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The perceived legitimacy of a basic income among Finnish food aid recipients

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Running head: Food aid recipients and basic income

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Abstract

Discussions on the pros and cons of a basic income (BI) have remained mainly at the ‘systemic level’. Based on survey and interview data, this study provides a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on the legitimacy of the idea of a basic income among people queuing in breadlines in Helsinki in late 2016, who are assumed to be affected positively by this benefit. While general support for the idea is high, not everyone supports an unconditional BI. Despite the likely ‘objective interest’, a BI does not seem to be supported by food aid recipients any more than by the general population as measured by a previous study. Besides interests, normative beliefs and perceptions of deservingness seem of importance for legitimacy too, especially among those not supporting a BI. Doubts regarding a BI are to some extent connected to wishes to limit the social citizenship of some in the breadlines.

Introduction

Food aid, provided in breadlines that are upheld by publicly subsidised voluntary organisations, has been a constant phenomenon in Finland since the mid-1990s. At that time, the rates of long-term unemployment were soaring following a severe economic recession, and Finland decided to use EU food aid after joining the union in 1995. As an ‘unofficial supplement’ to public social policy programmes, food aid has often come to symbolise inadequacies of the country’s Nordic-type comprehensive welfare system which is meant to guarantee all permanent residents at least the indispensable means for living and taking an active part in society. However, many observers have underlined the low level of basic universal social security benefits and the level of, and entitlement conditions for, social assistance – the strictly means-tested ‘benefit of last resort’ – as reasons for the current problems. Others have pointed at either ‘poverty traps’ or various disincentives to accept work as having resulted from the conditions for entitlement.

One solution to such issues discussed by politicians and researchers in Finland is a basic income (BI). However, discussions on the pros and cons have remained mainly at the ‘systemic level’. Our aim is to provide a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on the legitimacy of a BI among people queuing in breadlines in Helsinki in late 2016, who we assume could be affected positively by such a type of benefit.

On introducing a basic income into the welfare system

As it is still a politically controversial idea, no country has yet introduced a BI on a full scale. Common features of the BI experiments that have been conducted in various parts of the world include a relatively limited target group, a relative short duration and a limited evaluation of outcomes (Kangas & Pulkka, 2016; Widerqvist, 2005, 2013).

At their core, many of these experiments seem to have had an assumption of the BI’s importance for vulnerable groups. The limited knowledge of experiment outcomes indicates an increased general well-being and reduced economic stress among target groups, while evidence on (positive) employment effects have been mixed (see Kangas & Pulkka, 2016; Widerqvist, 2013; also Marx & Peeters, 2008).

Having been on the Finnish political agenda with varying intensity since the 1980s (Koistinen & Perkiö, 2014), the question of introducing a BI as part of social policies rose to the centre of public debate when a BI experiment was included in Prime Minister Sipilä’s governmental programme following the general election in the spring of 2015 (Action plan, 2016; Finland, a land of solutions, 2015). The programme’s wording on the experiment was very general, but the main idea was to test whether an unconditional monthly lump payment would create greater work incentives within the system, reduce bureaucracy and simplify the benefit system (Kangas & Pulkka, 2016). The planning period saw a lively public debate on the pros and cons of a BI (Perkiö, 2016), including most of the various ideas highlighted in

international academic debates (Andersson & Kangas, 2005.) However, at the centre of this debate were, arguably, solutions similar to van Parijs' (1992) well-known definition of an unconditional benefit paid to every resident of a country. The present study was conducted during the height of this debate with the aim to study the views on BI among various people in economically vulnerable situations (the actual experiment later came to be limited to a representative sample of long-term unemployed only¹).

During the public debate, it often seems to have been assumed that a BI would, in practice, replace and/or reduce the need for currently existing forms of 'public support of last resort', which are usually strictly means- and needs-tested, as opposed to the (Nordic-type) system's primary (universal or income-related) forms of social security. By reducing problems of non-take-up and (unwanted) 'mismatches' of such last resort support (cf. Kuivalainen, 2007), a BI has thereby been thought to reduce the need for recipients to additionally rely on informal support, such as food aid. According to existing estimates from the 2010s, 2.3% of the population have been turning to food aid annually, amounting to some 1.7 million single visits to breadlines or other charity food aid providers (Ohisalo, 2017).

While prior research on food aid recipients in Finland (Ohisalo, 2017; Ohisalo, Laihiala, & Saari, 2015) has shown that receivers display a wide variety of life situations, the main groups consist of the unemployed and of receivers of basic/minimum old-age, sickness or disability pensions. Many also simultaneously receive social assistance, an indication of the unsatisfactory level of other types of benefits. Considerable groups in breadlines have also either been refused social assistance or for some reason have not applied for it.

Against this background, it seems fair to assume that a BI of an amount corresponding to, or exceeding, amounts of existing forms of what is usually conditional economic support – during the debate, the sum of 560 euros, corresponding to the current basic unemployment

¹ For the experiment, see Kangas & Pulkka (2016) and Kangas et al. (2016).

and sickness benefits, was frequently mentioned² – would be in the self-interest of many food aid recipients. A BI would guarantee a continuous source of income with less bureaucratic effort and control, thus making it a legitimate reform from food aid recipients' perspective, even if its level would remain unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the fact that taking odd jobs would not affect the amount of the BI has been assumed to have various positive effects, also among people at the margins of the labour market (Kangas & Pulkka, 2016).

However, although being one of the main factors assumed to affect views on welfare state programmes in general, a wide body of research has shown that other types of factors besides often ambiguous self-interest affects peoples' views on welfare state programmes, for example various forms of normative factors, such as values and perceptions (Jaeger, 2006; Svallfors, 2007, 2013; van Oorschot, 2006; van Oorschot, Roosma, Meuleman, & Reeskens 2017).

From a legitimacy perspective, previous research has not indicated that the introduction of a BI in a Nordic type of comprehensive welfare system setting would be an unproblematic undertaking. For instance, Bay and Petersen (2006, p. 420) did not assume a sufficient degree of generally perceived popular self-interest in a BI. Thus, popular support would instead demand 'a high degree of trust, identification and sympathy with fellow citizens and/or a strong commitment to egalitarian values'. De Wispelaere (2015, p. 21) considered the 'willingness to contribute' that is retained in the popular support for universalist social policies in the Nordic countries to be a factor that would probably reduce support for a BI. This expectation of everyone contributing to the welfare system has commonly been tied to fulfilling the moral duty of working, derived from the Protestant work ethic (Julkunen, 2009; Kettunen, 2001). In a similar vein, Johansson (2001), discussing the limits of social citizenship in the Nordic countries, argued that the strictly means- and needs-tested types of

² It also became the amount paid in the government experiment.

last-resort public financial support are to be regarded as a kind of paradoxical consequence of the Nordic-type welfare system which rests on the assumption that everyone takes part in its financing through working. Those able and of working age who are not active in the labour market will inevitably be excluded from social citizenship. They are:

... subject to paternalistic policies, rigid or meaningless obligations, and practical constraints of their scope of self-determination, all of which are justified in terms of vague notions of normalisation and behavioural change necessary for inducing responsible citizenship (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007, p. 58).

Such diverging policies towards non-contributing groups can thereby be seen to reflect core normative beliefs, or ‘deeply rooted categories of worth’ of a society (Steenland, 2006, p. 1,320), which might then also affect peoples’ way of thinking and thus how they view policy reforms, even in ways that might not be in their own self-interest.

To what extent such normative factors affect popular support for a BI in Finland remains scarcely researched. A study some 15 years ago (Andersson & Kangas, 2002) detected a considerably higher *level* of support for a BI in Finland than in Sweden, leading to speculations on the possible existence of specific Finnish normative beliefs that could explain the finding. More recent popular surveys – triggered by the planned Finnish government experiment – have confirmed a continued strong support in Finland for the general idea of a universal BI, although the amount of support decreased with different framings of the question, for example regarding income amounts, labour tax levels etc. (Haavisto & Heikkinen, 2017; Kangas & Pulkka, 2016). Knowledge of possible but distinctly Finnish normative considerations behind said support remains limited.

However, even much less is known about the views among economically vulnerable groups with a more probable self-interest in a BI, such as food aid recipients. Findings from a

British study by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) indicate that there might be both similar and divergent mechanisms involved when people in economically vulnerable situations consider the situation and behaviour of others living under similar economic circumstances. Even among ‘the poor’, references were made to hegemonic British ideas about the undeserving poor and ‘scroungerphobia’. Although similar views also exist in the Nordic countries to some extent, such arguments have not been as dominant or outspoken in a Nordic context (Kroll, 2007; Svallfors, 1996), and public attitudes towards ‘the poor’ have not generally been characterised by equally strong moral prejudice (Blomberg, Kallio, & Kroll, 2018; Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). Yet, to the extent that core normative beliefs, such as those related to working as a societal duty and a prerequisite for full social citizenship, as manifested in the principles of Nordic social security systems, are embraced by Finnish food aid recipients, this could affect their views on an unconditional BI, even in ways contradictory to self-interest. In any case, the above discussion highlights the probable complexity regarding Finnish food aid recipients’ views on a BI.

In the study, we investigated these views empirically. Our research questions were: *What is the level of support for a BI among food aid recipients, and how does it relate to the level of support found among the general population? Do interests and normative considerations affect food aid recipients’ views and, if so, in what ways?*

Data and methods

In our study, we utilised a mixed-methods model of triangulation known as the convergence model. Thus, when collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data on food aid recipients’ views and reasoning concurrently but separately, the results were converged when making interpretations (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The importance of studying peoples’ support for different social policy solutions, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, in

order to gain a deeper understanding of peoples' reasoning, has been stressed, for example by van Oorshot and Roosma (2015).

Food aid recipients constitute an economically vulnerable target group that is not represented in general population surveys in a way that would allow separate analysis. This is due to such factors as their relatively low absolute numbers and their higher-than-average non-response rates. They may thus be considered a 'hard-to reach-population' when it comes to data collection (cf. Shaghghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011). For such a population, the constitution of which is also in constant flux, it is usually not possible to collect data or estimate data representativeness in ways common to popular surveys.

Both survey and interview data were gathered on site in Finland's two largest breadlines in Helsinki in the autumn of 2016. To counteract possible distrust of the research (cf. Bonevski et al., 2014), information leaflets about the study were handed out beforehand, the study was discussed with personnel at the sites, and the researchers present were prepared to answer any additional questions during data collection.

The survey questionnaire, which included questions on attitudes towards social benefits, was distributed on three separate occasions in each breadline³. A total of 829 anonymous filled-in questionnaires were handed in. The characteristics of the respondents (Appendix Table A1) corresponded with those in an earlier survey conducted in 36 Finnish breadlines (Ohisalo, 2017).

In the survey, support for a BI was measured by the statement: 'Every person permanently residing in Finland should automatically be guaranteed a certain basic income'.

³ Some recipients came on a regular basis, some occasionally, others only once or a few times. During the first day of data collection, about every fourth recipient participated in the survey. The proportion declined in the later occasions, mainly because a growing number of persons had already been approached). For a further description of the data collection, see Ohisalo (2017, pp. 56–57).

It was an adaption, fitting the overall survey format⁴, of a similar broadly formulated statement that had been used in a recent popular survey (see Kangas & Pulkka, 2016). Below, we also compare our findings with those from this popular survey.

Prior survey comparisons between general populations and vulnerable groups seldom seem to discuss methodological challenges related to *comparing* the populations, regardless of the sampling methods used. In the case of vulnerable populations, comparisons have often been made in order to obtain a ‘benchmark’ with which to compare the situation, characteristics, views etc. of the vulnerable group (see e.g. Bullock, 1999; Muñoz, Vázquez, & Vázquez, 2004; Taylor & Vogel-Ferguson, 2010). Nevertheless, while providing valuable information that cannot be obtained by other means, the nature of the hard-to-reach population and related methodological challenges of data collection have to be considered when interpreting results (see Swärd, 1999; also Cohen & Wagner, 1992).

When searching for explanations of variations in support, we applied linear regression analyses. This analysis included two variables measuring perceived self-interest in a BI: a) one measuring depth of economic predicament, and b) another measuring perceptions on whether a BI of 560 euros, a sum frequently mentioned in the public debate, would improve the respondent’s personal economic situation.

Furthermore, in line with previous international attitude studies (e.g. Svallfors, 2013; van Oorschot et al., 2017) that stress the importance of normative considerations and perceptions for more concrete attitudes, we included a question that measured the degree of identification with other members of society. As Bay and Pedersen (2006, p. 420) stated, a BI demands a ‘high degree of trust, identification and sympathy with fellow citizens.’ We also

⁴ The wording in the popular survey conducted by the Finnish National Pensions Institution, which focused on the idea of a BI, was: ‘What do you think of a system in which everyone permanently residing in the country would automatically be guaranteed a certain basic income?’ (Kangas & Pulkka, 2016). The data were collected through telephone interviews by using stratified random sampling (Airio, Kangas, Koskenvuo, & Laatu, 2015).

included five independent socio-economic variables (age, citizenship, education, labour market position and gender) as controls. (Appendix Table A1.)

The interview data are based on a total of 81 short semi-structured interviews conducted on four separate occasions in the same breadlines as the survey, to which qualitative content analyses were applied (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, & Wägnerud, 2012). The participants were approached with the overall aim of ascertaining the range of life situations of food aid recipients in breadlines. The interviewees' age varied between 23 and 84 years, comprising almost equal shares of both genders. Questions posed in the interviews, which constitute the units for the analysis, included the interviewees' principal standpoint concerning a guaranteed monthly BI, but also more concrete questions such as if and how it would affect their current economic and employment situation. To give the reader an impression of the data as a whole, we chose to report the number of cases (Silverman, 2006) in the various categories, identified on the basis of individual interviewees' way of reasoning. However, the focus of the study is analytic, not statistical, generalisation (Maxwell, 2010; Yin, 1994).

Data collection was conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the Finnish advisory board on research integrity (2009).

Findings

The perceived legitimacy of basic income – survey results

We began our analysis by looking at support for a BI among food aid recipients participating in the survey. The results showed that 69% agreed with the statement that 'every person permanently residing in Finland should automatically be guaranteed a certain BI' (53% fully and 16% partly), while 16% said they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 15% partly or fully disagreed. The internal non-response rate on this question was 13.9%. The non-response rate

was clearly most prevalent among old-age pensioners, which might be because the relationship between a BI and pensions had not been at the core of the public discussion.

Table 1

In a survey conducted by the Finnish National Pensions Institution in autumn 2015 (Airio et al., 2015; Kangas & Pulkka, 2016), the same proportion of the general population as the food aid recipients in this study (69%) supported an automatically guaranteed BI for all people permanently residing in Finland (Table 2). While keeping in mind possible effects of slight variations in wording and regarding differing survey contexts⁵ (cf. above), this is an interesting and somewhat surprising finding, taking into account that food aid recipients could be assumed to be among the net beneficiaries of a BI. The finding thus raises questions regarding possible explanations for the varying support among food aid recipients.

Table 2

According to our analyses (Table 3), perceptions that a guaranteed monthly BI of, say, 560 euros would improve the respondents' personal economic situation was a very strong predictor for supporting a BI. The variable measuring economic predicaments also had a significant effect, in that respondents who were more dependent on food aid were more supportive of a BI. Furthermore, the variable measuring normative views was significant, although not very strongly; people with a stronger identification with other members of society were more supportive of a BI. In contrast, none of the socio-economic variables had an effect on attitudes. For example, the variable measuring labour market position had no significant impact on support for a BI.

Table 3 in about here

⁵ The credence of a comparison of variations of a question seems to be strengthened by the fact that the level of popular support for a BI, and for the closely related question of a negative income tax, has been found, by and large, to be similar (even at different points in time) (Andersson & Kangas, 2005; Kangas & Pulkka, 2016).

The reasoning on a basic income – findings from interviews

To deepen our understanding of the reasoning behind support for a BI, we turn to the interview data. Initially, interviewees were asked about their thoughts of a system where all permanent residents of Finland would be automatically guaranteed a certain BI (e.g. 560 euros). On the basis of the interviewees' lines of reasoning, a majority of them seemed to support the idea of a BI. Many supported an unconditional BI (N=29), but many (N=19) also were for a conditional BI. Others, again, were against a BI altogether (N=16). The overall support for some kind of a BI was thus quite high among the interviewees, as it was in the survey data. The categories containing different lines of reasoning are presented in more detail below.

'A basic income for everyone'. There were several reasons, largely reflecting the assumptions presented above, for *unconditional support for a BI*. It was argued that a BI would: (1) improve one's own situation, (2) reduce the bureaucracy related to applying for social benefits, (3) reduce poverty and/or lead to shorter breadlines, and/or (4) have positive effects on the economy/employment/welfare system. As a 38-year-old male student said:

Well, it would at least improve purchasing power. And maybe people wouldn't be on the razor's edge with social assistance applications and such. That there would be a basic living for everyone, whether you have a job or not. (No. 38)

Having a BI was seen to improve one's own situation, either by providing a higher income than one's current income, or by freeing one from constantly applying for social benefits, or by reducing one's insecurity over one's income: '*Well, it would take away the uncertainty so that you would anyway know how much you'll get every month.*' (No. 32, female, unemployed, 47 years old)

Although many informants referred to BI as improving their own situation, it was far more common to refer to a BI as benefiting others or ‘all people’ in general. As a 54-year-old retired man replied when asked why he thought a BI would be sensible: *‘Why, everyone has to have the basic living means so that there wouldn’t be such an awful lot of these [bread]lines.’* (No. 48)

However, quite a few informants who said they supported an unconditional BI (11 out of 29) did not specify their general view. This does not mean, however, that they did not reflect on it from various, more specific angles related to their own finances and/or work incentives (see further below). These informants had very diverse life situations. For example, there were a couple of students, a young woman on care leave, several young unemployed persons but also middle-aged unemployed in their 50s, and some retired persons). The younger informants in particular had positive views on the economic and employment effects of a BI.

‘A basic income for some’. The most common type of reasoning of those supporting only a conditional BI was that it should be paid only to those in real need. As a 26-year-old long-term unemployed woman expressed it:

Well, it is not a bad idea in itself, it depends on how the system will work, I mean, if it is for absolutely everybody then in that sense it sounds a bit wrong, but if it is just for those in a difficult life situation then it is not a bad idea. (No. 18)

Some of the interviewees felt that a BI should only be paid to Finns or Finnish citizens, or that it should at least be ensured that a BI would not draw more immigrants to Finland. Others pointed at the need to keep means-tested social benefits, such as social assistance or a

housing allowance, to complement a BI. A 23-year-old long-term unemployed woman explained:

Well of course, on top of it, there should perhaps come some possible security of some sort, so that if one falls over, or if there is an accident, then in a way there is security for it – which social assistance is now, since you also get discretionary [social assistance] if there is something that causes surprising expenses. (No. 52)

In a couple of cases, support for a BI was dependent on the level of the BI, not with restricting which group(s) should be granted a BI.

‘A basic income for none’. Among food aid recipients opposing a BI, a common argument was that (minimum) social security should only be granted on some type of means-testing to prevent it from being granted on unclear grounds or to people who do not actually need it. Some interviewees found ‘undeserving’ recipients with no real need for help even among ‘the poor’ in general or among those in breadlines:

I think it is a bit bad, a bad idea that since, as you can see, even in this breadline, there is a lot of such misuse that one does not necessarily have the need. In [food aid] too, there should maybe be some control over who gets it. Because it has very clearly become more common that it [food aid] is being misused. And the same goes for [the basic income] ... (No. 58, female, retired, 61 years old)

Another common reason for opposing a BI was that the informant did not want it to be granted to immigrants, at least not in full.⁶ As a 40-year-old long-term unemployed man said

⁶ Such reasoning was also used when supporting a conditional BI (c.f. above), but here the informants did not say anything positive about a BI, while the informants supporting a BI conditionally regarded it as otherwise a good thing.

regarding BI being granted to everyone living permanently in Finland: *'Permanently, exactly. I sure don't think that those who come from abroad should get anything else but these vouchers.'* (No. 56)

A further line of argument underlined the need for 'reciprocity': Several interviewees stated that people should have to do something in order to be granted social security. A 34-year-old long-term unemployed man even exemplified the argument by referring to himself:

I don't know, maybe not like automatically and on flimsy grounds. I don't quite subscribe to it; it has nothing to do with immigrants or anything but with all Finns. There has to be some kind of a plan, so that it is not made too easy, I guess ... Of course, more is always better, but then again, if it is made too easy then I don't know if it is a good thing in the long run. Including myself and everybody, there should be some kind of a final goal ... (No. 29)

Further, several interviewees stated that a BI makes people passive. In their opinion, many people would not want to work if they did not have to, and a BI would make it possible for them (or give them an incentive) to just stay at home and do nothing. Young people in particular were blamed for not wanting to do anything for a living. As a 44-year-old unemployed man put it quite bluntly: *'That [basic income] can be a load of sh*t too, see, it doesn't buck anyone up to do anything anymore.'* (No. 04)

In addition to the lines of reasoning presented above, some of the interviewees (N=17) either had ambivalent views or could not take a stand on the matter. Many of them displayed good insights on the BI debate, however. While some saw both pros and cons with a BI and therefore could not make up their minds, others referred to the lack of detail in the BI system. Among other informants, the question regarding BI instead triggered despondent reflections on social security policy in general, perceived as being deeply unfair.

Basic income and economic effects

In addition to the interviewees' general standpoint on a BI, we also discussed the possible personal economic effects of a BI. Initially, we asked whether a BI of 560 euros a month would improve the informant's own financial situation. Here, the views were very clearly divided. A number of interviewees (N=29) anticipated that a BI would improve their financial situation, and some of them stated that this was their reason for supporting the idea (c.f. above), although some of them were under the impression that the BI would be paid on top of their current income.

But an equal share (N=28) perceived that they would not have a vested interest in a BI of 560 euros, which was often seen as too low, especially if there would not be any means-tested benefits left. However, support for a BI was also quite common among those not anticipating a financial gain: Some stated that the BI would nevertheless make their life easier by reducing the bureaucracy related to social benefits, indicating self-interest in a broader sense.

Others, again, did not care where they got their benefits from, be it the municipal social services centre, the National Pensions Institute or a BI, as long as they got them:

Well, I think it is quite the same by which name and from which 'hatch' one gets money, as long as they get it, so that they stay alive and well, and in a good mood. (No. 51, male, retired, 58 years old)

Some who supported a BI, either conditionally or unconditionally, pointed out that they would still benefit the most from having a (full-time) job: *'Basic income is perhaps the best of all [suggested improvements]. Well, salary is the best of all'* [laughter]. (No. 20, female, unemployed, 50 years old).

Although a majority of the interviewees had fairly clear views on whether a BI would improve their economic situation or not, some (N=13) were rather unsure about its economic effects. One reason for this was that they were unsure how it would affect other social benefits or a debt recovery procedure.

Basic income and employment expectations

For those belonging to the labour force or who were students (N=43), we also analysed what they thought of the idea that a guaranteed monthly BI would make it easier to take up a short-term or part-time job if they considered their own situation. Views on the employment effects of a BI were divided.

Of those interviewees who anticipated that it would be *easier* to take up an odd job due to the BI (N=10) a couple mentioned that they already worked part-time every now and then, but only as much as they could without losing their unemployment benefits. In contrast to some other informants' views on the young not wanting to work if they do not have to, some of the younger informants stressed that they would very much like to work and that a BI would indeed make it possible for them. As a young long-term unemployed woman stated:

Well really good, it would be great if one could in a way affect their own income in the way that one would do something for it. (No. 52)

Furthermore, some informants (N=11) thought that a BI would make it easier to take up a short-term or part-time job, and that the idea of a BI therefore sounded good, but without explicitly referring to their own situation.

Quite a few (N=18), however, did not believe that the introduction of a BI would have positive employment effects. The most common argument for a BI *not making it easier* to take up an odd job was that there is no work to take on, whether part-time or full-time. Most

of those who had such impressions were in their 50s or 60s. But there were also younger informants, including one in her 20s who found it hard to get even an odd job without a proper education. Two interviewees stated that they could not do any work, even if they were not on a disability pension. Others stated that they do not want to work part-time or short-term, but instead want a more permanent job. Overall, ‘work’ was generally described positively, or as something they would need themselves, even though there were reasons why the interviewees did not or could not work. A 58-year-old man illustrated the lack of work:

A: Well, yeah, I would rather go to work, but when there is no work available so...

Q: Yeah, you mean even if you had the basic income?

A: Yes, I would surely rather go to work. But when there is no work, then there isn't.

(No. 44)

Despite having a rather negative view on the employment effects of a BI, often linked to a long experience of job-seeking, and also being well aware of current employment possibilities and labour market development in general, many supported a BI in principle.

A few interviewees (N=4) found the question of employment effects was one that had no easy answer.

Discussion

What then can be concluded concerning the legitimacy of a BI among food aid recipients in a Finnish context? Generally, support for some kind of BI is high, but not everyone supporting it embraces the idea of an *unconditional* BI. It should, however, also be noted that not all food aid recipients support the idea of a BI. Thus, even though it seems reasonable to believe that many informants who participated in our study belong to the category of ‘net beneficiaries’ from the introduction of a BI (at least considering conditions for receiving it), such an

‘objective interest’ in the benefit does not seem to lead to all-embracing support, not even among groups that are economically far more vulnerable than the population in general.

However, both survey and interview data revealed the importance of perceived self-interest, but also of normative considerations, although with varying emphasis. The importance of perceived self-interest for BI support was significant in the survey data. In the qualitative interviews, aspects of self-interest were not that pronounced. Some of the interviewees believed that a BI would improve their situation, while others did not. Irrespective of the views on their personal situation, many supported a BI for other reasons. Having a BI was seen, for example, as guaranteeing more genuine and long-lasting economic security through less stigmatising processes (cf. De Wispelaere, 2015). In line with results from previous studies (see above), it was also perceived that the benefit would reduce bureaucracy and/or ‘economic stress’.

The food aid recipients’ reasoning on the economic effects of a BI also illustrates some of the difficulties in catching the awareness of interests. On the other hand, the results might also genuinely reflect that a BI of 560 euros is too low to be in the interest of all food aid recipients. Rather many informants were also unsure of how a BI would harmonise different benefits they were now receiving.

Generally, the qualitative data brought perceptions, normative beliefs and images of deservingness to the fore, especially among those who did not support a BI. Some of them opposed the benefit with reference to it being granted also to other (objectively) vulnerable groups that are nevertheless perceived as undeserving. The interviewees thus made similar points of social comparisons, distancing themselves from the ‘not deserving’ (e.g. unemployed young adults, immigrants and ‘cheaters’ in breadlines) among the poor and vulnerable and not wanting to support a universal benefit that would be shared by ‘them’ (c.f. Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; also van Oorschot et al., 2017). On the other hand, a universal

BI was opposed by others by using a ‘distant point of social comparison’ – people who are better off financially should not be receiving a BI, only people who have less.

Several informants stressed that a BI should be paid only to those who really need it and aspects of reciprocity are important; money should not be distributed too easily or automatically without the recipient doing anything for it. Under such conditions, the ‘BI’ easily turns into a selective BI benefit which some people should receive only after some kind of needs testing – reminiscent of the current Finnish social assistance scheme.

The bottom-up perspective used in the present study also gives the recipients of food aid a voice concerning social policy reforms that have been regarded, at least by many social actors, as a solution to ‘their’ problems. As argued by Ruth Lister (2004, p. 2, cited in Shildrick & MacDonald 2013, p. 286), ‘“the poor” are frequently talked about and theorised about but are rarely themselves in a position to have their thoughts published’. Our results clearly show that food aid recipients are not one ‘voice’.

The results also echo Shildrick and MacDonald’s (2013) British results in that they show that normative views about the ‘undeserving poor’ are not only nurtured by persons among the financially better off, but also by some who have less but feel they are more entitled to support. However, whether such views of wishing, in practice, to limit the social citizenship of certain people in the breadlines are due more to universal attempts to distance oneself from ‘the undeserving’, or to the normative feedback effects of existing selective benefits of last resort and the Nordic welfare state norms, such as reciprocity, (see Kettunen, 2001; also Johansson & Hvinden, 2007) that they reflect, remains a question requiring further analyses. Nevertheless, our results seem to indicate that a BI is not cheered by the food aid recipients in this study more often than by the population at large – at least in a situation where the precise conditions of receiving it are not defined. The uncertain interplay between a BI and other parts of social security was also reflected in some of the interviews. At the same

time, this highlights some general challenges in introducing a BI. If discussed on a general level, the phenomenon might be hard to grasp. If specified, the reaction might be the same. However, in our view, this does not diminish the relevance of studying the views of groups likely to be substantially affected by a BI.

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Appendix

Table A1.

Table 1. Support (%) for a basic income among food aid recipients (N=713).

Statement: Every person permanently residing in Finland should automatically be guaranteed a certain basic income.	%
Fully disagree	8
Partly disagree	7
Neither agree nor disagree	16
Partly agree	16
Fully agree	53

Table 2. Support (%) for a basic income among food aid recipients and among the general population in Finland (aged 15 or older).

	In favour of a basic income
Food aid recipients	69
General population	69

Table 3. Drivers of support for basic income.

Basic income support	
<i>Socio-economic position</i>	
Age	-.061 ns
Sex	-.013 ns
Citizenship	-.040 ns
Education	-.029 ns
Labour market situation	.050 ns
<i>Own interest</i>	
Food aid essential for own survival	.102**
BI would improve own economic Situation	.287***
<i>Normative perceptions</i>	
People living in Finland are 'all in the same boat'	.077*
R ² (adjusted)	0.10
N=624	

Note: Dependent variable 'support for basic income'; linear regression. Entries are betas. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Appendix.

Table A1. Description of individual-level variables.

Variable	% (N)
Age group	
16–25	4 (33)
26–35	14 (104)
36–45	13 (102)
46–55	25 (190)
56–65	27 (204)
65 yrs. or more	17 (132)
Gender	
Male	50 (391)
Female	50 (387)
Citizenship	
Finnish	77 (581)
Other	23 (171)
Labour market situation	
Permanently employed (full or part-time)	9 (67)
Unemployed	44 (313)
Student/stay-at-home	12 (84)
Retired	35 (242)
Statement: The distribution of food is a necessity for coping in my situation.	
I fully disagree	2 (16)
I partly disagree	4 (26)
Neither agree nor disagree	5 (37)
I partly agree	23 (170)
I fully agree	67 (503)
Statement: If I were to receive 560 euros in basic income every month, it would affect my economic situation in a favourable way.	
I fully disagree	12 (83)
I partly disagree	5 (38)
Neither agree nor disagree	24 (172)
I partly agree	13 (92)
I fully agree	47 (336)
Statement: People living in Finland are ‘all in the same boat’.	
I fully disagree	20 (144)
I partly disagree	10 (73)
Neither agree nor disagree	16 (120)
I partly agree	20 (146)
I fully agree	34 (243)