

# Why everyone wants to help the sick—but not the unemployed

May 26 2016

---



Professor of political science Carsten Jensen working in his office. Credit: Jesper Rais, Aarhus Universitet

New research from Aarhus BSS at Aarhus University explains why healthcare costs are running out of control, while costs to unemployment

protection are kept in line. The answer is found deep in our psychology, where powerful intuitions lead us to view illness as the result of bad luck and worthy of help.

Illness and unemployment are two types of ordinary risks to which we are all exposed. But from a historical perspective, unemployment and illness represent two very different types of risks. Unemployment came about as a result of the industrialisation, while illness is something the human species has faced for millions of years. This difference is reflected in current-day political attitudes.

"People across countries are very positive towards the healthcare sector, but are not necessarily that inclined to give money to the unemployed. Why do [people](#) generally prefer helping the ill and not the unemployed?" This is the question posed by two professors in political science, Carsten Jensen and Michael Bang Petersen, from Aarhus University.

Using techniques to uncover people's implicit intuitions, the researchers explored the fundamental differences behind our attitudes towards unemployment benefits and healthcare. According to the researchers, the differences may be found in the evolutionary history of our species.

"For millions of years, a need for health care reflected accidents such as broken legs or random infections. Evolution could therefore have built our psychology to think about illnesses in this way, as something we have no control over. People everywhere seem to have this deep-seated intuition that ill people are unfortunate and deserve to be helped," Michael Bang Petersen explains.

## **Agreement across countries and political ideologies**

Even countries like the US, which you would normally not associate with the term welfare state, [healthcare costs](#) are enormous. The researchers

did research in both Denmark, the US and Japan and found that everywhere people intuitively believed that people who fall ill are unlucky, while unemployed people have brought it on themselves.

"Because we have this psychological tendency to regard people who are ill as unlucky, people's attitude towards the sick are extremely difficult to change," Carsten Jensen explains.

In modern societies, more people die from lifestyle diseases than from broken legs and infections, and there are considerable socio-economic differences in who will suffer from these lifestyle diseases. But we continue to think of illness as random accidents. This even applies across the political spectrum, where conservatives who normally oppose government spending think of ill people has unfortunate and deserving of care.

"The traditional attitudinal factors such as self-interest, access to information and political ideology do not really matter in the healthcare area," says Michael Bang Petersen and continues:

"When it comes to healthcare, everyone seem united in the belief that people who are ill are unlucky and need help. This means that the policies in the areas of [health care](#) and [unemployment](#) are very different, as we all more or less agree on the goal in healthcare, while we deeply disagree on whether or not unemployed people deserve help."

## **Pressure on the politicians**

Increased healthcare spending is often explained by the supply of health - i.e. the costs of new technology and medicine. But the researchers from Aarhus University argue that when it comes to the rising costs of healthcare, we are also dealing with demand. Politicians find it hard not to accommodate people's demand for better healthcare, and no one

wants to be seen as responsible for a health scandal.

Provided by Aarhus University

Citation: Why everyone wants to help the sick—but not the unemployed (2016, May 26)  
retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-05-sickbut-unemployed.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.