(1. リサーチノート）

# 1-2. The Relationship between "Welfare Fraud" Estimation Bias and the Belief in Immanent Justice

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## 1 Introduction

This study investigates the belief in immanent justice from the perspective of the estimation of welfare fraud.[1]

Negative attitudes toward the welfare system are expressed in the form of recipients' criticism in Japan. One of the criticisms of the welfare system is the problem of "illegal" receipt of benefits. In 2019, approximately 2.1 million of Japan's approximately 60 million households received welfare benefits (MIC, 2020; MHLW, 2019). Although fewer than 5% of the households receiving welfare payments did so "illegally," the government is calling for a strict crackdown on "illegal" benefits (MHLW, 2017). They include cases such as failure to declare income (Inaba, 2013), and it is difficult to say whether all cases are malicious.

As almost no surveys have been conducted to examine Japanese people's attitudes toward those who abuse the welfare system, little is known about the Japanese people's true estimation of the rate of "illegal" receipt of benefits. In a survey conducted by Yamada (2015), participants estimated that, on average, approximately 30% of welfare recipient households received "illegal" benefits. Notably, this is an overestimation compared to the current situation.

The reason why people overestimate the rate of "illegal" welfare receipt seems to be that they estimate it according to a more subjective definition of "illegal" receipt rather than the institutional definition. That is, people may consider a receipt "illegal" if they subjectively feel that it is unfair, even if the recipient receives welfare benefits without any problems in the system.

## 2 Overestimating the Rate of "Illegal" Receipt as a Bias

This study focuses on the overestimation of "illegal" receipt of welfare in terms of perceived unfairness. The assumptions of this study are as follows.

The first assumption is that the estimation bias of "illegal" receipt stems from a sense of unfairness. In the background of this overestimation, it is inferred that there is a sense of unfairness toward

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1 ) In this paper, the term "welfare" refers to the public assistance system provided by the government.

recipients who receive direct assistance from the government. Statistical welfare irregularities are lower than what people realize. Therefore, people may overestimate the overall rate of "illegal" receipt by perceiving many welfare cases as unjustifiable and inequitable, regardless of their institutional appropriateness.

Furthermore, there is a fear that the sense of unfairness will be amplified by media coverage of welfare. Many Japanese citizens are unfamiliar with the welfare system, and they often learn about "illegal" welfare benefits cases through rumors or media coverage. This may lead people to feel that most cases are unfair. A typical example is the impact of media coverage based on episodic frames that focus on a particular recipient. Episodic frames that focus on a specific person have powerful emotional and cognitive appeal (Aarøe, 2011; Aarøe & Petersen, 2020). Nakagoshi and Inamasu (2019) focused on the Japanese public assistance system ("seikatsu-hogo"). They found that media coverage of public assistance that focuses on recipients does not necessarily lead to an understanding of the benefit system. Instead, it attributes responsibility to recipients, which may result in negative attitudes toward public assistance and its recipients. Thus, people may have negative feelings and a sense of unfairness toward welfare recipients through episodic coverage. Recent studies have suggested that episodic, frame-based welfare coverage increases with high economic inequality (Epp & Jennings, 2021). Given the severity of inequality in Japan, it cannot be denied that people's perceptions of illegal receipt rates may be influenced by frequent episodic reporting that incites a sense of inequity.

The second assumption is that a person who is sensitive to justice would estimate "illegal" benefits based on the morality of the recipient and the consequences suffered by them. Belief in a just world is an indicator of fairness sensitivity and a psychological factor that may be associated with inequity toward welfare (García-Sánchez, Correia, Pereira, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón & Vala, 2021). Furthermore, the belief in immanent justice (BIJ) is a key component of belief in a just world—the belief that the world is fair. Specifically, BIJ is defined as the belief that an occurrence is caused by past acts (Maes & Schmitt, 1999). People with high levels of BIJ are expected to be sensitive to perceived morality and tend to believe that immoral behavior should have negative repercussions. According to previous research, information about welfare fraud activates moral beliefs and appetite for punishment (Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006).

The aforementioned discussion indicates that when people with a higher BIJ receive information about a recipient's death—when they learn that a recipient encountered an unfavorable outcome—they would seek the cause of the event from the past. Hence, taking such an event as a sign of past fraud, they would change the estimated rate of "illegal" receipt to include such cases, depending on the recipient's actions in their lifetime.

## 3 Hypotheses

Based on these two assumptions, this study predicts two possible situations in which the cognitive bias to regard welfare receipt as "illegal" is suppressed in people with high BIJ. The first is when presented with information about morally right recipients, and the second is when presented with information about immoral recipients who receive unfavorable outcomes. For the participants with high BIJ who are presented with both vignettes, the estimate of "illegal" receipt will be reduced—people with high BIJ who read the vignette about moral recipients will judge welfare support as legitimate. However, in the case of vignettes about immoral recipients, those with high BIJ will not consider the welfare system to be unfair only if recipients receive an unfavorable outcome (i.e., death) that serves as punishment.

The hypotheses are as follows:

**H 1:** When participants with high BIJ read a vignette about morally correct recipients, the estimated rate of "illegal" receipt is relatively low.

**H 2:** When participants with high BIJ read a vignette about immoral recipients receiving unfavorable outcomes, the estimated rate of "illegal" receipt is relatively low.

Regarding this prediction, it may be critiqued that while a high BIJ may result in criticism of the individual, it does not change the estimate of the rate of "illegal" receipt. However, given that a person with a high belief in a just world can engage in victim-blaming against the ingroup (Correia, Pereira & Vala, 2018), it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that blame will be directed at abstracted groups or systems rather than specific individuals.

It is also debatable as to why blaming a group of recipients would lead to overestimation of the "illegal" receipt of benefits. As stated above, this study assumes that a sense of unfairness toward recipients leads to an overestimation of "illegal" receipt. This stems from the current status of public assistance in Japan. In Japanese society, where few people receive direct financial support from the state, welfare recipients tend to be perceived as a privileged group that enjoys unconditional favorable outcomes when, in fact, welfare recipients are subject to severe restrictions. Consequently, criticism of welfare recipients will likely lead to the perception that they are a group composed of people who do not deserve to enjoy favorable outcomes.

## 4 Procedure

### 4.1 Design

The experiment had a 2 (recipient's moral characteristics: morality/immorality) × 2 (recipient's status: Subsistence /Death) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to complete the BIJ scale before the experiment.

### 4.2 Data Collection

A web survey was conducted in which participants were recruited through crowdsourcing and were limited to Japanese citizens over the age of 18 years. Participants who did not respond accurately to the scale of the directed questions were excluded from the analysis, as it was assumed that they had not read the questions carefully (Maniaci & Rogge, 2014). A total of 964 subjects were analyzed (367 men, 587 women, 10 gender non-response; mean age 38.61 [SD = 10.16] years).

### 4.3 Variables

The variables addressed in this study are as follows.

**BIJ:** BIJ was measured using the Japanese version of the scale (Maes, 1998; Maes & Schmitt, 1999; Murayama & Miura, 2015). The scale included items such as, "Any person will one day receive retribution for the evil he or she has done," and "All those who do evil will eventually be held accountable for it. " For each of the four questions, participants were instructed to respond on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

**Morality of the Recipient:** The content of the vignettes was used to manipulate the recipients' morality. It has been suggested that people have a prejudice against welfare recipients as lazy people who engage in morally problematic acts to increase their monthly welfare checks (Henry, Reyna & Weiner, 2004). Referring to this prejudice, this study defines morality as the strength of recipients' industriousness. It describes a recipient's daily life, including how much the recipient spends on weekdays and welfare money. All participants read the lead sentence, "The following article was published by a major newspaper. Please read it and answer the following questions (July 13, 2018): According to a survey conducted by the MHLW, approximately 3% of the total households in Japan receive welfare benefits." The participants then read the vignette for their assigned groups. The contents of each group's vignettes are listed below.

**Emphasizing Morality ver.** "Mr. Goto* (*fictitious name) is one of the people living on welfare. His room was furnished with only the bare necessities. When we asked him about his daily life, we could see that he was trying to make ends meet with the money he received. Mr. Goto said, "On weekdays, I spend most of my time job hunting. I spend most of the money I receive on food and

living expenses. I cannot possibly have a life just like other people."

**Emphasizing Immorality ver.** "Mr. Goto* (*fictitious name) is one of the people living on welfare. His room was furnished with only the items related to his hobbies. When we asked him about his daily life, he did not seem to be trying to make ends meet with the money he received. Mr. Goto said, "On weekdays, I spend most of my time without anything to do. I spend most of the money I receive on cigarettes and gambling. I cannot possibly have a life just like other people."

**State of the Recipient:** To manipulate the recipient's subsistence or death, a sentence was added at the end of the vignette. In the subsistence condition, the sentence was "Currently, Mr. Goto is still living on welfare." In the death condition, the sentence was "Later, Mr. Goto passed away due to worsening chronic illness."

**Estimating the Rate of "Illegal" Benefits:** Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of households receiving "illegal" benefits as a percentage of all households receiving welfare assistance on a scale of 0–100%.

## 5 Debriefing

At the end of the experiment, participants were informed that the experiment was manipulated using a fake vignette. Additionally, the moral prejudice that welfare recipients are lazy as an experimental stimulus may foster negative attitudes toward recipients. To prevent such hazards, I apologized for using some of the rhetoric used in welfare bashing, even if it was for deepening a sound discussion on welfare.

## 6 Results

The mean estimates of the rate of "illegal" receipt were 29.38% (SD = 18.10) in the morality/ subsistence condition, 31.83% (SD = 20.65) in the morality/death condition, 36.08% (SD = 21.92) in the immorality/subsistence condition, and 31.68% (SD = 19.74) in the immorality/death condition. Similar to Yamada (2015), the participants generally estimated a higher rate of illegal receipt of benefits.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict the respondents' estimated rate of "illegal" receipt. The independent variables were BIJ, moral characteristics (morality = 0, immorality = 1), state of the recipient (subsistence = 0, death = 1), and the interaction term. The dependent variable is the estimate of "illegal" receipt. All the independent variables were centralized (Table 1). The analysis revealed that the main effect was significant only for moral characteristics ($\beta = 2.55$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the three-way interaction was significant ($\beta = -5.26$, $p < .05$): those participants with stronger BIJ estimated higher rates of "illegal" receipt in the immorality/ subsistence condition (Figure 1). Further-

more, there was a negative correlation between the estimate of "illegal" receipt and approval of supportive policies for welfare (r = .47, p < .001).

Based on these results, H 1 and H 2 were supported.

Table 1   Results of the multiple regression analysis. Coefficients are standardized.

| IV = Estimating rate of illegal benefits | | 95% Under | 95% Upper |
|---|---|---|---|
| BIJ | .023 | −0.04 | 0.08 |
| Moral character (0 = Morality,  1 = Immorality) | .063* | 0.01 | 0.12 |
| State (0 = Subsistence,  1 = Death) | −.025 | −0.09 | 0.04 |
| BIJ*Moral character | .026 | −0.03 | 0.09 |
| BIJ*State | .066* | 0.01 | 0.13 |
| Moral character*State | −.090** | −0.15 | −0.03 |
| BIJ*Moral character*State | −.069* | −0.13 | −0.01 |
| $R^2$ | .023 | | |

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$
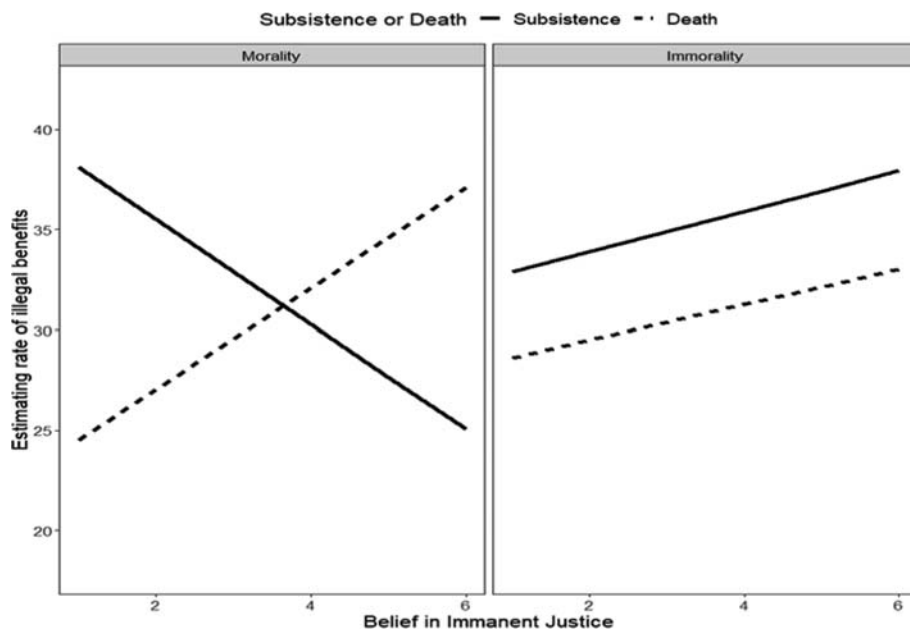


Figure 1   Three-way interaction plot; the y-axis value estimates the rate of "illegal" benefits.

## 7 Discussion

These results are consistent with the overall predictions. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Participants with low BIJ are not affected by information about the morality or death of re-

cipients.

2. Participants with high BIJ will estimate a relatively low percentage of "illegal" benefits when (1) the recipients are morally good or (2) immoral recipients die in retribution.

Particularly in the case of participants with high BIJ, it is interesting that overestimation of "illegal" benefits is more likely to occur when beliefs are undermined by exposure to events with an imbalance between cause and effect. Those with high BIJ tend to fear that their beliefs will be challenged. Therefore, individuals with high BIJ tendencies are strongly motivated to regain their beliefs when they witness events that do not involve bad consequences for bad behavior (Maes & Schmitt, 1999). As stated in the introduction, receiving welfare benefits is an extreme rarity for many Japanese people, and when presented with the case of a person receiving welfare that evokes a sense of unfairness, it would be easy to estimate that many receiving welfare benefits do so "illegally." Hence, those with high BIJ tendencies may have a sense of unfairness toward the entire group of recipients through the one individual in the vignette, consequently overestimating the rate of "illegal" receipt.

Furthermore, the results of the correlation analysis showed that the more participants estimated the rate of "illegal" benefits, the more likely they were to have a negative attitude toward welfare. In Japan, the acceptance rate of welfare is low (Kurita, Hori & Katafuchi, 2020), and the stigma associated with receiving welfare benefits is problematic. Information focusing on a particular recipient may lead to an overestimation of the rate of "illegal" receipt or an increase in negative attitudes toward welfare. This finding is also important in considering the role of episodic media coverage of welfare.

This article provides a different perspective on poverty-relevant research—the study focuses on a hitherto neglected bias: the estimation of the rate of "illegal" benefits. The results suggest that those with particularly high BIJ tend to have a strong belief that the welfare system is being abused when "bad" recipients do not derive reasonable penalties. However, judging the legitimacy of welfare based on a particular recipient's morality and the consequences they have suffered may necessitate recipients to adhere to desirable norms formed in society that recipients should live lives of honest poverty, thereby justifying the exclusion of those who deviate from the norm. If many citizens believe that the welfare system is unfair and cannot find legitimacy in its operation, then the system itself will not be viable. As this study suggests, considering the receipt of welfare benefits as unfair may result in the denial of the welfare system itself as a citizens' right.

Future studies may investigate whether people who overestimate the rate of "illegal" receipt will have a more positive attitude toward welfare when exposed to the fact that most of the benefits are legitimate. Further examination of the determinants of negative attitudes toward welfare is essential for the credible operation of the welfare system as a safety net.

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## Appendix

Examples of vignettes in Japanese are shown below.

### Morality / Death condition

「後藤さん（仮名）もまた、生活保護を受けて生活しているうちのひとりだ。部屋には必要最低限の家具しかおかれておらず、普段の様子を聞いても、支給額の範囲内で家計をやりくりしようとする姿勢が見受けられる。『平日は就職活動をして過ごすことが多いです。もらったお金は、ほとんど食費や生活費に使ってしまいます。人並みの生活はとうていできそうにありません。』そう後藤さんは語る。その後、後藤さんは持病の悪化により死亡した。」

### Immorality / Subsistence condition

「後藤さん（仮名）もまた、生活保護を受けて生活しているうちのひとりだ。部屋には後藤さんの趣味に関連するものしかおかれていない。普段の様子を聞いても、支給額の範囲内で家計をやりくりしようとする姿勢は見受けられない。『平日は何もせずに過ごすことが多いです。もらったお金は、ほとんど煙草やギャンブルに使ってしまいます。人並みの生活はとうていできそうにありません。』現在も、後藤さんは生活保護を受給しながら生活している。」