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Neoliberalism and perceptions of charitable food assistance recipients

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Neoliberalism and Perceptions of Charitable Food Assistance Recipients

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An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Health and Behavioral Studies

James Madison University

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by Lucas Gabriel Hopper

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Accepted by the faculty of the The Department of Psychology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at VA Association for Psychological Science on 04/01/22.

Dedication

To my family and friends- Grammie, Dad, Mom, Auden, Sam, Annie, and Kearney. Thank you for

your support and for believing in me.

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Abstract

Previous research has suggested that recipients of charitable food assistance experience stigma and may be seen as undeserving. Neoliberal worldviews have also been identified in discourse around charitable food assistance (CFA) and CFA settings, and tied to stigma and undeservingness. However, there is relatively little research on the context of CFA overall and a paucity of research that has examined the relationship between these factors of CFA perceptions, particularly in individuals who are not directly involved as recipients or volunteers. This study consists of a quantitative survey administered to 266 psychology students at a large university measuring their perceptions of nonprofit food aid recipients' deservingness, their stigmatizing attitudes toward food aid recipients, and their neoliberal attitudes. I studied the correlations between these three variables. I hypothesized that stigmatizing attitudes, perceptions of undeservingness, and neoliberal attitudes would all positively correlate with each other. I also tested two simple mediation models of particular interest. The three correlational hypotheses were supported. The two models, one with stigmatizing attitudes as a mediator and one with perceptions of deservingness as a mediator between the two other constructs of interest, were both found to be supported. Studying these constructs is important, due to how they may impact people who rely on CFA, and how they may influence support for legislation and programs that enable nonprofit food aid.

Keywords:

Stigmatization, perceptions of deservingness, charitable food aid, food banks, food pantries, neoliberal attitudes

You are What You (Can't) Eat: Charitable Food Assistance Stigma, Deservingness, and

Neoliberal Attitudes

Food banks have emerged as a common solution to food insecurity since the 1980's, shifting from being organizations designed for short-term, urgent emergencies to those designed to fill the gaps left by the shrinking of traditional welfare programs (de Souza, 2019; Derrickson, 1999). In 2020, more than 60 million people relied on food banks or other community aid organizations for food (Feeding America, 2021). Millions of others contribute money, food, and time to these programs every year, in order to keep up with demand (de Souza, 2019). Despite the relative universality of these programs in communities across the U.S., there is still evidence of many psychosocial barriers preventing those who are experiencing food insecurity from using food aid, including stigma and perceptions of undeservingness associated with their usage (Bowe et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2021; Garthwaite, 2017; Middleton et al., 2018; Yanniello et al., 2018). Public food assistance programs are underutilized, with only 41.3% of food insecure households participating in federally sponsored food programs in 2018 (Kindle et al., 2019). There are well-documented barriers to their use, including administrative barriers, lack of information, the costs of accessing them, and, most relevant to this study, stigma. The fact that charitable food aid is even less utilized, with only 31.2% of food insecure households found to be using local food pantries (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018 as cited in Kindle, 2019), despite frequently having fewer administrative barriers, has led researchers to investigate the potential role of psychological constructs in preventing food aid use. Given the numbers of people who rely on food assistance, especially as these numbers surge due to COVID, it is important for researchers to continue to examine these psychological barriers, how they are a product of the general public's attitudes about those experiencing food insecurity, and how they relate to each other.

Another construct that deserves study in this domain is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the dominant, highly individualistic economic and political system of the U.S. that has been described as "capitalism with the gloves off" due to its emphasis on the free market without accompanying public and "nonmarket" infrastructure (de Souza, 2019, p. 22). Neoliberalism has been conceptualized as a complex set of ideologies, a form of governance, and a set of policies (Larner, 2000). Many scholars have identified how contemporary neoliberal political contexts have given rise to private food aid over publicly-funded government entitlement programs (Garthwaite, 2016), as well as how barriers to food aid utilization are accompanied by support for neoliberalism (de Souza, 2019). Others have identified neoliberal themes in interviews of food aid recipients and volunteers (Garthwaite, 2017; Swales, 2020). These themes include seeing themselves as "thieves of enjoyment," who had not worked sufficiently, and as failures for being food insecure. These themes also included minimizing the socio-political context for their food insecurity, and internalizing ideas about active citizenship that have arisen under a neoliberal political context (Garthwaite, 2016). However, few researchers have interrogated the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and perceptions of charitable food aid users, particularly using quantitative methods. Specifically, research utilizing methods that interrogate the underlying mechanisms that predict attitudes toward those with food insecurity are lacking, especially those that use mediation models to map out the relations between these constructs. This research will contribute to the larger body of research on perceptions of food aid users, and provide new evidence of the relationship between these perceptions and the socio-political attitudes defined by neoliberalism.

Stigma of Food Insecurity and Food Aid Use

Stigma has been defined as "when a person possesses (or is believed to possess) 'some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker et al., 1998, as cited in Major & O'Brien, 2005, pp. 394-395). Stigma can be divided into stigmatization, which is "the perception that other people will devalue your identity", and personal/internalized stigma, which is a person's own feeling of their devalued identity (Baumberg, 2015 p. 3). Many studies have found that food aid users experience stigma. There are many different lines of research that contribute to why food aid use is stigmatized. This includes the stigma associated with poverty (Bullock, 2008; Bullock and Reppond, 2017), which contributes to food insecurity, as well as stigma associated with dependence on government or charitable aid. In a welfare context, Baumberg's (2015) findings illustrate the prevalence of stigma associated with claiming governmental benefits ("benefit stigma"). Bowe et al. (2019) and van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol's (2018) have interpreted charitable food aid stigma as related to the unreciprocal aid of "charity" or "gifts", which place the receiver in a lower role than the giver.

Individuals who use charitable food assistance face stigma that may even go beyond the stigma associated with other types of aid (Fang et al., 2021). As mentioned previously, the underutilization of charitable food aid has drawn attention to the potential role of psychosocial barriers (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018 as cited in Kindle et al., 2019). Fang, Thomsen, & Nayga. Jr., (2021) found associations between food pantry use and the mental health outcomes of anxiety and depression that they did not find between these mental health outcomes and participation in WIC, SNAP, additional SNAP benefits, or alternative school meals. The authors suggest that these differences may be due to the stigma associated with visiting pantries.

Food charity recipients have demonstrated experiences of stigmatization and personal/self stigma in both quantitative (Kindle et al., 2019; Yanniello, 2018) and qualitative (Bowe et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; de Souza, 2019; McNaughton, 2020; Swales, 2018; Yanniello, 2018) studies. In Kindle and colleagues' study (2019), participants who used food pantries indicated that they perceived a high degree of social distance between themselves and people who did not use food pantries. Participants in Yanniello and colleagues' (2018) study reported feelings of shame or failure for using their campus food pantry (69.44%). Participants were also most likely to respond "maybe" to the question of whether they would worry about being negatively evaluated by others if they had to use the pantry (24.23%). Participants more frequently responded that they would worry but would go anyway (19.24%), would definitely (7.36%) or probably (17.10%) worry, or would worry and not use the food pantry as a result (6.89%), than that they would definitely not worry (7.84%) or probably not worry (17.34%). In response to an open-ended question, the majority of the participants who had used the campus food pantry in the past, but felt hesitant to use it again, gave stigma-related reasons for their hesitance (21.74%). Middleton et al. (2017) identify stigma in at least 7 of 20 studies that examine users' perceptions of food banks, as well as related experiences of shame and embarrassment. This often manifested in participants expressing that they felt that they had less value or were devalued by others because of their food aid use. In particular, participants in many qualitative studies expressed "anticipated" stigma, rather than the enacted stigma that occurs directly through stigmatizing interactions with others (Middleton et al., 2018; van der Horst, Pascucci, & Bol, 2018). This anticipated stigma manifested in the fear of encountering stigma, such as being seen by people they knew while entering food aid settings, and being

devalued by volunteers (Bowe et al., 2019; Yanniello et al., 2018); this was then associated with internalized negative emotions such as shame (Middleton et al., 2018).

Additionally, the social conditions of food aid organizations themselves may construct stigma. As Garthwaite (2017) and de Souza (2019) illustrate, charity can stratify clients and the volunteers or workers, with clients occupying a lower position. The workers in a food aid organization are rewarded with social prestige or a positive self-image, while the clients are stigmatized. This difference in status between the volunteers and the people utilizing the food bank's services is communicated explicitly and implicitly in a number of ways. For instance, participants are often presented with pre-assembled packages that may or may not meet their dietary needs, made up of surplus, sometimes expired, food that volunteers themselves would not eat. This serves to set recipients apart from volunteers and make them feel devalued (de Souza, 2019; Middleton et al., 2017, Swales, 2020). Volunteers also sometimes express stigma toward food insecure people by only socializing with other volunteers and not eating in the same area as recipients (Cohen et al., 2017). Volunteers also treat them with scrutiny, such as by expressing stereotypes that they will take advantage of the system (de Souza, 2019). Finally, volunteers may report stereotypical views of participants in interviews, such as that they are dependent on aid and are not sufficiently interested in getting off of it (de Souza, 2019).

Although there has been some great foundational work examining perceptions of charitable food assistance recipients, little research has examined how food aid stigma manifests in the general population of people who are not necessarily food insecure and are not directly involved with food aid. For example, much of the research on food aid has focused on either volunteers/workers or recipients.

Perceptions of Deservingness

There are several approaches to perceptions of deservingness that are relevant to the context of food assistance. A theory of deservingness that incorporates many areas of research on perceptions, mainly of public opinions on governmental resource distribution programs, has posited that deservingness judgments are made through a deservingness heuristic that takes into account at least five criteria. These criteria are Control, Attitude (similar to gratitude), Reciprocity (ability to contribute back to society), Identity, and Need (CARIN). People support programs that help different groups of people to the extent that they align with these dimensions. For example, disability welfare programs tend to be highly supported, while groups perceived to have relative control over their need, such as general welfare program recipients, are less supported (Gielens, Roosma, & Achterberg, 2019; Laenen & Meuleman, 2017; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017).

This model has been supported by experimental research, which manipulates these criteria through vignette studies. For example, when a vignette character seeking unemployment benefits had either a typically Dutch or a typically Greek name (identity dimension) and when their reason for their unemployment (control dimension) was manipulated, this affected the extent to which participants thought that the character deserved benefits (Gielens, Roosma, & Achterberg, 2019). While the weight various criteria have on deservingness perceptions has been debated, and may vary by culture, the role of each criterion has been supported by international research (Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019).

Appelbaum (2001) also discusses how perceptions of norm deviance account for perceptions of deservingness, with people who are perceived as breaking social norms (such as single mothers) being seen as undeserving, as well as the poor being viewed as an underclass that

has its own deviant norms. This aligns with Bullock's findings on the prevalence of a "culture of poverty" hypothesis, which positions the poor as transmitting negative values and service dependency over generations, as well as conforming to stereotypes of the single mother or "welfare queen" (Bullock, 1999; Bullock, 2008).

There is a great deal of research on the concept of deservingness, as it is applied to the poor or the recipients of specific governmental programs, but much less research has been conducted that examines the perceived deservingness of charitable food assistance recipients. Research indicates that people judge the deservingness of charitable food assistance recipients and divide them into hierarchies of deservingness, similar to findings in the public aid research (Laenen & Meuleman, 2019). This may involve judgments that use similar criteria to public aid contexts (Applebaum, 2001), including viewing able-bodied young people, single mothers, people associated with devalued racial groups or racial groups different from the perceivers', and people who use drugs as especially undeserving (de Souza, 2019; Fong et al., 2016, Swales, 2020).

Both people who use charitable food resources and people who do not, despite their hunger or food insecurity, may suffer from perceiving themselves as undeserving. McArthur and colleagues (2020) found that 30.1% of food insecure students on an Appalachian campus avoided accessing the pantry because "others need it more than I do", suggesting that they did not view themselves as sufficiently deserving, despite their need. Similarly, participants in Swales and colleagues' (2020) study reported believing that they should not be seeking food, and reported refusing or postponing seeking food aid, despite having a need for it. This was because they thought their need was not as severe as others or that they should be working. Hierarchies of deservingness may also be applied among recipients. Middleton et al.'s (2018) literature review

identifies several qualitative studies in which recipients create deserving-undeserving hierarchies and distance themselves from the "undeserving" other.

The research has also identified many cases in which the volunteers or workers at food assistance organizations suggest perceptions of clients as undeserving. This may include explicitly expressing that many of the clients do not deserve food (Cohen et al., 2017). It may also include believing that recipients were exaggerating their circumstances to illegitimately gain more food (Bowe et al., 2019), such as by exaggerating their family size (de Souza, 2019). This reinforces deservingness hierarchies because suspicion of cheating has also been linked to perceptions of deservingness (Clery, 2012). The application of the concept of cheating or taking advantage of food charities in the first place suggests that there is a legitimate and illegitimate way to obtain food. Volunteers may occasionally deny clients resources on the suspicion that they are undeserving or may inconsistently apply organizational guidelines that restrict food on the basis of perceived deservingness (de Souza, 2019). Hierarchies of deservingness may also be present in food aid organization's policies. For example, Ruby's Pantry implemented a $20 (now $22) "donation" expected as payment for food. This donation is intended to prevent "indiscriminate charity," separating clients from undeserving people perceived as wanting an undeserved handout (de Souza, 2019, p. 145).

A question of interest to this study is the relationship between stigma and perceptions of deservingness in the context of charitable food assistance. There are strong theoretical similarities and ties between the two. Perceptions of undeservingness have been theoretically tied to the construct of stigma (Baumberg, 2015). Oftentimes, identity groups that are stigmatized will be seen as less deserving. As Baumberg (2015) points out, recipients who are perceived as undeserving are almost inherently devalued. According to the CARIN model of the

deservingness heuristic, a devalued or "othered" identity would be one of several criteria taken

into account in a perception of deservingness. This would align with a model where

deservingness perceptions are predicted by stigma. However, the conceptualization of the

"undeserving poor" as its own stereotype, including by deservingness heuristic researchers who

use this framework (van Oorschot & Roosman, 2017), complicates the relationship between

deservingness perceptions and stigma, as stereotypes are considered a manifestation of stigma

(Bos et al., 2013; O'Brien & Major, 2005).

Neoliberal Attitudes

Neoliberalism has been described as a political ideology, set of policies, and form of

governance (Larner, 2014) that rests on classical liberal ideas such as the social contract and

Adam Smith's political economy (Grzanka et al., 2020). Neoliberal values and beliefs include

"hard work, self-help, and reliance" (de Souza, 2019, p. 22), belief in the free market and

competition, limited government involvement, and individualism (Bullock, Twose, & Hamilton,

2019; Grzanka et al., 2020; Larner, 2000). Neoliberal policies have drawn inspiration from and

have been supported by the Calvinist constructions of the virtue of labor (i.e. Protestant work

ethic) and the "deserving and undeserving poor" (de Souza, 2019, pp. 22-23). In turn, media and

political rhetoric under neoliberalism has contributed to stigma and perceptions of the poor as

undeserving (Garthwaite, 2016). De Souza (2019, p. 22) uses the term "neoliberal stigma" to

refer to the stigmatization that results "when markers of hard work, personal responsibility, and

economic citizenship are applied in a variety of contexts, creating social distance between

groups."

Neoliberalism and its adjoining attitudes, such as the emphasis on meritocracy,

competition, and the free market, lead to viewing welfare or food aid as "charity" rather than an

essential social safety net that everyone deserves. This may promote a norm of food aid as something that must be earned and that can be sought illegitimately, contributing to stigma and deservingness hierarchies (Garthwaite, 2017). For example, neoliberal policies in the U.S. have outsourced public entitlement programs' functions to nongovernmental sources or made them increasingly conditional. This has typically involved monitoring and division of recipients based on deservingness, such as through job search requirements or means-testing, which makes it more difficult for people to access these programs (Bullock, Twose, & Hamilton, 2019; de Souza, 2019). Similarly, neoliberal attitudes may promote skepticism in and differentiation between evaluations of charitable aid recipients' perceived deservingness. For instance, neoliberal attitudes include a view of individual responsibility that casts hunger as a "problem of the hungry" (de Souza, 2019, p. 22). This view of individual responsibility suggests that a devalued defect is usually the cause of a person's hunger, rather than surrounding conditions such as ineffective labor and social policies (Larner, 2000; Swales, 2020). These attitudes likely contribute to stigma and the idea that it is not society's responsibility to address food insecurity. The latter may lead to decreased support for collective resources being used against hunger, as well as a decrease in the belief that anyone who wants to use food insecurity resources should be entitled to them and is, therefore, deserving.

The Current Research

This research contributes to scholarship on perceptions of charitable food aid users and the role of public perceptions on food aid use. While the effects of stigma, neoliberal attitudes, and perceptions of deservingness have all been individually studied in terms of their relation to food insecurity and users of services meant to address this problem, there is currently a lack of psychological research that examines them all together, especially research that uses quantitative

methods and research that focuses on individuals who are not directly involved in food aid contexts.

As previously discussed, there are strong links between perceived deservingness and stigma. For this reason, I predicted that stigmatizing attitudes would correlate negatively with perceived deservingness. There is also evidence to suggest that neoliberal attitudes would be positively associated with both stigmatizing attitudes and perceptions of undeservingness (de Souza, 2019; Swales, 2020). However, there is less evidence, and conflicting theoretical explanations, to suggest the nature of potential mediation relationships between these constructs (Baumberg, 2015; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). For this reason, this part of the study was exploratory. I tested three main correlational hypotheses. Additionally, I tested exploratory hypotheses using mediation models. Given the previously mentioned complexity of the relationship between stigma and perceptions of deservingness, two competing models were of interest: one with stigma as a mediator in the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and perceptions of deservingness, and one with perceptions of deservingness as a mediator in the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and stigmatizing attitudes.

Hypotheses

H1: Neoliberal attitudes will negatively correlate with perceived deservingness of people who use charitable food assistance.

H2: Neoliberal attitudes will positively correlate with stigmatizing attitudes toward people who use charitable food assistance.

H3: Stigmatizing attitudes toward people who use charitable food assistance will negatively correlate with perceptions of the deservingness of people who use charitable food assistance.

H4a. Stigmatizing attitudes toward CFA users will mediate the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and perceptions of CFA users' deservingness.

H4b. Perceptions of CFA users' deservingness will mediate the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and stigmatizing attitudes toward CFA recipients.

Method

Participants

In line with other studies (Appelbaum, Lennon, & Aber, 2006; Fang and Huber, 2020), participants were not deceived by commission, but were initially provided a vague description of the study's purpose, lacking the most descriptive details (deception by omission). They were initially informed that they were answering a survey related to hunger, but were not told about the specific variables being studied or aims of the study until later. A more detailed description and the reasons for withholding this information at the beginning were provided in the debrief, after participants completed the survey questions.

Participants were recruited from James Madison University's Department of Psychology Participant Pool. JMU students over the age of 18, who were incentivized to take surveys for course credit in psychology classes, logged into their accounts and opted into the study. The survey's time slots were open early in the semester (from January 31 2022 to February 7 2022), which may have resulted in a sample with different characteristics (such as high conscientiousness), compared to if the survey had been accessible to students throughout the semester or exclusively late in the semester.

An appropriate number of participants based on a power analysis ($n = 301$) were allowed to sign up for the study through the Participant Pool, and then received a link to the Qualtrics survey. Many participants were removed from analysis due to failing attention checks, leaving a

total of 266. Of these participants, 213 (80.1%) identified primarily as a woman, 50 (18.8%)

identified primarily as a man, and 3 (1.1%) identified primarily as transgender, transsexual, or

gender-nonconforming. In terms of race/ethnicity, 222 participants (83.5%) indicated that

white/Caucasian represented their race/ethnicity, 23 (8.6%) selected Asian/Asian American, 22

(8.3%) selected Latino/Latina/Hispanic, 14 (5.3%) selected African American, 9 (3.4%) selected

biracial/multiracial, and 1 (1.1%) selected Middle Eastern. In terms of sexual orientation, 230

participants (86.5%) identified as heterosexual, 21 (7.9%) as bisexual, 5 (1.9%) as none of the

above, 4 (1.%) as lesbian and gay, 3 (1.1%) as queer, and 3 (1.1%) as asexual. In terms of

political party, 105 (39.9%) identified with the Democrat party, 75 (28.5%) with the Republican

party, 59 (22.4%) as Independents, 18 (6.8%) with parties that were not listed, 4 (1.5%) with the

Libertarian Party, and 2 (.8%) with the Green Party. Cantril's ladders of participants' families

growing-up can be seen in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants first read an informed consent statement that aligned with James Madison

University's standards of informed consent statements. They were then able to choose whether to

proceed or to exit the survey at that point.

After completing the informed consent procedure, participants were provided with

definitions of the relevant terms, for those who were unfamiliar. The definition can be seen in

Appendix A (Feeding America, 2021). Because the first two sentences were adapted from the

website of Feeding America (Feeding America, 2021), the network encompassing as much as

80% of American food banks (de Souza, 2019, pp. 41-42), this passage represents how the

majority of U.S. food banks function. The next paragraph informed participants about front-line

organizations that distribute food and their relationship to food banks. The final paragraph defined the broader term of "charitable food assistance".

Participants then proceeded through measures related to the three variables of interest in randomized order. After completing the measures for the three variables of interest, participants were given measures of individual differences, including three control variables (described below). Participants were asked to indicate their involvement with food aid, such as whether they have donated to or volunteered for food charity organizations, as well as their own food security status and food aid use. Finally, they were asked to indicate their demographics (class and SES, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation) and political ideology (party affiliation).

Measures

Anti-Neoliberal Attitudes Scale (ANAS)

The ANAS (Grzanka et al., 2020) is a measure with 25 items composed of five subscales. Responses are given on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. The measure contains statements such as "All things being considered, most people get what they deserve out of life" (Inequality Consciousness subscale). The overall scale predicts attitudes about abortion access, intersectionality awareness, and the belief that guns cause crime. Belief in intersectionality and in guns causing crime represent a structural understanding of societal problems that is antithetical to neoliberalism's individualistic framing. A correlation between anti-neoliberalism and abortion access may seem counterintuitive in the abstract, given neoliberalism's emphasis on individual liberties, but was predicted by Grzanka and colleagues (2020), due to the context of a political alliance between conservative politicians who promoted neoliberal policies and the religious right of the United States. Grzanka and colleagues recommend treating the scale as a single-factor instrument, as the general factor explained most

of the variation. Over three studies, the authors observed alphas of .83, .84, .91, and .95 for the overall scale. In their second study, they observed good test-retest reliability between two measurement times ($r = .89$, $p < .001$). I observed a Cronbach's alpha of .93 for the overall scale. The scale's four factors include: Communitarian Values (original Cronbach's alpha of .82, alpha of .84 in this study), Inequality Consciousness (original Cronbach's alpha of .83, alpha of .81 in this study), Racism and Sexism Awareness (original Cronbach's alpha of .87, alpha of .89 in this study), and Multicultural Ideology (original Cronbach's alpha of .82, alpha of .87 in this study). Because I was interested in how neoliberal values, in general, predict the other variables of interest, I used the full scale as a single measure. I also reverse-scored their scale to make interpretation easier (i.e. higher values indicated more neoliberal attitudes).

Stigmatizing Attitudes

Kindle and colleagues (2019) developed two scales with slight differences in wording: one intended for people who access food pantries and one intended for the non-pantry-using general public. This study used only the latter version. This scale is a 10-item adaptation of the 12-item HIV Stigma Scale (Renius et al., 2017), with five items slightly modified from this and five developed originally for the Food Pantry Stigma Scale by Kindle and colleagues. All items were measured on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with two reverse-scored items. Kindle and colleagues (2019) found acceptable internal consistency for both versions of the measure (an alpha of .87 for the user version and an alpha of .74 for the public version). I found an alpha of .79 for this study. Like the HIV Stigma Scale, this measure is intended to study the social distance aspect of stigma (i.e., how much distance the general population prefers from someone who uses food pantries) through items such as "I have stopped socializing with some people because they used a food pantry."

Perceptions of Deservingness

The measure was inspired by the question asked in vignette studies such as Appelbaum, Lennon, and Aber (2006, p. 394). It asks participants to respond to the question, "In your opinion, how deserving is the **average recipient of charitable food assistance** of the food they receive?", on a scale from 1 (*very undeserving*) to 7 (*very deserving*). I included other formulations of this question, measuring perceptions of the deservingness of people who use different types of food insecurity resources (e.g., soup kitchens and food pantries) or are described as hungry or food insecure using different wordings. The eight variations on this question (Appendix D) had an excellent reliability (a Cronbach's alpha of .92). However, to conceptually focus the measure on CFA use, I removed three of the items relating to the "average poor person," the "average hungry person" and the "average welfare recipient of welfare benefits", leaving the four items that directly address use of CFA. I constructed the scale by averaging these items. The scale had an excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

Control Variables

Food charity use measure. This measure, which was used in Kindle and colleagues' study (2019), asks participants about their use of various forms of charitable organizations that distribute food. It asks, "Have you ever gone to a food pantry to get food to feed yourself or your family?", with "Yes", "No", and "I don't know" response options. In terms of CFA use, 231 participants (86.8%) had never received food from a charitable organization, 15 (5.6%) had received food from a pantry to feed themselves or their families, 13 (4.9%) had received food from another type of charitable organization to feed themselves or their families, and 7 (2.6%) did not know if they had received food from a charitable organization.

Household food insufficiency. The USDA's measure of household food insecurity, as in Derrickson (1999), was used. Participants were asked, "In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household?" They chose from one of four options to describe the food available in their households: (1) enough of the kinds of foods we want to eat, (2) enough, but not always what we want to eat, (3) sometimes not enough to eat, and (4) often not enough to eat. In the last seven days, 233 (87.6%) of participants had had enough of the kinds of foods they wanted to eat, 30 (11.3%) had had enough but not always what they wanted to eat, and three (1.1%) had sometimes not had enough to eat in their households.

Food Insecurity Political Participation. This measure was adapted from Kim, Russo, and Amnå's (2017) measure of offline political participation. While the items in the original measure relate to general political participation, this version of the measure gauges four different types of involvement with food aid. It asks, "Have you done any of the following in the last 12 months?" in relation to the following items: "Donate money to a food pantry, food bank, or other charitable organization that provides food", "Donate food to a food pantry, food bank, or other charitable organization that provides food", "Volunteer to help an organization that provides food charity", and "Participate in events for a cause or a charity dedicated to addressing hunger or food insecurity". Each option has answer choices of "Yes" and "No". The "Yes" answers were summed to create a participation score for the analyses. In the last 12 months, 103 (38.7%) of participants had donated money to a charitable organization that provides food, while 163 (61.3%) had not; 97 (36.5%) had volunteered with such an organization, while 169 (63.5%) had not; 145 (54.5%) had donated food to such an organization, while 121 (45.5%) had not; 79 (29.7%) had participated in events for a cause or charity dedicated to addressing hunger/food insecurity, while 187 (70.3%) had not. A scale was constructed by averaging these four items,

with a reliability of .72. This scale had a mean of .40 and standard deviation of .35, with a score of 0 for each item indicating not participating in any type of engagement in the past, and a score of 1 indicated participation in all types of engagement. This scale was used as a control in the mediation analyses.

Results

Descriptives and Frequencies

The mean score on Kindle's Food Pantry Stigma Scale was 1.58, with a standard deviation of .48. The minimum score was 1.00 and maximum score was 3.20 on this measure, which had a five-point Likert scale. The mean score on the ANAS was 2.14, with a standard deviation of .62. The minimum score was 1.08 and maximum score was 4.36 on this measure, which also had a five-point Likert scale. The mean score on the deservingness scale was 5.69, with a standard deviation of 1.08. The minimum score was 2.00 and maximum score was 7.00 on this measure, which had a seven-point Likert scale.

Correlations

All correlations reported in this study are Pearson's *r* correlations.

The correlations between the three variables of interest can be seen in Table 2. Participants who held stigmatizing attitudes toward people on food assistance also viewed them as undeserving. Participants who held higher levels of neoliberal attitudes also held more stigmatizing attitudes toward food assistance users and viewed them as less deserving. These correlations were all moderately strong.

While several measures of class were included in the survey, the Cantril's ladder of participants' families growing up was used in analysis. This measure did not have any significant correlations, except with food insecurity and food aid use (Table 6).

A binary gender variable correlated with several constructs, such that identification as a man was associated with higher levels of neoliberal attitudes and stigmatizing attitudes toward CFA users, and lower perceptions of food insecure people's deservingness.

A binary variable of Democrat compared to Republican party identification was also analyzed. Republican identification was associated with a similar pattern of associations to identification as men. A binary variable was also constructed based on white or Caucasian identity compared to marginalized racial/ethnic identities. White participants had higher levels of neoliberal attitudes, were more likely to identify as Republican, and were less likely to state that they had used CFA resources.

Hypothesis Testing

I tested the first three hypotheses using Pearson's *r* correlations (Table 3). I also tested mediation models using Model 4 of Hayes' Process macro (Hayes, 2013) for SPSS. I tested two simple mediation models by entering the three main constructs as the main predictor variable, *X*, the criterion variable, *Y*, and the mediating variable, *M* (see Figures 1 and 2). The first model involved neoliberalism as the predictor variable, perceptions of deservingness as the criterion variable, and stigmatizing attitudes as the mediating variable. The second model involved neoliberalism as the predictor variable, stigmatizing attitudes as the criterion variable, and perceptions of deservingness as the mediating variable. I controlled for food aid use, food insecurity status, and a scale of whether or not participants had engaged in four types of involvement with CFA organizations in the past year (donating food, donating money, volunteering, and participating in events related to food insecurity/hunger). I analyzed the effect size and 95% confidence intervals of the total, direct, and indirect (mediation) pathways of this model, in order to investigate the mediational relationship between these constructs of interest.

The first hypothesis was that neoliberal attitudes would negatively correlate with perceived deservingness of people who use charitable food assistance. Hypothesis 2 stated that neoliberal attitudes would positively correlate with stigmatizing attitudes toward people who use charitable food assistance. Hypothesis 3 stated that stigmatizing attitudes toward people who use charitable food assistance would negatively correlate with perceptions of the deservingness of people who use charitable food assistance. The correlational findings supported all three of these hypotheses (Table 2). As previously mentioned, participants who had more stigmatizing attitudes toward food pantry users held lower perceptions of the deservingness of food assistance users, and participants with higher levels of stigma or lower perceptions of deservingness had higher levels of neoliberal attitudes. All of these correlations were moderately strong.

The final part of the study involved exploratory mediation models. The first hypothesized model, that stigmatizing attitudes mediate the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and perceptions of deservingness, was supported. Participants who held neoliberal attitudes possessed more stigmatizing views of people who use food aid, which led them to perceive CFA users as less deserving. This was indicated by the indirect effect of stigmatizing attitudes on the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and perceptions of deservingness being significant (Figure 1). Additionally, both the total and direct effects of neoliberal attitudes were significant. This suggested that participants' perceptions of the deservingness of those needing food assistance were because of neoliberal attitudes, but that this relationship was not entirely explained by stigmatizing attitudes.

The second possible model was also supported. According to this model, participants who hold neoliberal attitudes perceive people who use food aid resources as less deserving, and this lack of perceived deservingness is associated with them possessing more stigmatizing

attitudes toward CFA users. This model was supported, as the indirect effect of perceived deservingness on the relationship between neoliberal attitudes and stigmatizing attitudes was significant (Figure 2). I also found significant total and direct effects of neoliberal attitudes on stigmatizing attitudes in this model. This suggested that participants possessed stigmatizing attitudes as a result of neoliberal attitudes, both as a result of deservingness being a mediator and as a direct result of participant's neoliberal attitudes.

Discussion

I found that the three constructs of interest were correlated. The correlation between stigma and deservingness aligns with previous research on the two. This includes scholarship that has identified the undeserving poor as a stereotype (a manifestation of stigma) that is commonly held toward people who lack resources or rely on aid (van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). The correlation between stigmatizing attitudes and perceptions of deservingness supports Baumberg's (2015) discussion of the relationship between deservingness and stigma, in which he argues that stigmatized identity groups are almost inherently seen as undeserving. This correlation also aligns with the CARIN model of deservingness, under which the devaluation of an identity group is considered while evaluating their deservingness of resources (Gielens, Roosma, & Achterberg, 2019; Laenen & Meuleman, 2017; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). However, this study adds to the work on deservingness that has been informed by the CARIN model by applying measures of deservingness to food aid and specifically examining the devalued identities of food insecure people who access CFA resources.

The correlations between neoliberalism and these constructs similarly align with the previous research. This finding is in line with de Souza's (2019) discussion of how neoliberalism is built on the concept of the "undeserving poor" and in turn promotes it, as well as de Souza's

discussion of how neoliberalism can promote a "neoliberal stigma". This study's findings also

supports scholarship that links adjoining attitudes to neoliberalism, such as a belief in

meritocracy and individual responsibility, to both CFA and public aid being seen as "charity"

that only deserving people should receive rather than a universal entitlement (Bullock, Twose, &

Hamilton, 2019; Garthwaite, 2017). Additionally, the correlation between neoliberal and

stigmatizing attitudes aligns with research that has linked the individualism associated with a

neoliberal worldview to the attribution of hunger to a devalued defect (e.g. stigma) possessed by

the food insecure (Larner, 2000; Swales, 2020). While the described previous research has

established these theoretical connections in the contexts of public aid (McNaughton et al., 2020)

and charitable food aid (de Souza, 2019; Swales, 2020), this study examines the relationship

between neoliberal attitudes and these perceptions of charitable food aid users quantitatively and

in a population outside of the direct context of food aid.

One of the ways in which this study builds on the existing research is by applying

mediation models to these constructs. Both the mediation models were found to be supported by

this study and remain plausible, though the model that included stigmatizing attitudes as the

mediator had a slightly higher R-squared value, indicating that it may be more predictive and,

thus, informative. As previously discussed, the CARIN model of deservingness aligns with my

finding of stigma as a significant mediator. Other scholarship connects the two in ways that

could potentially support either of the two hypothesized models, such as by arguing that the

concepts are inherently linked or conceptualizing the "undeserving poor" as a stereotype

(Baumberg, 2015; van Oorschot & Roosman, 2017). However, there is a lack of previous

research that has applied mediation models or discussed potential mediation effects between

these constructs. My findings indicate that both mediation models can explain the relationship

between these attitudes toward and perceptions of food aid users.

Additionally, this study contributes by researching attitudes toward food insecurity in

college students. While some research has focused on attitudes of the general public or college

students toward CFA users (Kindle et al., 2019; McArthur et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2019

Yanniello et al., 2018), much of the research that addresses one or more of the constructs of

interest has focused on people who are directly involved in food aid settings, either as volunteers

or recipients. The study's focus on these college students is useful due to the potential role of

public attitudes toward CFA users in supporting legislation and resources that address food

insecurity, as well as for understanding the attitudes and perceptions CFA users may face in their

communities or campuses.

Limitations

Some limitations of the study are that the measures relied on self-report and mostly

pertain to internal attitudes, rather than behaviors. Participants' behaviors toward food-insecure

people, and the extent to which self-reported attitudes predict these behaviors, are topics that

deserve investigation, but fall outside the scope of this study. Although my hypotheses and

purpose were obfuscated to prevent demand characteristics, participants may have been biased to

give socially desirable answers or preserve a positive self-image, which could have affected the

results. Other limitations include limited external validity. This study used a student sample from

one university, and the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Compared to the

general population, the student body that the sample was taken from is skewed white, female,

and younger and wealthier than the general population (College Factual, 2021). The measures of

stigmatization and perceptions of deservingness include experimenter-generated adaptations of other measures or methods, which have not been thoroughly validated.

Future Directions

One future direction could be to examine the relationships between the three constructs of interest in the context of different types of food aid use. This could be accomplished by examining stigma toward different types of food aid use, and using perceived deservingness of different types of food aid users individually in analysis, rather than using a scale including several. This direction could include the types of food aid I included in my measure of perceived deservingness, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, as well as types of food aid that were not featured in this study, such as mobile food pantries and community cafes. Another future direction of this work might be to investigate similar variables among people who use food aid. While this population was not screened out of the survey, food insecure people were not specifically targeted for recruitment in this study. Recruiting a more food insecure sample could allow for more analysis of differences within the food insecure sample, such as by investigating the construct of internalized stigma.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Participants' Families' Class Growing Up

Class Ladder Rung	Frequency	Percent
1 (Lowest)	0	0.0
2	2	0.8
3	6	2.3
4	20	7.6
5	36	13.6
6	56	21.2
7	75	28.4
8	51	19.3
9	12	4.5
10 (Highest)	6	2.3
Total	264	100.0

Table 2

Correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Neoliberal Attitudes	2.19	0.62	–	.37***	-.46***
2. Stigmatizing Attitudes	1.65	0.55	.37***	–	-.32***
3. Deservingness	5.60	1.05	-.46***	-.32***	–

p < .05
**p* < .01
***p* < .001.

Table 3

	Race	Gender	Class	Party	Food Insec	Aid Use	Engage	Neolib	Stigma	Des
Race	-	.03	.06	.34**	.05	-.22**	-.06	.14*	.02	.08
Gender	.03	-	.12	-.05	-.11	-.06	-.08	-.25**	-.17**	.27**
Class	.06	.12	-	.01	-.18**	-.31**	-.03	.06	.01	-.08
Party	.34**	-.05	.01	-	.40	-.09	-.02	.71**	.24**	-.42**
Food Insec	.05	-.11	-.18**	.40	-	.15*	.08	-.01	.04	-.03
Aid Use	-.22**	-.06	-.31**	-.09	.15*	-	.03	-.08	-.08	.04
Engage	-.06	-.08	-.03	-.02	.08	.03	-	-.09	-.08	.01
Neolib	.14*	-.25**	.06	.71**	-.01	-.08	-.09	-	.37**	-.50**
Stigma	.02	-.17**	.01	.24**	.04	-.08	-.08	.37**	-	-.35**
Des	.08	.27**	-.08	-.42**	-.03	.04	.01	-.50**	-.35**	-

Notes: "Race" is a binary variable participants who identified as white coded as "1" and participants who did not identify as white coded as "0". "Gender" is a binary variable participants who identified as female coded as "1" and participants who identified as male coded as "0". "Class" represents the relative deprivation ladder of participants' families growing up. "Party" is coded with Republicans as "1" and Democrats as "0", with other parties excluded from this binary variable. Participants who had used food aid were coded into "Food Aid Use" as "1" and those who had not were coded into "0". Participants who were unsure were not included.
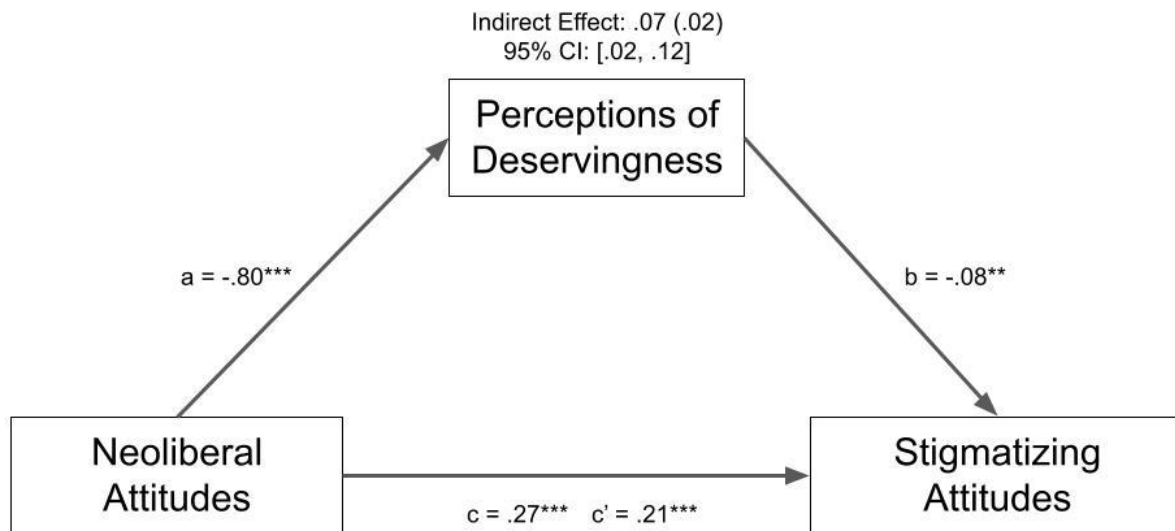
Figure 1

Simple Mediation Model with Stigma as a Mediator and Perceived Deservingness as a

Criterion
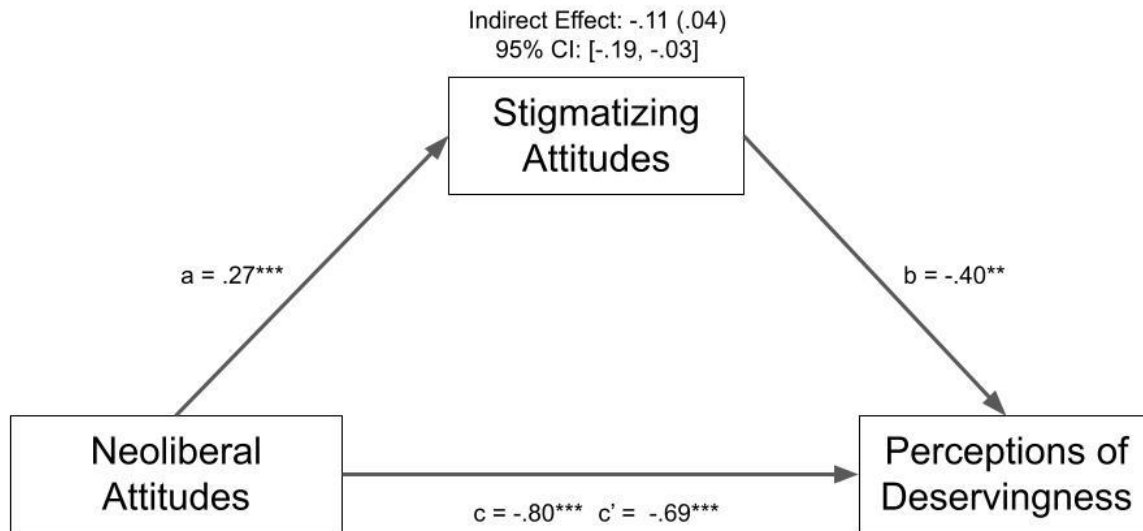
Indirect Effect: -.11 (.04)
95% CI: [-.19, -.03]

Stigmatizing Attitudes

a = .27***

b = -.40**

Neoliberal Attitudes

Perceptions of Deservingness

c = -.80*** c' = -.69***

Notes. All path effects are beta coefficients. c = Total Effect c' = Direct effect. *$p < .05$ **$p <$
.01 ***$p < .001$. Total model $R^2 = .22$, $p < .001$. Food aid use, food insecurity status, and a scale of engagement with CFA (including donating and volunteering) were controlled for in this model.

Figure 2

Simple Mediation Model Perceived Deservingness as a Mediator and Stigma as a Criterion

Indirect Effect: .07 (.02)
95% CI: [.02, .12]

Perceptions of
Deservingness

a = -.80***

b = -.08**

Neoliberal
Attitudes

Stigmatizing
Attitudes

c = .27***   c' = .21***

Notes. All path effects are beta coefficients. c = Total Effect c' = Direct effect. *$p < .05$ **$p <$ .01 ***$p < .001$. Total model $R^2 = .14$, $p < .001$. Food aid use, food insecurity status, and a scale of engagement with CFA (including donating and volunteering) were controlled for in this model.

Appendix A

A **food bank** is a non-profit organization that collects and distributes food to hunger-relief organizations. Food banks act as food storage and distribution depots for smaller front line agencies; and usually do not themselves give out food directly to people.

Diverse organizations, including **food pantries** and **soup kitchens**, directly distribute food to people. This food can be supplied by food banks, private donations, or a combination of both.

Charitable food assistance is a broad term for private or nonprofit organizations that provide food on a charitable basis. It includes food banks and the distribution organizations associated with them, as well as charitable organizations that are not associated with food banks.

Appendix B

Anti-Neoliberal Attitudes Scale (ANAS) (Grzanka et al., 2020)

1. I consider the present employment system to be unfair to women.**

2. Racism is a major problem in the USA.**

3. Racism may have been a problem in the past, and it is not an important problem today.

4. Discrimination against women in the labor force is no longer a problem.

5. Racial problems in the USA are rare, isolated incidents.

6. Women's claims of inequality between the sexes are simply exaggerated.

7. It is important for political leaders to talk about racism to help work through or solve society's problems.**

8. Basic services such as health care and legal assistance should be provided to everyone by the government, free of charge.**

9. If the government must go deeper into debt to help people, it should do so.**

10. Society should provide resources and services free-of-charge to people who cannot afford them.**

11. People who earn larger incomes should pay higher taxes than people with smaller incomes.**

12. Those who are well off in this country should help those who are less fortunate.**

13. It is not right for people to go hungry in this country.**

14. We should help racial and ethnic minorities preserve their cultural heritages in the USA.**

15. We should recognize cultural and racial diversity is a fundamental characteristic of US Society.**

16. We should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in this country.**

17. A society that has a variety of ethnic and cultural groups is more able to tackle new problems as they occur.**

18. Immigrant/ethnic parents must encourage their children to retain their culture and traditions of their homeland.**

19. It is important for public schools to teach about the history and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities.**

20. All things being considered, most people get what they deserve out of life.

21. Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

22. Those who are the most capable hold the most power and influence.

23. Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.

24. Poor people should spend less time complaining about income inequality and more time working hard.

25. Maybe it is not their fault, but most poor people were brought up without ambition.

1 (*strongly disagree*)- 5 (*strongly agree*)

** Indicates that the item was reverse-scored in the original measure.

Appendix C

Food Pantry Stigma Scale: General Version (Kindle et al., 2019)

Please tell us the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement below:

1. I have stopped socializing with some people because they used a food pantry.

2. I would expect people who use a food pantry to be very careful about who they told of their use of a food pantry.

3. I would feel guilty if I used a food pantry.

4. I would fear losing friends and facing rejection if I socialized with people who use a food pantry.

5. I avoid interacting with people after finding out they use a food pantry

6. I feel I'm a better person because I do not use a food pantry.

7. I do not mind people in my neighborhood using a food pantry.

8. I have not had any trouble with people who use a food pantry.

9. I work hard to find out if people in my social groups use a food pantry.

10. If people told me that they use a food pantry, that would be a mistake.

1 (*Strongly disagree*)- 7 (*Strongly Agree*)

Appendix D

Average deservingness scale (Applebaum, Lennon, & Aber, 2006)

1. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average recipient of charitable food assistance** of the food they receive?**

2. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average food bank system user** of the food they receive?**

3. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average food pantry user** of the food they receive?**

4. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average soup kitchen user** of the food they receive?**

5. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average food insecure person** of food charity?

6. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average hungry person** of food charity?

7. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average poor person** of food charity?

8. In your opinion, how deserving is the **average recipient of welfare benefits**?

1 (*very undeserving*)- 7 (*very deserving*)

** Indicates that the measure was retained in the final scale that was used for analysis.

Appendix E

Control Measures

Food charity use measure (Kindle et al., 2019)

1. Have you ever received food from a food pantry to feed yourself or your family?

    Yes

    No, but I have received food from another type of charitable organization

    No, I have never received food from a charitable organization

    I don't know

Household food insufficiency (Derrickson, 1999)

1. In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household?

    (1) enough of the kinds of foods we want to eat

    (2) enough, but not always what we want to eat

    (3) sometimes not enough to eat

    (4) often not enough to eat

Food Insecurity Political Participation (Kim, Russo, & Amnå, 2017)

Have you done any of the following in the last 12 months?

1. Donate money to a food pantry, food bank, or other charitable organization that provides food.

2. Volunteer to help an organization that provides food charity.

3. Participate in events for a cause or a charity dedicated to addressing hunger or food insecurity.

4. Donate food to a food pantry, food bank, or other charitable organization that provides food.

Yes

No