

Beliefs That White People Are Poor, Above and Beyond Beliefs That Black People Are Poor, Predict White (But Not Black) Americans' Attitudes Toward Welfare Recipients and Policy

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Abstract

In past work, White Americans' beliefs about Black poverty have predicted lower perceived work ethic of the poor, and, thus, less welfare support. In this article, we examine whether beliefs about White poverty predict more positive attributions about the poor among three representative samples of White Americans. Study 1 reveals that White (but not Black) Americans' White-poor beliefs predict increased perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking, which predict more welfare support. Study 2 demonstrates that the link between White Americans' White-poor beliefs and the humanization of welfare recipients is stronger among White Americans who feel intergroup status threat (i.e., those who hold racial zero-sum beliefs). Study 3 replicates and extends Study 2 by using an experimental approach. Together, these data suggest that White Americans' White-poor beliefs function to humanize welfare recipients as a means to justify policies that could help the ingroup, preserving the racial status quo.

Keywords

race/class stereotypes, economic inequality, welfare policy

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In the United States, support for welfare policies—policies that intend to lift people out of poverty—remains controversial. Although attitudes toward welfare policies are multifaceted, past work has emphasized the racialized role of dehumanizing the poor. This prior work finds that among White Americans¹ beliefs that Black people are poor predict a tendency to perceive welfare recipients as lazy and underserving and, in turn, oppose welfare policies (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019, 2021; Cooley et al., 2019, 2020).

More recently, however, a narrative about the plight of poor White Americans has loudly emerged. Stories about the impact of the opioid crisis, the shrinking employment opportunities for those in rural America, and the rise of the populist movement have all focused on poor White people (Jardina, 2019; Knowles & Tropp, 2018; Om, 2018). Relatedly, the growth of right-wing extremism reflects a burgeoning contingency of White Americans who believe that White people are being pushed down by People of Color (e.g., “the great replacement” conspiracy; Jones, 2022). This latter narrative suggests that some White Americans perceive racial economic standing as “zero sum” such that progress

for racialized minorities is perceived to come at the expense of White Americans.

Together, these societal narratives linking White people with low status are important because White Americans who are particularly attuned to White poverty may respond by *humanizing* the poor, and, in turn, expressing more support for policies that help the poor as a way to mitigate the perceived low status of their racial group. To test this hypothesis, the current work measures (Studies 1 and 2) and manipulates (Study 3) White Americans' White-poor beliefs

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to examine their relationship with the humanization of the poor and support for welfare policies. This work also evaluates whether these processes are motivated to help the racial ingroup in two ways. First, we include a sample of Black Americans to assess whether the link between White-poor beliefs and the humanization of welfare recipients is uniquely displayed by White (but not Black) Americans. Second, we test whether these processes are more likely to emerge among White Americans who endorse racial zero-sum beliefs (e.g., beliefs that gains for Black people equate to losses for White people).

White (vs. Black) Americans Are Less Supportive of Welfare Policies

White Americans, on average, are less supportive of redistributive policies and welfare policies than are Black Americans (Wetts & Willer, 2018; Wilson, 2001). There are a variety of reasons why this divergence in support along racial lines may emerge. Most notably, Black (vs. White) Americans tend to be more aware of structural and systemic racism given their lived experience of being Black in America (Nelson et al., 2013). And, greater awareness of racism may lead Black Americans to be less likely to attribute economic hardship to internal attributes such as laziness (Rucker et al., 2019). As a result, welfare may be viewed as a necessary step toward righting structural inequality among Black (vs. White) Americans—rather than handouts that facilitate laziness—yielding greater support for welfare policies on average (see also Bonam et al., 2019).

Another key factor underlying differences in Black and White Americans' support for welfare may be White Americans' racial prejudice (e.g., Gilens, 1996). Abundant data suggest that welfare policies are "racially coded" meaning that discussions of these policies activate White Americans' negative stereotypes of Black Americans without overtly mentioning the race of the welfare recipient or saying overtly racist statements (e.g., Gilens, 1996). As a result of welfare being racially coded, prior work highlights that White Americans tend to associate welfare recipients with being lazy Black Americans (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017); and, the strongest known predictor of negative attitudes toward welfare policies is White Americans' racist attitudes (Gilens, 1996). Together, these data suggest that White Americans' beliefs that Black people are poor predict a tendency to dehumanize welfare recipients and, in turn, oppose welfare policies (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019, 2021; Cooley et al., 2020).

How Might Assumptions That White People Are Poor Shift Attitudes Toward Welfare?

In addition to thinking that Black people are poor, White Americans may be likely to think that White people can be poor. Numerous factors may affect beliefs that White people

are poor. For example, based on population size alone, there are more White Americans than any other race/ethnicity who live at or below the poverty line (U.S. Census, 2020). Thus, given the context of being in a majority-White country, it stands to reason that many Americans may believe that White people are poor.

However, there are also reasons to believe that White Americans (vs. Black Americans) may be particularly likely to think that White people are poor. For example, basic cognitive processes lead to a greater awareness of variability within one's own group than within outgroups (i.e., ingroup heterogeneity effects; Konovalova & Le Mens, 2020). As a result, White Americans (vs. Black Americans) should be more likely to perceive economic variability among White Americans—perceiving some White people to be wealthy, but others to be poor. Consistent with this reasoning, recent data reveal that White Americans form a sense of their own status by frequently comparing to other White people, rather than people from other racial groups (Cooley et al., 2020, 2021); as a result, White Americans may be particularly attuned to economic variability among White people. Together these findings suggest that a variety of cognitive processes may lead White Americans to be particularly likely to attend to poverty within their own racial group.

Individual Differences in White Poor Beliefs

Although White Americans, on average, may be more attuned to White poverty than Black Americans are, some White Americans may be more likely to attend to White poverty than others. In particular, a variety of work suggests that some White Americans are reticent to acknowledge the status conferred to them due to racism in the United States (i.e., "White privilege denial"; Dobbs & Nicholson, 2022; Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Indeed, a growing contingency of White Americans express feeling that White people experience racism (Norton & Sommers, 2011), that White people have been left behind (Graham & Pinto, 2021; Jardina, 2019), and that White people's relative status is at risk (Cohen et al., 2017). Recent populist movements, the election of Donald Trump, and the January 6th uprising (among myriad other events) are thought to stem from White Americans who feel that White people are being replaced and pushed down by other racial groups (Jones, 2022). Thus, White Americans who are most attuned to the perceived challenges faced by White people in the United States may also be most likely to associate White people with poverty.

The Role of Racial-Zero-Sum Beliefs

If White Americans believe that White people are poor, this may lead some White Americans to humanize the poor. In particular, when people view racial status as zero-sum, such that the racial progress of minoritized peoples is perceived to come at the expense of White Americans, they may respond by simultaneously humanizing ingroup members and

dehumanizing outgroup members to maintain a group-based hierarchy (e.g., Bruneau et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2004; Kteily et al., 2015; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Lending indirect evidence to this possibility, research finds that people often misinterpret the economy as zero-sum: One person's financial successes are perceived to come at the expense of other's financial failures (e.g., Friedman & Friedman, 1990). Furthermore, when people believe they are competing for scarce resources, those high in zero-sum beliefs tend to express the most ingroup support and outgroup prejudice (Esses et al., 2001). It follows that White Americans, who both believe White people are poor, and who are high in racial zero-sum beliefs, may be particularly motivated to humanize poor welfare recipients—people who they may be likely to envision as struggling ingroup members.

Greater humanization of the poor, and of welfare recipients in particular, may then justify greater support for welfare policy as a method to remediate the perceived low status of the ingroup. Research indirectly lends evidence to this hypothesis: Stoking fear in White Americans that they will lose their status as a result of increasing racial diversity increases endorsement for policies that would reduce threats to White people's status such as restrictive immigration policies (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Outten et al., 2012). Likewise, in areas where both unemployment and racial diversity were particularly high, White Americans were more likely to feel that their racial group was threatened and, thus, were more likely to support a political figure who advocated for White people (i.e., Trump; Knowles & Tropp, 2018). Together these findings suggest that White Americans who perceive other racial groups to be a status threat—namely those high in racial zero-sum beliefs (Wilkins et al., 2015)—may be particularly likely to link White-poor beliefs to the humanization of welfare recipients, and, thus, welfare policy support. This process may function to preserve the racial status quo.

Overview of Present Studies

Based on previous theory and data, we hypothesized that White (vs. Black) Americans would report greater beliefs that White people are poor, and that these beliefs would predict: (a) humanization of welfare recipients, (b) a stronger belief that welfare recipients are hardworking, and, in turn, (c) more support for welfare policies. Critically, by measuring White-poor and Black-poor beliefs orthogonally, we were able to test whether the effects of White-poor beliefs would emerge above and beyond the established effects of Black-poor beliefs (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Gilens, 1996). Finally, we anticipated these effects would be strongest among White Americans highest in racial zero-sum beliefs—White people who may be most motivated to maintain the current racial hierarchy.

We tested these hypotheses across three studies. In Study 1, we obtained a representative sample ($N = 837$) of non-Hispanic Black and White Americans. Within this sample,

we assessed beliefs that Black and White people are poor, work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients, and support for welfare policy. In Study 2 ($N = 619$), we replicated and extended upon Study 1 by directly measuring humanization of the poor (perceived agency) and racial zero-sum beliefs. Finally, in Study 3 ($N = 628$), we replicated and extended upon Study 2 by manipulating, rather than measuring, White-poor beliefs. We report all measures and data exclusions below.²

Study 1 Method

Statistical Power and Participants

In Study 1, we conducted an *a priori* power analysis (Faul et al. 2009) for a MANOVA with two numerator degrees of freedom, two groups, and four covariates, to detect a small-to-medium effect size ($f = 0.15$) with adequate power ($1 - \beta = .80$). These analyses suggested we would need at least $N = 432$ to detect the predicted effect. Because we also wanted to investigate a moderation pattern of attenuation (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2019) and we wanted to account for attrition, we sought to at least double our desired sample size. To enhance the generalizability of our results, we used a survey recruitment platform (Lucid Panels) to recruit 500 non-Hispanic Black Americans representative of Black Americans living in the United States based on region of the country, age, gender, and education; and 500 non-Hispanic White Americans representative of White Americans living in the United States on the same characteristics.

Our final sample, after omitting participants who did not identify as Monoracial and who were currently receiving welfare ($N = 158$)³ was 431 White participants (231 women, 194 men, 6 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 48.52$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 17.39$; $Med_{\text{income}} = \text{US\$40,000-US\$49,999}$; $Med_{\text{edu}} = \text{some college, no degree}$; 143 Democrats, 157 Republicans, 107 Independents, 24 Other) and 406 Black participants (227 women, 277 men, 2 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 44.75$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.35$; $Med_{\text{income}} = \text{US\$30,000-US\$34,999}$; $Med_{\text{edu}} = \text{some college, no degree}$; 291 Democrats, 25 Republicans, 71 Independent, 17 Other).

Based on our obtained sample size, we conducted a sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2009). Given our total sample size ($N = 837$) and seven total predictors, this analysis revealed that we had adequate power ($1 - \beta = .80$) to detect a small effect ($f^2 = 0.009$).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were told that we were interested in their perceptions of the types of people who tend to be wealthy and poor in the United States. Then, participants responded to the following two statements, comprising our key measure of racialized poverty beliefs, on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) scales: (a) "When I think of White people, I tend to think of poor people"; and

Table 1. Correlations Among Key Variables Separately by Participant Race, Study 1.

Variable names	White-poor beliefs	Black-poor beliefs	Work Ethic	Welfare support	Income	Education	Political party
White-poor beliefs	—	.52	.12	.13	-.13	-.02	-.05
Black-poor beliefs	.17	—	-.05	.14	.03	.06	.03
Work ethic	-.02	.01	—	.48	-.01	.06	.34
Welfare support	.10	.23	.28	—	-.11	.04	.33
Income	-.03	-.01	.12	.10	—	.43	.10
Education	.001	.02	.06	.08	.42	—	.11
Political party (1 = democrat; 0 = else)	.08	.05	.20	.28	.10	.07	—
Sample descriptives							
Black sample: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.47 (1.27)	3.43 (1.48)	3.87 (0.93)	4.41 (1.06)			
White sample: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.80 (1.12)	3.31 (1.22)	3.59 (1.05)	4.08 (1.26)			

Note. Correlations between variables of interest for White sample above the diagonal. Correlations between variables of interest for Black sample below the diagonal. Bolded correlations are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

(b) When I think of Black people, I tend to think of poor people.”

Next, participants responded to our key questions about work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients and attitudes toward welfare. To assess the perceived work ethic of welfare recipients, we included the following five items all assessed on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) scales: (1) “Most people on welfare could get by without it if they really tried (reverse-scored);” (2) “People who stay on welfare have no desire to work (reverse-scored);” (3) “Welfare recipients are lazy on average (reverse-scored);” (4) “Welfare recipients tend to be ambitious;” and (5) “In general, welfare recipients are hard-working.” We averaged across these items so that higher values indicated perceptions that welfare recipients were harder working ($\alpha = .78$). To assess support for welfare policies, participants responded to the following three items: (a) “In general, the wealthy should be taxed at higher rates to provide benefits to the poor” (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*) (b) “Imagine you had a say in making up the federal budget for the next fiscal year. Would you want more or less money dedicated to welfare programs?” (1 = *much less money*; 6 = *much more money*), and (c) “How do you feel about raising federal income taxes for people who make more than US\$200,000 per year to benefit public services for low income individuals?” (1 = *I greatly oppose this policy*; 6 = *I greatly support this policy*; $\alpha = .79$).

Participants concluded by reporting demographic information including whether they were currently receiving welfare, political affiliation, income, education, and racial identification.

Additional/Exploratory Measures

Because of the cost associated with recruiting a representative and large sample of Black and White Americans, we also included several items to address separate research questions. These measures included: (a) racialized wealth beliefs (see Supplemental Materials for exploratory analyses); (b) beliefs about the percentage of people of different races below the

poverty line in the U.S. and in participants’ home cities; (c) subjective status; (d) attitudes toward reparations; (e) voting intentions in the 2020 Presidential election; (f) contact with White and Black people (for interesting exploratory findings using this variable, see Supplemental Materials); (g) media consumption; (h) feeling thermometers; and (i) motivations to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among key variables appear in Table 1.

Racial Group Differences in Race/Poverty Stereotypes

First, we assessed whether White and Black Americans vary in their beliefs about the race of the poor. To test this, we conducted a MANOVA predicting White-poor beliefs and Black-poor beliefs by participants’ race. We also included income and education (both standardized) and political ideology (*democrat* = 1; *else* = 0) as control variables. This allowed us to ensure that the effects of White-poor beliefs on our outcomes were not confounded by participants’ own objective status or political beliefs (see Supplemental Materials for comparable results without controls).

Results of the MANOVA revealed an overall effect of participants’ race, $F(2, 831) = 11.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. We next looked at the effects of participants’ race separately when predicting White-poor beliefs versus Black-poor beliefs. White participants reported significantly greater endorsement of the belief that White people are poor ($M = 2.83, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.71, 2.95]$) than Black participants ($M = 2.44, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.32, 2.56]$), $F(1, 832) = 18.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$. In contrast, there was no effect of participants’ race on Black-poor beliefs: White participants ($M = 3.33, 95\% \text{ CI} = [3.20, 3.47]$) and Black participants ($M = 3.41, 95\% \text{ CI} = [3.27, 3.55]$) reported similar beliefs that Black

Table 2. Regression Model Predicting Perceived Work Ethic of Welfare Recipients, Study 1.

Predictors	Perceived work ethic			
	B	SE	p	95% CI
Intercept	−0.31	0.07	<.001	[−0.45, −0.17]
Education (z)	0.05	0.04	.135	[−0.02, 0.13]
Income (z)	−0.03	0.04	.394	[−0.10, 0.04]
Democrat (1 = <i>democrat</i> , 0 = <i>else</i>)	0.62	0.07	<.001	[0.48, 0.76]
Black-poor beliefs (z)	0.01	0.04	.905	[−0.08, 0.09]
Sample race (1 = <i>White</i> , 0 = <i>Black</i>)	−0.07	0.07	.336	[−0.22, 0.07]
White-poor beliefs (z)	−0.04	0.05	.350	[−0.13, 0.05]
Sample race × Black-poor beliefs (z)	−0.20	0.07	.005	[−0.35, −0.06]
Sample race × White-poor beliefs (z)	0.29	0.07	<.001	[0.14, 0.43]

Note. Our effect of interest is bolded. (z) indicates variables that were standardized prior to analyses.

people are poor, $F(1, 832) = 0.64$, $p = .425$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. Therefore, consistent with hypotheses, White (vs. Black) Americans were more likely to think White people were poor, but equally likely as Black Americans to think Black people were poor.

Investigating the Role of White-Poor Beliefs, Black-Poor Beliefs, and Participants' Race on the Work Ethic Stereotyping of Welfare Recipients

To assess work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients, we asked participants their perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking. Our key hypothesis was that, among White participants, stronger White-poor beliefs would predict perceptions that welfare recipients have more work ethic, and that these effects would hold above and beyond the effects of Black-poor beliefs—effects that have been the primary focus of prior work (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017). Because we anticipated that these processes are motivated to preserve the relative status of White Americans, we did not expect to see these same associations among Black Americans.

To test these hypotheses, we regressed beliefs that welfare recipients are hardworking onto White-poor beliefs, Black-poor beliefs, participants' race (1 = *White*; 0 = *Black*), and two two-way interactions: participants' race × White-poor beliefs and participants' race × Black-poor beliefs. To test this model, we used PROCESS in SPSS (Model 2; Hayes, 2017) with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. We controlled for participants' income, education, and political ideology (1 = *democrat*; *else* = 0). Continuous variables were standardized prior to analysis. By including beliefs that Black people are poor in our regression model—the predictor of primary focus of prior work—we were able to isolate the unique effect of White-poor beliefs on perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking (see Supplemental Materials for comparable results without controls). Central to our hypotheses, we found a significant interaction between participants'

race and White-poor beliefs when predicting perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking (see Table 2).

To probe this interaction, we estimated the effect of White-poor beliefs on perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking separately for White and Black participants (see Figure 1, left panel). As predicted, among the White sample, stronger White-poor beliefs predicted greater beliefs that welfare recipients are hardworking, $b = 0.25$, $t = 4.25$, $p < .001$. In contrast, among Black Americans, there was no relationship between White-poor beliefs and perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking, $b = -0.04$, $t = -0.94$, $p = .350$.

Of note, although less central to the focus of this article, we also observed a significant interaction between participants' race and Black-poor beliefs (see Table 2 and Figure 1, right panel). Consistent with previous theory and research (e.g., Gilens, 1996), among the White sample, stronger Black-poor beliefs predicted *reduced* beliefs that welfare recipients were hardworking, $b = -0.20$, $t = -3.36$, $p < .001$. Among Black Americans, however, there was no relationship between Black-poor beliefs and perceptions of welfare recipients' work ethic, $b = 0.005$, $t = 0.12$, $p = .905$.

Together these findings suggest that links between White-poor beliefs and work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients are expressed distinctly by White Americans, consistent with the possibility that these patterns reflect motives to maintain the racial hierarchy.

Moderated Mediation Predicting Policy Support

Finally, we examined whether perceptions that welfare recipients are hardworking mediated the relationship between White-poor beliefs and support for welfare policies among White (but not Black) Americans. To test this hypothesis, we tested for moderated mediation using PROCESS (Model 8) and 5,000 bootstrapped re-samples (see Figure 2). Mirroring our regression models, we included income, education, political ideology, and Black-poor beliefs as covariates. All continuous variables were standardized before analysis.

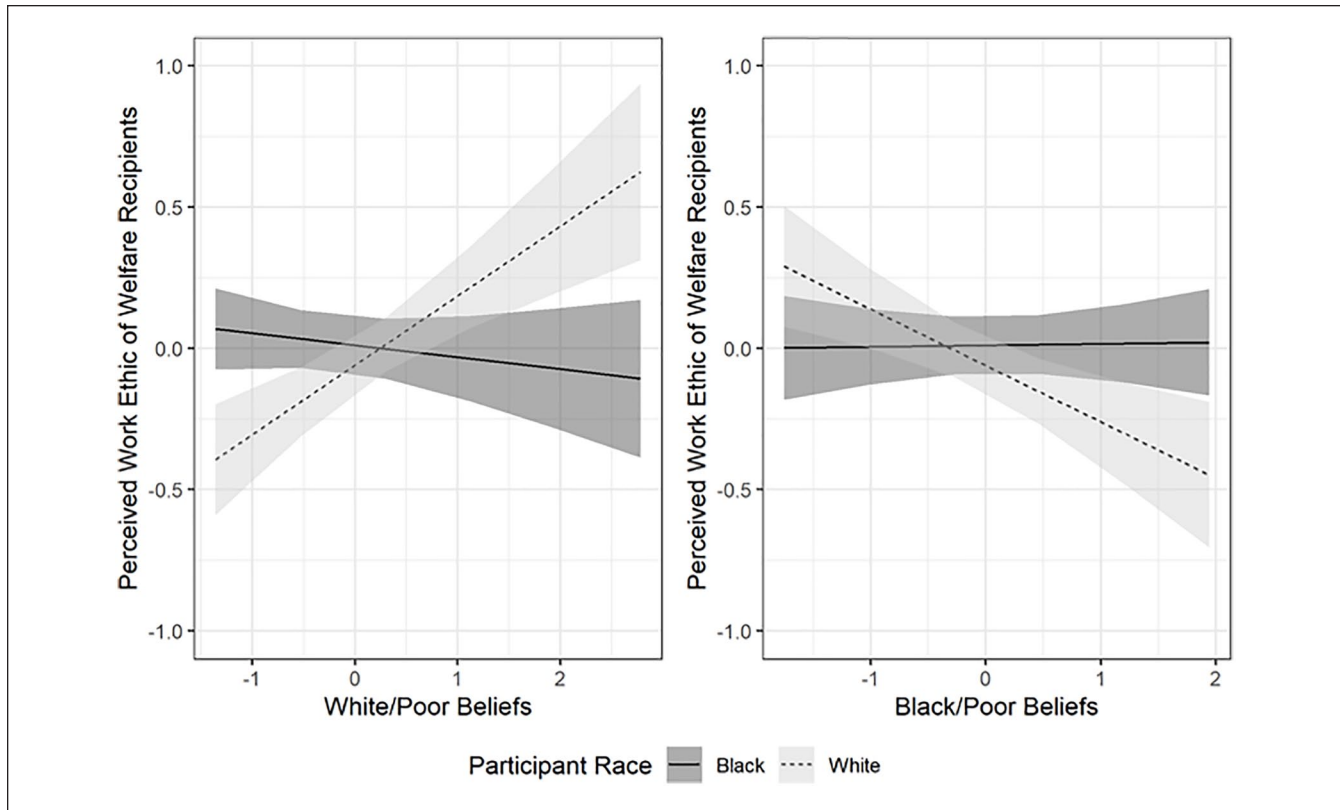


Figure 1. Participant Race Moderated the Effect of White-Poor Beliefs and Black-Poor Beliefs on the Perceived Work Ethic of Welfare Recipients, Study 1.

Note. Gray bands reflect 95% confidence intervals.

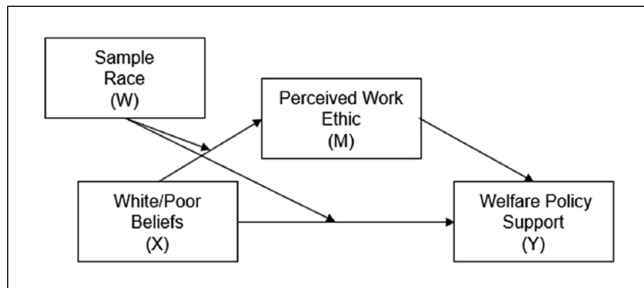


Figure 2. Theorized Moderated Mediation Model, Study 1.

As predicted, results revealed a significant moderated mediation effect, $b = 0.07$, 95% CI = [.03, .12], such that there was a significant indirect effect among White Americans, $b = 0.06$, 95% CI = [.02, .10], but not Black Americans, $b = -0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.04, .02] (see Figure 3). In particular, White Americans highest in White-poor beliefs thought welfare recipients were harder working, which predicted greater welfare support.

Discussion

Study 1 revealed that White Americans held stronger beliefs that White people are poor than Black Americans.

Furthermore, White-poor beliefs predicted increased perceptions that welfare recipients were hardworking—but only among White (not Black) Americans. Perceived work ethic, in turn, predicted greater support for welfare policies.

These findings provide an important extension of previous work which has largely focused on how, among White Americans, beliefs that Black people are poor predict perceiving the poor as lazy and, in turn, reduced support for welfare (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017, 2019; Dupree et al., 2020; Gilens, 1996, 1999). Although we replicate that finding here, we also extend upon prior work to show that when we simultaneously consider both beliefs about Black poverty and White poverty—which prior work has not—that White-poor beliefs have unique effects on White Americans' work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients. On the surface, these effects may seem to reflect ingroup favoritism. However, if ingroup favoritism were the mechanism, we would have expected to see associations between Black-poor beliefs and increased perceptions of welfare recipients' work ethic among Black Americans, which we did not. Thus, it may be that White Americans associate White-poor beliefs with more positive evaluations of welfare recipients and welfare policy support as a way to preserve the current racial economic hierarchy.

Study 1 also has several limitations. First, we theorized a process by which White-poor beliefs humanize poor people and, in turn, lead to more beliefs that welfare recipients are

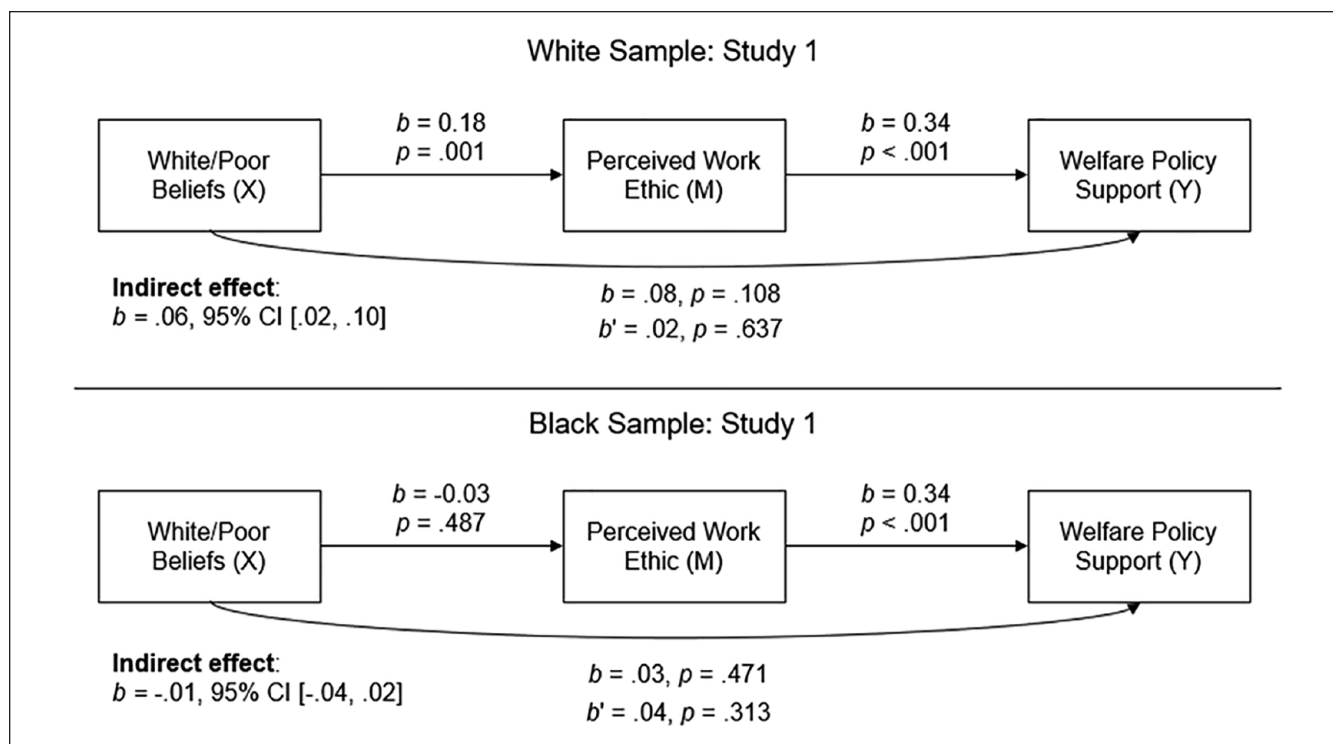


Figure 3. Indirect Effect of White-Poor Beliefs on Welfare Policy Support Through Increased Beliefs That Welfare Recipients Are Hardworking Among White, But Not Black Participants, Study 1.

hardworking and more support for welfare policies. Yet, we did not measure humanization of the poor; instead, we only measured work ethic stereotyping of the poor (a key mediator of race effects on welfare support in prior work; for example, Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2021). Second, if these processes are motivated to help White people (as we predict), then White-poor beliefs should predict the humanization of welfare recipients most strongly among White Americans who feel status threat from other racial groups.

Study 2

In Study 2, we gathered a new representative sample of White Americans with the intent of extending upon our Study 1 findings in two key ways. First, in addition to measuring work ethic stereotyping, we included what we reasoned might be a more integral mechanism: the humanization of welfare recipients in terms of their perceived capacity for agency (Gray et al., 2007). We hypothesized that, among White Americans, greater beliefs that White people benefit from welfare would predict greater perceptions that welfare recipients are capable of agency (Gray et al., 2007). Humanization in terms of agency may then precede more specific perceptions of recipient work ethic and, ultimately welfare support. In other words, perceiving a mental capacity for agency in welfare recipients may be a necessary prerequisite to stereotyping them as having work ethic.

Second, we investigated whether White participants who most strongly endorsed racial zero-sum beliefs would report the strongest relationship between beliefs White people are poor and humanization of the poor. If so, this would suggest that these processes are motivated to preserve the racial status quo (for related work see Bruneau et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2004; Kteily et al., 2015; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993).

Method

Statistical Power and Participants

We expected to examine linear models with four focal predictors (White-poor beliefs; Black-poor beliefs; zero-sum beliefs; and the White-poor \times zero-sum interaction) and three theory-based control variables that were included prior studies (i.e., income, education, and political orientation). An *a priori* power analysis (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that we would need approximately 600 participants to detect a small effect ($f^2 = .02$) with adequate power ($1 - \beta = .80$). To enhance the generalizability of our results, we used a survey recruitment platform (Lucid Panels) to recruit 700 non-Hispanic White Americans representative of White Americans living in the United States based on region of the country, age, gender, and education.

After omitting participants who were currently receiving welfare ($N = 109$) and a participant who did not complete all

our measures of interest ($N = 1$), our final sample consisted of 558 White participants (281 women, 265 men, 12 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 44.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 17.46$; $Med_{\text{income}} = \text{US\$40,000-US\$49,999}$; $Med_{\text{edu}} = \text{some college, no degree}$; 168 Democrat, 207 Republican, 148 Independent, 33 Other, and 2 did not respond).

Based on our sample size, we conducted a sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2009). Given our total sample size ($N = 558$) and seven total predictors, this analysis revealed that we had adequate power ($1 - \beta = .80$) to detect a small effect size ($f^2 = .014$).

Procedure

The procedure for Study 2 was similar to Study 1 with three key changes. First, in addition to measuring work ethic stereotyping (as in Study 1), we measured the humanization of welfare recipients (i.e., perceived capacity for “agency”; an important dimension of humanization as theorized by Gray et al., 2007). In particular, participants reported their agreement with four items assessing the degree to which welfare recipients are capable of (a) “exercising self-control”; (b) “acting morally”; (c) “remembering”; and (d) “planning” on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) scales ($\alpha = .90$).

Second, participants completed a measure of racial zero-sum beliefs (from Wilkins et al., 2015). This scale included five items: (a) “Blacks take jobs away from Whites”; (b) “When racial minorities get rights, they are taking rights away from Whites”; (c) “Rights for Blacks mean Whites lose out”; (d) “As Blacks face less racism, Whites end up facing more racism”; and (e) “Less discrimination against minorities means more discrimination against Whites” (1 = *strongly agree*; 6 = *strongly disagree*; $\alpha = .92$). We hypothesized that racial zero-sum beliefs would moderate the relation between White-poor beliefs and the humanization of welfare recipients in terms of perceived agency.

Finally, participants reported their general support for welfare policy using the same items as Study 1, but with the addition of two more specific policy items: one that measured support for “temporary assistance for needy families,” a policy that provides cash assistance to needy families and another that measured support for “healthy family initiatives,” a policy that provides education to eligible families on how to keep their families together. Responses to all five welfare items were combined into a welfare policy support composite for analyses ($\alpha = .84$). Participants concluded by reporting demographic information.

Exploratory Measures

We included two additional measures: (a) racialized wealth beliefs as in Study 1 and (b) perceptions of racial economic inequality (see Supplementary Materials for exploratory analyses on these variables). Both of these measures were included to provide pilot data for different research questions.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables appear in Table 3.

Predicting Perceptions of Welfare Recipients’ Capacity for Agency

We hypothesized that White-poor beliefs would predict the humanization (i.e., perceived capacity for agency) of welfare recipients, particularly among people who strongly held racial zero-sum beliefs. To test this hypothesis, we predicted the perceived agency of welfare recipients by White-poor beliefs, racial zero-sum beliefs, and the interaction between these two predictors using PROCESS (Model 1) with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. As in prior studies, we controlled for Black-poor beliefs, income, education and political affiliation ($democrat = 1$; $else = 0$). All continuous variables were standardized before analyses. As can be seen in Table 4, results revealed a significant interaction between White-poor beliefs and racial zero-sum beliefs.

We next probed this significant interaction by testing the effect of White-poor beliefs on the perceived agency of welfare recipients separately for people high ($+1 SD$) and low ($-1 SD$) in racial zero-sum beliefs (see Figure 4). As predicted, among those high in racial zero-sum beliefs, greater White-poor beliefs were associated with greater perceived agency of welfare recipients, $b = 0.20$, $p = .0004$, 95% CI = [0.09, 0.31]. In contrast, White-poor beliefs were not associated with the perceived agency of welfare recipients among those low in racial zero-sum beliefs, $b = -0.001$, $p = .992$, 95% CI = [-0.14, 0.14].

Moderated Mediation Model

Finally, we tested our broader theoretical model (see Figure 5) to examine whether the serial indirect effect from White-poor beliefs to welfare policy support via the humanization and work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients was stronger among those high in zero-sum beliefs. To test this model, we used PROCESS (Model 83), 5,000 bootstrapped resamples, and included the same covariates as included in all other models. All continuous variables were entered in standardized form. Results were consistent with our model. In particular, there was a significant moderated serial mediation effect through perceived agency and perceived work ethic, $b = .02$, 95% CI = [.001, 0.03]. Likewise, there was a simpler moderated mediation effect through perceived agency only, $b = .03$, 95% CI = [.001, .052]. To probe these moderated mediation effects, we tested mediation models separately for those high ($+1 SD$) and low ($-1 SD$) in zero-sum beliefs. As can be seen in Figure 6, both the serial indirect effect (through agency and work ethic) as well as the simpler indirect effect (through agency only) were significant for those high, but not low, in zero-sum beliefs.

Table 3. Correlations Among Key Variables and Descriptive Statistics, Study 2.

	Beliefs White people are poor	Beliefs Black people are poor	Humanization	Work ethic	Welfare policy support	Racial zero-sum	Income	Education
Beliefs White people are poor	—							
Beliefs Black people are poor	.61	—						
Humanization: capacity for agency	.14	.11	—					
Work ethic	.03	-.02	.44	—				
Welfare policy support	.23	.20	.48	.53	—			
Racial zero-sum	.25	.24	-.14	-.35	-.19	—		
Income	.00	.00	.01	-.12	-.03	.04	—	
Education	.10	.09	.06	-.01	.05	.04	.46	—
Political party (1 = democrat; 0 = else)	.02	.09	.19	.24	.30	-.15	.10	.19
Sample descriptives								
M	2.77	3.15	4.53	3.63	4.10	2.42	11.41	3.25
SD	1.21	1.31	0.99	1.07	1.11	1.25	4.80	1.41

Note. Bolded correlations are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 4. Regression Model Predicting Perceptions of Welfare Recipients' Capacity for Agency, Study 2.

Predictors	Humanization: perceived agency			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Intercept	-0.11	0.05	.021	[-0.21, -0.02]
Black-poor beliefs (z)	0.08	0.05	.150	[-0.03, 0.18]
Income	-0.02	0.05	.682	[-0.11, 0.07]
Education	0.03	0.05	.516	[-0.06, 0.12]
Political party (1 = democrat; 0 = else)	0.30	0.09	.001	[0.12, 0.48]
White-poor beliefs (z)	0.10	0.05	.064	[-0.01, 0.20]
Racial zero-sum beliefs (z)	-0.20	0.05	<.001	[-0.29, -0.11]
White-poor beliefs (z) × Zero-sum beliefs (z)	0.10	0.03	.003	[0.03, 0.17]

Note. Bold indicates the effect of interest. (z) indicates variables that were standardized prior to analysis.

Together, these findings suggest that among those who hold racial zero-sum beliefs, White-poor beliefs are associated with humanizing welfare recipients. Critically, this humanization of welfare recipients predicts more support for welfare policies.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 replicated and extended on our prior findings in several ways. First, replicating Study 1, when we simultaneously considered the predictive role of White-poor beliefs and Black-poor beliefs, White-poor beliefs uniquely predicted White Americans' evaluations of welfare recipients. Then, extending upon Study 1, we found that White-poor beliefs played a unique role in humanizing welfare recipients in terms of their perceived agency which then predicted the work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients. In

fact, a close examination of the significant indirect effects from our serial mediation model suggests that humanization in terms of perceived agency may be a more proximal mediator than work ethic stereotyping (a mediator of focus in prior work; e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019).

Finally, we found that associations between White-poor beliefs and the humanization of welfare recipients were moderated by racial zero-sum beliefs. In particular, White Americans high, but not low, in racial zero-sum beliefs exhibited a positive association between White-poor beliefs and the humanization of welfare recipients—a process that further predicted greater support for welfare policy.

Together, the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 demonstrate the unique effects of individual differences in White-poor beliefs, above and beyond the effects of Black-poor beliefs, on the humanization and work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients. Both studies also provide evidence

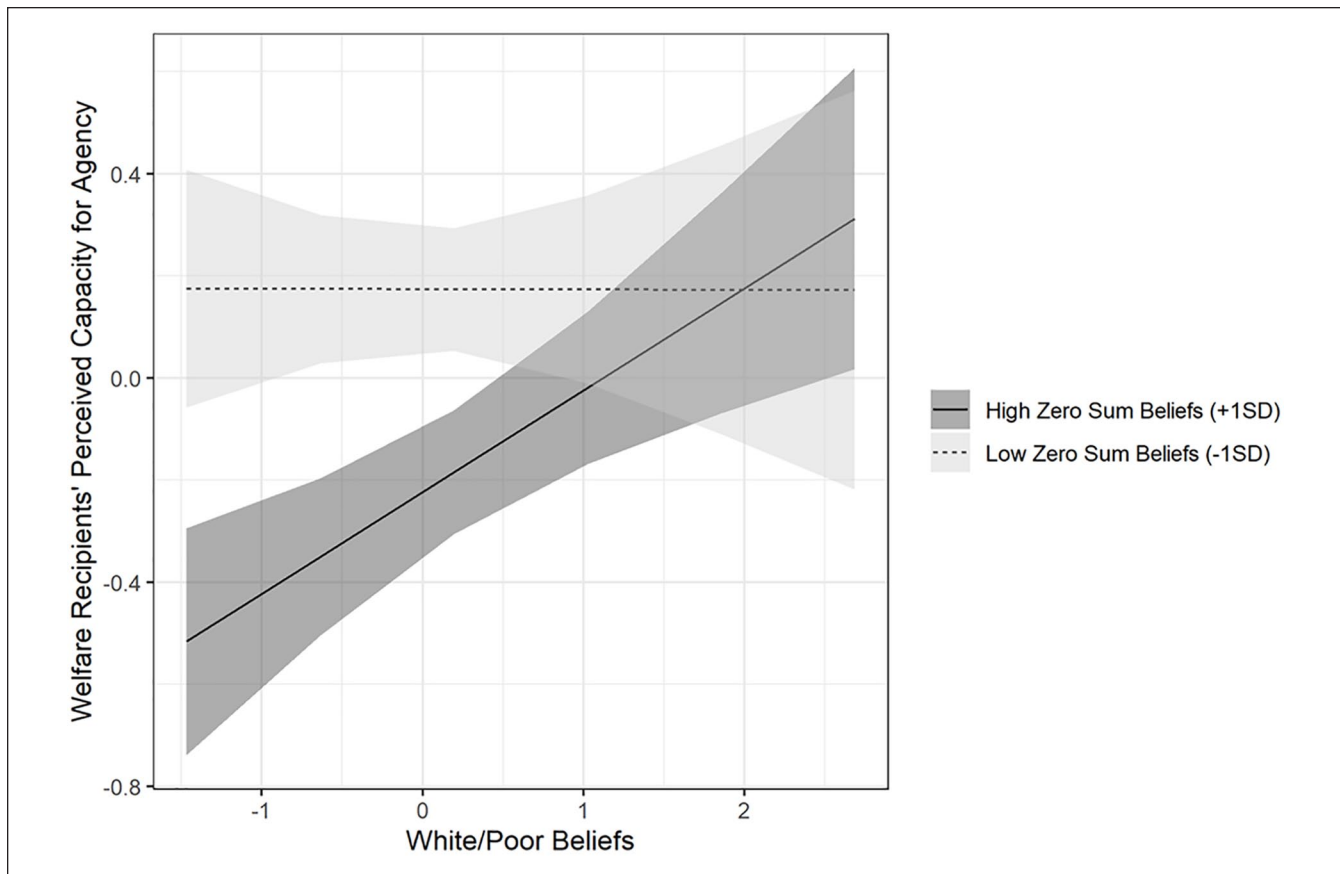


Figure 4. Zero-Sum Beliefs Moderated the Effect of White-Poor Beliefs on the Humanization of Welfare Recipients, Study 2.
 Note. Gray bands reflect 95% confidence intervals.

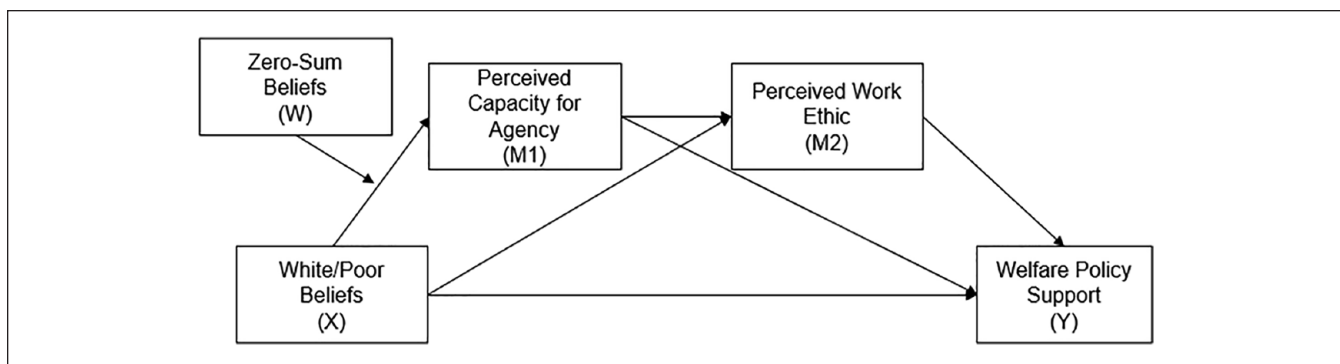


Figure 5. Theorized Moderated Mediation Model, Study2.

consistent with these processes being motivated to maintain the status quo: these effects were only observed among White (but not Black) Americans (Study 1) and these effects were most pronounced among White Americans high in intergroup status threat (Study 2).

That said, both Study 1 and Study 2 are correlational in nature. When combined with representative samples and theory-driven control variables, correlational data can provide compelling support for the possible causal role of

White-poor beliefs on the humanization of welfare recipients. However, correlational work is always vulnerable to confounds. Thus, in Study 3, we aim to replicate the findings from Study 2, but with an experimental design.

Study 3

In our final study, we aimed to provide experimental evidence of the humanizing effect of White-poor beliefs

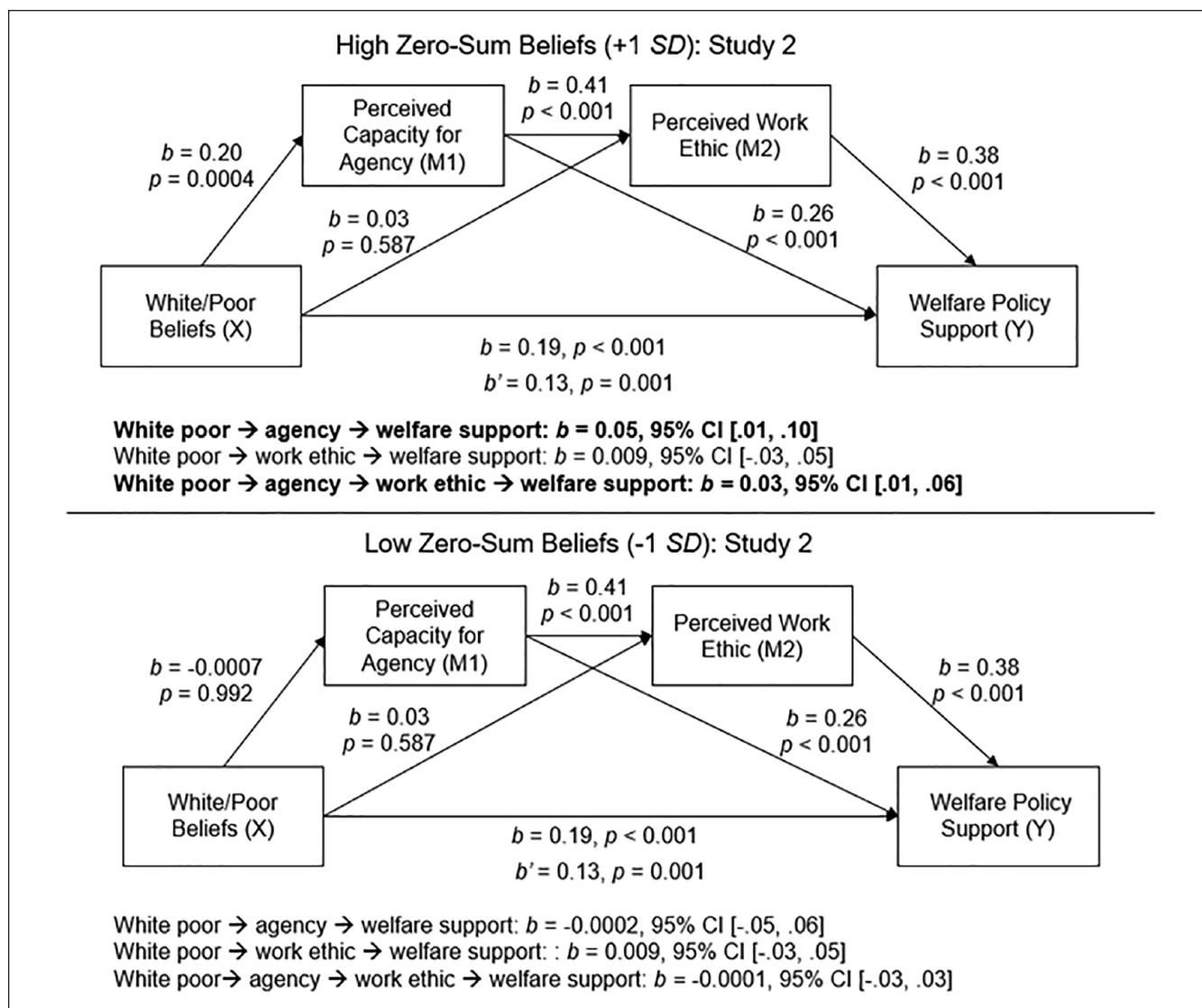


Figure 6. Significant Indirect Effects Observed for Those High But Not Low in Zero-Sum Beliefs, Study 2.

Note. Bolded indirect effects among those high in zero-sum beliefs (top figure) are statistically significant as reflected by confidence intervals that do not include zero.

on perceptions of welfare recipients by collecting a new representative sample of White Americans. Within this sample, we manipulated the salience of White-poor (vs. Black-poor) beliefs rather than measuring pre-existing individual differences in these beliefs. Finally, we again tested for the moderating role of intergroup status threat (i.e., racial zero-sum beliefs).

Method

Statistical Power and Participants

We expected to examine linear models with two focal predictors (race poverty condition; zero-sum beliefs; and the race poverty condition \times zero-sum interaction). An *a priori* power analysis (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that we would

need approximately 550 participants to detect a small effect ($f^2 = .02$) with adequate power ($1 - \beta = .80$). To enhance the generalizability of our results and account for attrition, we used a survey recruitment platform (Cint)⁴ to recruit 700 non-Hispanic White Americans representative of White Americans living in the United States based on region of the country, age, gender, and education.

After omitting participants who were currently receiving welfare ($N = 77$), our final sample consisted of 628 White participants (322 women, 301 men, 5 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 46.12$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.32$; $Med_{\text{income}} = \text{US\$40,000-US\$49,999}$; $Med_{\text{edu}} = \text{high school degree or equivalent}$; 170 Democrat, 204 Republican, 194 Independent, and 60 Other).

Based on our sample size, we conducted a sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2009). Given our total sample size ($N = 628$) and three total predictors, this analysis revealed that we had

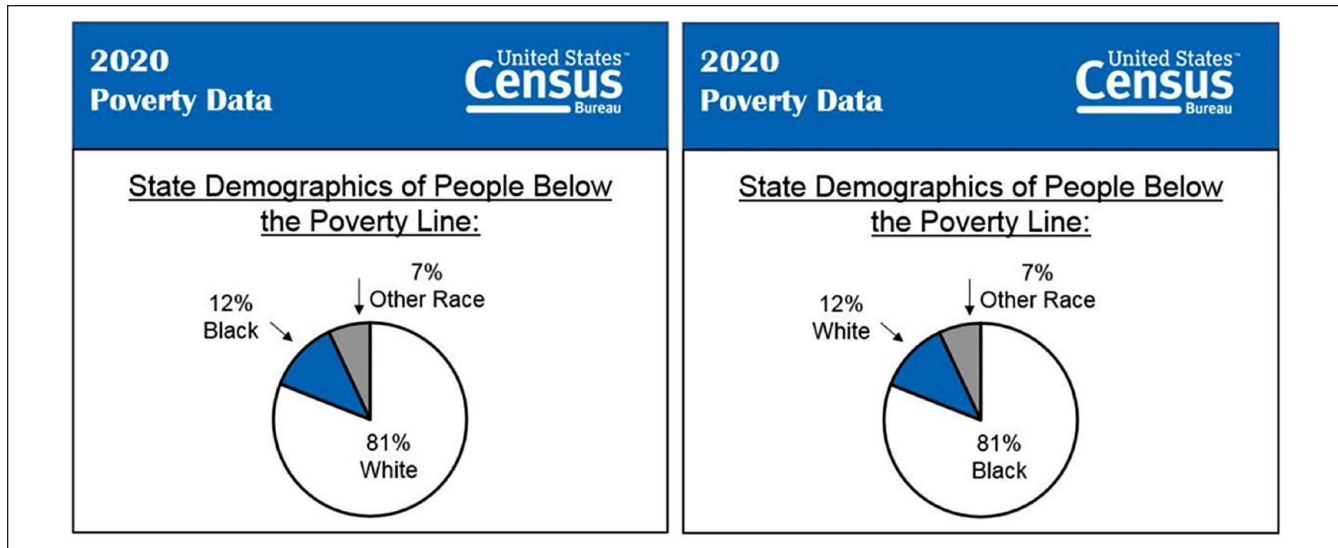


Figure 7. Manipulation of the Race of Poverty, White-Poor Condition (Left Panel), and Black-Poor Condition (Right Panel), Study 3.

adequate power ($1-\beta = .80$) to detect a small effect size ($f^2 = .017$).

Procedure

The procedure for Study 3 was very similar to Study 2 with one key change: Instead of measuring individual differences in White-poor beliefs and Black-poor beliefs, we experimentally manipulated these beliefs. In particular, participants learned that we were interested in the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and that they would view the demographics of poverty in a randomly selected state. The name of the state was never mentioned to avoid potential confounds regarding participants' personal location or their attitudes toward particular regions. They then read the following about the selected state:

In this state, unemployment claims have skyrocketed by 4,000% since March. Incomes in this state have also declined, on average, by 3.6%. As a result, the percent increase in the state's population that lives at or below the poverty line (i.e., in extreme poverty) has increased 37%. This increase in poverty is expected to continue to rise next month.

Participants were then randomly assigned to either learn that the majority of impoverished people in that state were White (see Figure 7, left panel) or that the majority of impoverished people in that state were Black (see Figure 7, right panel). To ensure attention to our key manipulation, participants were asked to report the percentage of people of each race in poverty as depicted in the chart. As a manipulation check, participants then responded to two items asking about White poverty and Black poverty: "When I think of White [Black] people in the state I just reviewed, I tend to think of poor people" and "When I

think of poor people in the state I just reviewed, I tend to think of White [Black] people" (Spearman-Brown_{White} = .89; Spearman-Brown_{Black} = .92). Next participants responded to the same items asking about welfare recipient agency ($\alpha = .84$), welfare recipient work ethic ($\alpha = .89$), and welfare policy support ($\alpha = .82$) as in Study 2. They were asked to answer these items when thinking about the state they just reviewed. Finally, participants reported their zero-sum beliefs, as measured in Study 2, given our interest in this variable as a moderator of our findings ($\alpha = .91$). Participants concluded with demographic information and were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Check

First, we investigated whether our manipulation did indeed influence White-poor beliefs. As anticipated, participants in the White-poor condition were significantly more likely to endorse beliefs that White people are poor ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.33$) than people in the Black-poor condition ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(626) = -10.66$, $p < .001$.

Main Analyses

Our central analysis was to replicate the moderated mediation model tested in Study 2 (see Figure 5) except that instead of "White-poor beliefs" being the focal predictor, we used our experimental manipulation of White-poor beliefs (i.e., race poverty condition) as the focal predictor. As before, the moderator was racial zero-sum beliefs. We tested this model using the PROCESS macro (Model 83), and 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. Condition was coded such that "1" represented the White-poor condition and "0" represented the

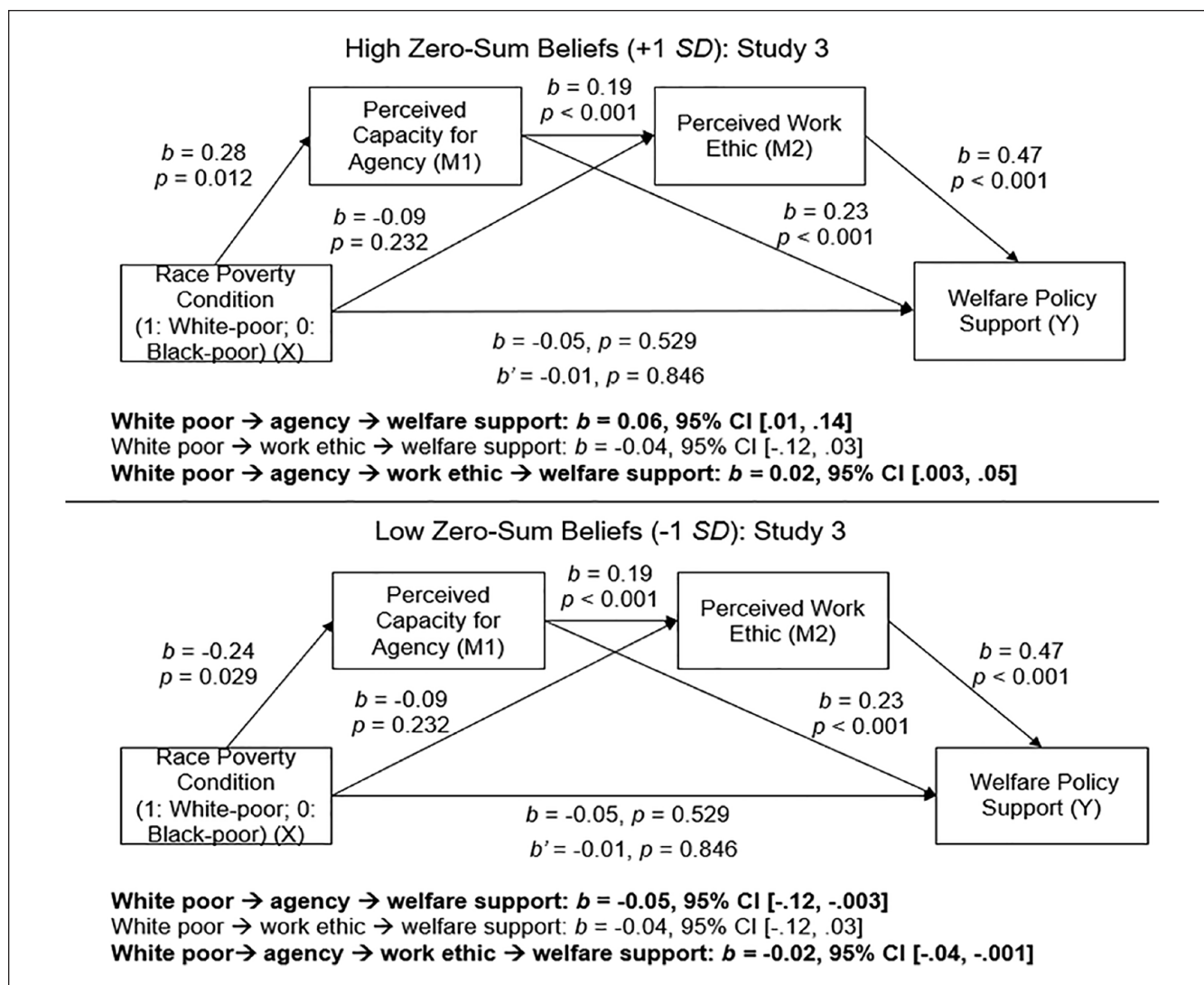


Figure 8. Significant Indirect Effects Observed for Those High and Low in Zero-Sum Beliefs, But in Opposite Directions, Study 3.
 Note. Bolded indirect effects are statistically significant as reflected by confidence intervals that do not include zero.

Black-poor condition. All continuous variables were standardized for analysis.

Results were consistent with hypotheses and replicated Study 2. In particular, there was a significant moderated serial mediation effect through perceived agency and perceived work ethic, $b = 0.02$, 95% CI [.006, .04]. Likewise, there was a simpler moderated mediation effect through perceived agency only, $b = 0.06$, 95% CI [.01, .12]. To probe these moderated mediation effects, we tested mediation models separately for those high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) in zero-sum beliefs as was done in Study 2.

As can be seen in Figure 8, both the serial indirect effect (through agency and work ethic) as well as the simpler indirect effect (through agency only) were significant for those high and low in zero-sum beliefs, but in opposite directions. Most central to our hypotheses, among those high in zero-sum

beliefs, being in the White-poor (vs. Black-poor) condition predicted perceptions of significantly greater welfare recipient agency which then predicted greater perceived work ethic and welfare policy support.

Although less central to the hypotheses tested in this article, it is interesting to note that, among those low in zero-sum beliefs, the pattern was reversed such that being in the Black-poor (vs. White-poor) condition predicted significantly greater welfare recipient agency which then predicted greater perceived work ethic and welfare policy support. Perhaps such participants were intending to break down the current racial hierarchy rather than maintain it.

Together these results provide an experimental replication of the finding that among White Americans high in inter-group status threat (i.e., racial zero-sum beliefs), White-poor beliefs predict the humanization of welfare recipients and, thus, welfare policy support.

General Discussion

Prior work on the racialization of welfare attitudes has predominately focused on the role of Black-poor beliefs. This work finds that, among White Americans, Black-poor beliefs predict reduced support for welfare due to stereotypes that Black people are lazy, inhuman, and impulsive (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019, 2021). The current research extends upon this prior work to assess whether White-poor beliefs play a unique role in welfare attitudes and policy support.

In this work, we hypothesized that White-poor beliefs (above and beyond Black-poor beliefs) may be associated with greater beliefs that White people benefit from welfare. As a result, beliefs that White people are poor may motivate White Americans to *humanize* welfare recipients as a justification to support welfare policies that can help boost the status of the ingroup. Three studies, each using large, representative samples of Americans, provided support for these hypotheses. In Study 1, we found that White-poor beliefs predicted reduced work ethic stereotyping of welfare recipients, which, in turn, predicted more support for welfare policies. Critically, this pattern was only present among White (but not Black) Americans; and this effect held when we controlled for Black-poor beliefs. Next, in Study 2, we found that differences in the perceived work ethic of welfare recipients follow from differences in the humanization of welfare recipients (i.e., their perceived capacity for agency). Moreover, we found that those who most strongly endorsed racial zero-sum beliefs showed the strongest links between their White-poor beliefs, the humanization of welfare recipients, and, in turn, welfare policy support. This finding is critical because it suggests that some White Americans—namely those who endorse racial zero-sum beliefs—may be motivated to support welfare policies when they believe these policies help poor White Americans. Finally, Study 3 replicated these effects experimentally. That is, those who most strongly held racial zero-sum beliefs humanized welfare recipients and, in turn, were more supportive of welfare policies when they were told the majority of the people in poverty were White (as opposed to Black). Together, these findings suggest that beliefs White people are poor may play an important role in White Americans' attitudes toward welfare recipients and hierarchy-attenuating policies, at least among White Americans who perceive threats to the current racial hierarchy.

Why Might This Humanization Process Be Specific to White Americans?

One reason that White Americans may be motivated to selectively humanize welfare recipients to the degree they believe White people are poor is to maintain the racial status quo (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). In particular, abundant data indicate that when White people feel the status of their group is threatened, they tend to respond by simultaneously humanizing ingroup members and dehumanizing outgroup

members to maintain a group-based hierarchy (e.g., Bruneau et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2004; Kteily et al., 2015; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Other work has shown that policies that are perceived as harming White people and helping Black people are disliked by White people who identify strongly with their racial group (Lowery et al., 2006). Building from this work, we find that individuals who both believe that White people are poor, and who endorse racial zero-sum beliefs, may be particularly motivated to humanize welfare recipients to justify welfare policy support that is perceived as able to help the ingroup.

The present findings are particularly important given that the bulk of research on race/poverty beliefs, as they relate to policy attitudes, have focused on the predominant stereotypes that Black people are poor and White people are wealthy (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019; Dupree et al., 2020). Yet, here, by measuring beliefs about Black and White poverty orthogonally, we were able to test whether White-poor beliefs can uniquely predict welfare attitudes above and beyond Black-poor beliefs. In future research, this novel orthogonal approach to measuring race/poverty associations could also allow the examination of more complex models, such as ones that allow White-poor beliefs and Black-poor beliefs to interact.

Limitations and Future Directions

This work, of course, is not without limitations. First, our hypotheses were generated in the specific context of the United States; we reasoned that the history, ecology, and culture of the United States have likely shaped motivations to hold specific racialized poverty beliefs which then influence attitudes toward wealth redistribution. Thus, these data do not tell us how, or if, the proposed processes would emerge within different cultural contexts. Future research should explore whether individual differences in racialized beliefs about who makes up “the poor” in other cultural contexts predicts attitudes toward policies that intend to help “the poor” in those contexts.

Similarly, these data are limited in that they only speak to processes that occur among *White people* living in the United States. Thus, future research should explore why race/poverty stereotypes are not associated with attitudes toward welfare recipients among Black people living in the United States (as observed in Study 1) as well as how, or if, these processes emerge among other U.S. racial groups.

A final limitation of this work is that we do not identify the factors that lead some White Americans to have stronger White-poor beliefs than others. One possibility is that White Americans develop White-poor beliefs as a method to maintain their convictions that racial economic inequality is less severe than it is (Kraus et al., 2019) or to deny the existence of anti-Black racism/White privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Consistent with this possibility, White-poor and Black-poor beliefs were positively correlated among both White and Black Americans in Study 1, but this correlation

was much stronger among White Americans ($r = .52$) than Black Americans ($r = .17$). Likewise, analyses presented in our Supplemental Materials (Study 2) indicate that greater White-poor beliefs were associated with reduced acknowledgment of the vast racial economic inequality between White and Black Americans (Collins et al., 2019). In addition to these possible motivated origins, individual differences in White-poor beliefs may also stem from less motivated sources such as the observation of White poverty within one's childhood neighborhood. Future research should explore these possibilities.

Conclusion

As economic inequality in the United States continues to grow (Smith, 2017), poverty harms a larger proportion of people. And, to the degree that poverty is seen as differentially harming particular racial groups, recipients' race may play a disproportionate role in White Americans' attitudes toward wealth redistribution due to their racialization of work ethic (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Gilens, 1996). Here, we extend upon existing narratives that have emphasized the role of Black-poor beliefs on White Americans' opposition to welfare to demonstrate that White-poor beliefs may play an overlooked, yet important, role in predicting White Americans' humanization of welfare recipients and policy support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

Data Availability

Materials for our studies can be accessed here: <https://osf.io/25uan/>. These studies were not preregistered.

Notes

1. Note that throughout the article we are speaking to the psychology of White people living in the United States. For parsimony of words, throughout the article, we will use the term "White Americans" to reference White people living in the United States.

2. For verbatim study materials for all studies, data, and syntax: https://osf.io/25uan/?view_only=ca61a47c8775469eaa01943ed169b4d2
3. Results are comparable with these participants included in all studies. However, we omitted participants who were currently benefiting from welfare to help address concerns about self-interest.
4. Lucid Panels, the platform we used for our first two studies, has since merged with Cint.

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