (.02)***	.34 (.02)***
“Unlucky Recipient” condition ^a	-.21 (.02)***	-.14 (.02)***
Dominance of “lazy” stereotypes	.08 (.01)***	.11 (.01)***
“Lazy Recipient” condition × dominance of “lazy” stereotypes	-.05 (.02)**	-.06 (.02)**
“Unlucky Recipient” condition × dominance of “lazy” stereotypes	-.07 (.02)***	-.07 (.02)***
Female	-.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)
Education	.05 (.04)	-.01 (.03)
Age	<-.00 (.001)	<.00 (<.00)
R ²	.30	.40
N	958	948

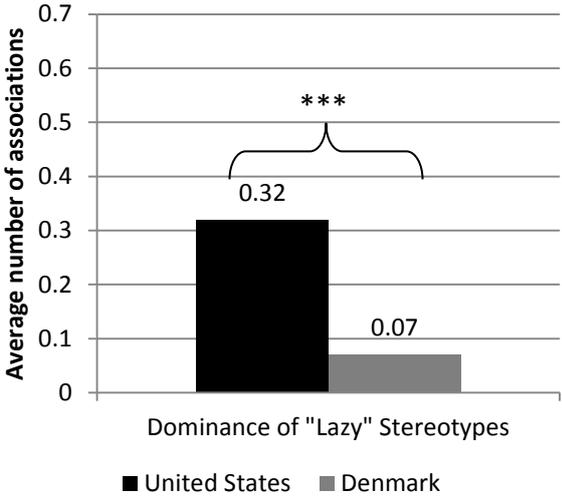
Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is opposition to social welfare, with higher values indicating more support for tighter eligibility requirements (i.e., higher values indicate more opposition to social welfare).^a Reference category on the experimental variable is “Recipient with No Cues” condition *** p < .001, **p < .01, * p < .05, two-tailed t-test.

Figure 1 Average Number of Associations about Social Welfare Recipients by Stereotype Category and Country



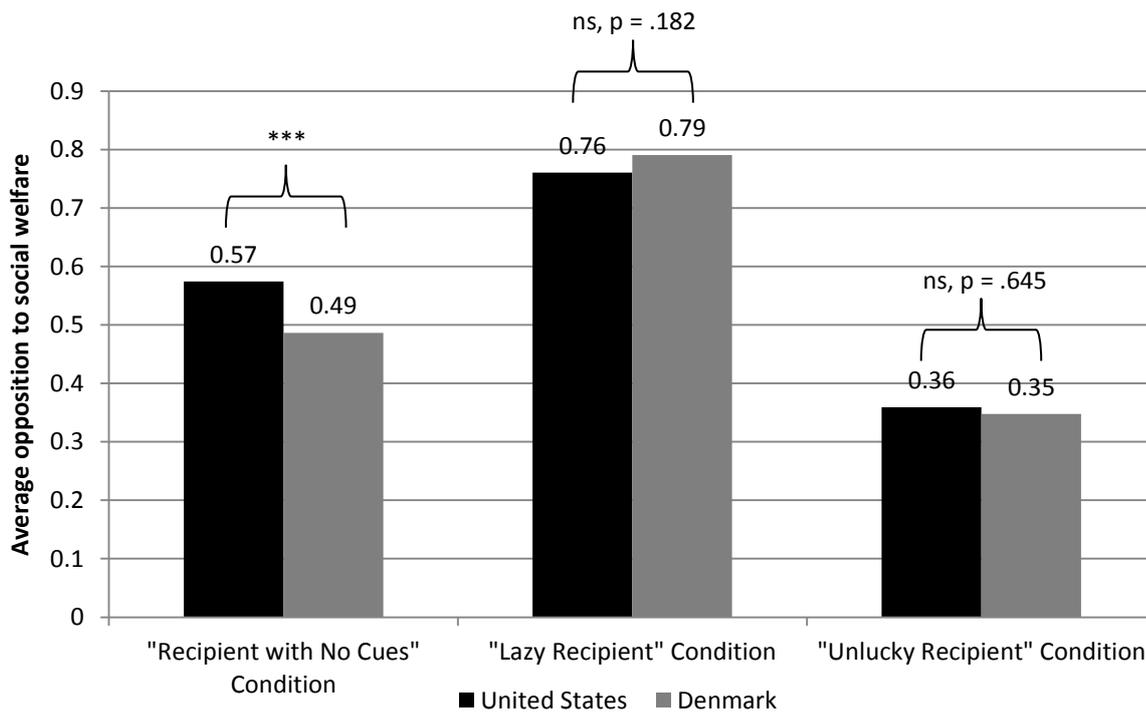
Note: Entries represent the average number of reported laziness and bad luck associations. The results have been calculated using independent sample t-test. 1,009 respondents participated in the US survey and 1,006 in the Danish survey. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed t-test.

Figure 2 Dominance of “Lazy” Stereotypes by Country



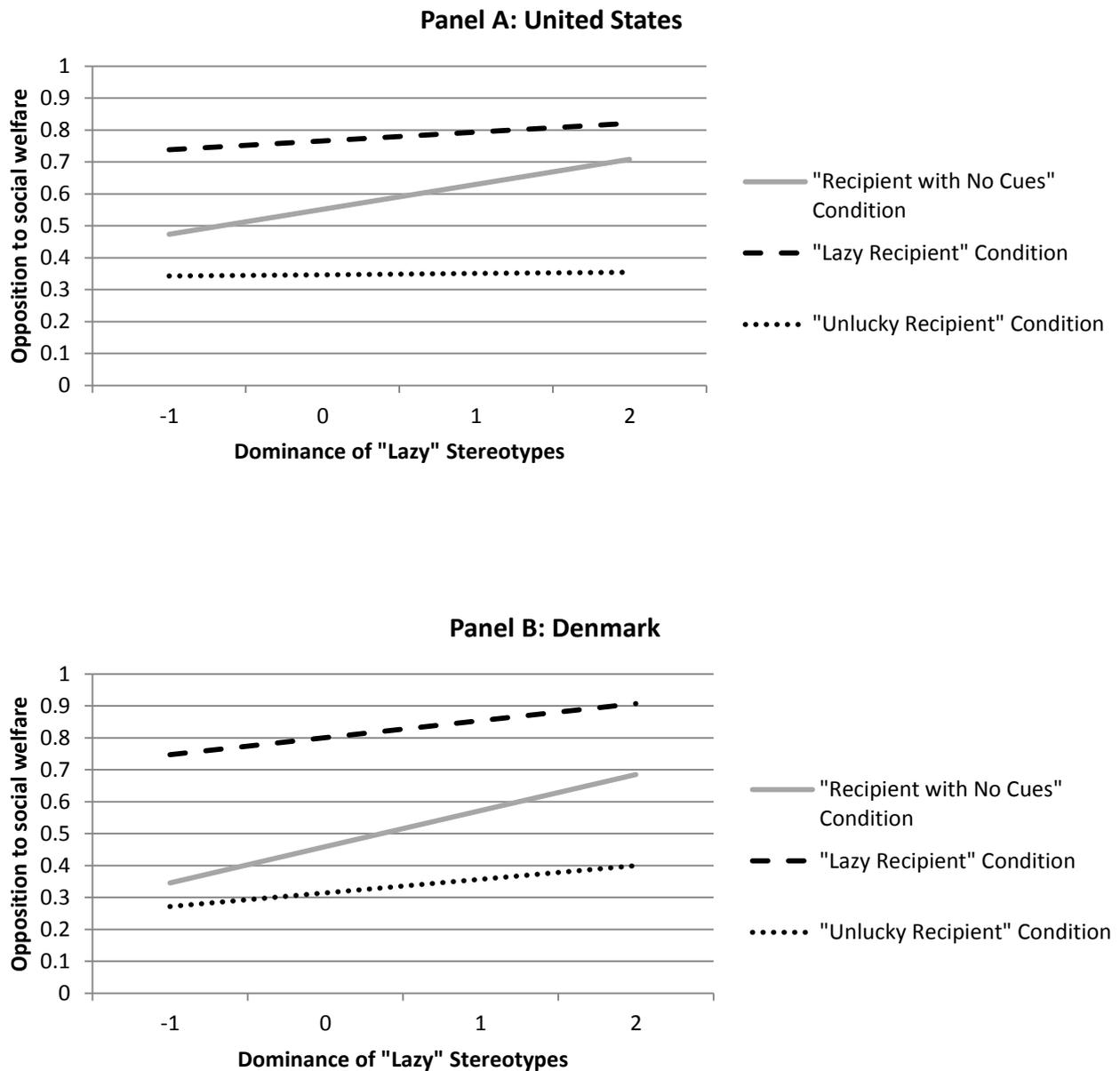
Note: The results have been calculated using independent sample t-test 1,009 respondents participated in the U.S. survey and 1,006 in the Danish survey. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed t-test.

Figure 3 Opposition to Social Welfare by Experimental Condition and Country



Note: The illustrations are based on the findings in Table 1. The dependent variable is opposition to social welfare, with higher values indicating more support for tighter eligibility requirements (i.e., higher values indicate higher opposition to social welfare). The findings are illustrated holding the control variables at their mean (age = 42.7, education = .54) and mode (female = male). *** p < .001, **p < .01, * p < .05, two-tailed t-test.

Figure 4 The Crowding-Out Effect of Minimal Cues on the Impact of Stereotypes



Note: The illustrations are based on the findings in Table 2. The dependent variable is opposition to social welfare, with higher values indicating more support for tighter eligibility requirements (i.e., higher values indicate higher opposition to social welfare). To avoid extrapolation, the effects of the experimental condition are illustrated from the 10th to the 90th percentile on dominance of laziness stereotypes and holding control variables constant at their mean (age = 42.7, education = .54) and mode (gender = male). *** p < .001, **p < .01, * p < .05, two-tailed t-test.