Unravelling deservingness: Which criteria do people use to judge the relative deservingness of welfare target groups? A vignette-based focus group study

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that European citizens share consistent attitudes towards the relative deservingness of different target groups of social policy, such as perceiving elderly people as most deserving, unemployed people as less deserving and immigrants as least deserving. Yet, it is unclear which criteria people apply when making these judgements. In this article, we explore the reasoning behind deservingness judgements. We analyse how four focus groups – from the middle class, the working class, young people and elderly people – discuss and rank various vignettes representing welfare target groups. Our focus groups' rankings mirror the well-established rank order of welfare target groups, and we also introduce further target groups: median-income families, low-income earners, and well-off earners. Our analyses of reasoning patterns show that depending on the target group specific combinations of deservingness criteria suggested in the literature (e.g. need, reciprocity, identity, control) are applied, and we suggest adding a further criterion emphasizing future returns on invested resources ('social investment'). Furthermore, by comparing focus groups, we find that different groups back up similar rankings by differing criteria, suggesting that below the surface of a 'common deservingness culture' linger class and other differences in perceiving welfare deservingness.

Keywords

Deservingness criteria, focus groups, public opinion, social policy, target groups, vignette study, welfare attitudes

Introduction

Over the last decades, research on welfare attitudes has become a well-established field of study (e.g. Andreß and Heien, 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno,

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2003; Larsen, 2008; Svallfors, 1997a). Within this field, a growing literature has analysed public perceptions of the relative deservingness of various target groups of social policies (e.g. Esmark and Schoop, 2017; Laenen, 2018; Van Oorschot et al., 2017b). The term *deservingness* describes a continuum – ranging from 'very deserving' to 'very undeserving' – upon which (members of) various social groups are placed depending on judgements in the population about their attitudes or actions in the context of social policies. The basic assumption is that the more positive ('deserving') the target group of a benefit scheme is judged, the more public support the scheme receives. Deservingness perceptions shape the public's answer to the basic social policy question of 'who should get what, and why' and become particularly relevant under conditions of fiscal austerity and welfare state retrenchment, as distributional conflicts increase and various groups compete for decreasing resources.

A main finding of research on public deservingness perceptions is that citizens in Europe across countries and social groups share a common and consistent deservingness culture, which, for example, perceives elderly people as most deserving of social benefits and services, unemployed people as less deserving and immigrants as still less deserving (Van Oorschot, 2006: 23). Also, several criteria (e.g. need, reciprocity or identity) have been suggested upon which these deservingness judgements are based, such as whether a group is considered particularly needy, viewed as victims of bad circumstances, or seen as having earned support. So far, these criteria have, however, only been inferred from population surveys or experimental studies, which had to pre-determine the criteria instead of exploring actual arguments and patterns of reasoning of citizens in a deliberative setting. Thus, we have little knowledge whether people actually apply the predetermined deservingness criteria at all, and – if they do – to what extent and how.

In this article, we seek to bridge this gap in deservingness research by adding qualitative data from focus groups to the picture. We conducted four focus groups in the autumn of 2016 in Germany, each assembling citizens from a specific social group: the middle class, the working class, young

people and elderly people. We consider focus groups particularly useful for studying deservingness attitudes, as the interactive discussions allow analysing shared understandings and collective representation within different social groups. Each focus group discussed six vignettes representing different welfare target groups (elderly people, unemployed people, median-income families with dependent children, low-income earners, well-off earners and immigrants), then individually ranked these vignettes in terms of their deservingness for social protection, and finally discussed the resultant rank order. This enables us to combine data on the rank order of relative deservingness with data on the underlying reasoning and justifications.

Our analysis starts with the preparatory step of examining the *rank order* of deservingness in the four focus groups by asking: How are the vignettes ranked, is there a similar rank order across individuals and groups, and, if not, what are the main differences? Our main aim here is to compare the rank order in the focus groups with the well-established finding from experimental and survey research that there is a 'universal' rank order of deservingness perceptions in order to check if the rankings in our study reflect this result, which would provide a promising ground for our own analysis. We then turn towards our main research questions, which focus on the *criteria* for deservingness: Which arguments and criteria are considered for each welfare target group? Which criteria are provided for high deservingness of target groups, and which for low deservingness? And what is the overall importance of each criterion? In an additional exploratory step, we finally turn our attention to differences between *focus groups* and ask which (combinations of) criteria each group applies, and if different groups use different criteria to justify the deservingness of welfare target groups. Here, we will present some evidence suggesting that different classes might back up similar rankings with reference to differing criteria, and argue that this preliminary finding requires more sophisticated qualitative – and quantitative – analyses in the future.

By providing the first analysis of the criteria that people apply in their reasoning about the deservingness of welfare target groups, we contribute to

deservingness research in three respects: We test the deservingness criteria suggested in the literature; we indicate the relative importance of criteria and their combinations for various welfare target groups; and we explore whether different social groups tend to apply different criteria.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we will review the literature on public deservingness perceptions and outline the deservingness criteria suggested so far. We will then describe our research design by explicating the research questions and our methods of data collection and analysis. Afterwards, we will present the main findings, and finally, we will conclude and discuss implications and limitations of our study.

Public perceptions of welfare deservingness: target groups and criteria

Deservingness perceptions within the population have received attention from various social science disciplines. Most noteworthy are findings from evolutionary psychology which suggest that determining the deservingness of individuals is a heuristic rooted in pre-modern, small-scale societies characterized by small-scale exchanges of help: over the course of human evolution, individuals developed cognitive categories enabling them to represent and discriminate between 'reciprocators' contributing to reciprocal sharing and 'cheaters' who did not reciprocate (Petersen, 2012). In contemporary societies, this 'deservingness heuristic' is supposed to constitute the psychological basis not only for everyday judgements about interpersonal help-giving, but also for attitudes towards political help-giving in the form of social welfare, with the automatic, affective and powerful nature of this heuristic overriding any differences in institutions, interests and ideas and thus resulting in similar deservingness perceptions across cultural divides, welfare state regimes, political orientations and ideologies (Jensen and Petersen, 2017; Petersen, 2012).

Within the field of social policy and welfare attitudes, scholars have focused on the relative *rank order* of target groups in terms of their deservingness, and on the *criteria* that people apply when making these judgements. In regard to the *rank order* of groups, the finding that 'that Europeans share a common and fundamental deservingness culture' (Van Oorschot, 2006: 23) has been qualified by subsequent research in three respects. First, there is evidence that a relatively large group of people do not want to differentiate between target groups (Laenen and Meuleman, 2017). Second, research shows uniformly high support for elderly people and sick and disabled people (Jæger, 2007), but less consistent attitudes towards unemployed people (e.g. Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014), people on social assistance (e.g. Kallio and Kouvo, 2015; Roosma and Jeene, 2017), and immigrants (e.g. Kootstra, 2016). And third, the rank order seems to vary with the operationalization of the *deservingness* concept, pointing to conceptual inconsistencies partly due to data availability (e.g. Jeene et al., 2014; Raven et al., 2015).

It is generally assumed that individuals form this rank order by implicitly judging the groups on the basis of several deservingness *criteria* and comparing how each group 'scores' on them. The most comprehensive conceptualization of criteria has been developed by Van Oorschot (2000). Five deservingness criteria are identified: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need ('CARIN'; see Van Oorschot et al., 2017a: xviii). *Control* refers to the degree to which people are seen as having control over their neediness or being personally responsible for it; the assumption is that the less control the person has over her neediness, the more deserving she is of public support. *Attitude* refers to people's response to public support – that is, their 'docility' (De Swaan, 1988) or 'gratefulness' (Cook, 1979): the more compliant and grateful a person seems, the more deserving she is thought to be. *Reciprocity* denotes the degree of reciprocation, or having earned support: the more a person has contributed, the more deserving she is deemed. *Identity* is associated with the closeness between those providing support and those who are supported: people 'closer to us' are seen as more deserving (e.g. 'our family', 'our town', 'our people'). Finally, *need* refers to the level of need: people with greater need are seen as more deserving. This criterion can be extended to dependent children, who increase the need of a household (Van Oorschot and Roosma, 2017: 14).

However, these deservingness criteria and their relevance for the ranking of welfare target groups have so far only be hypothesized or inferred from survey data. The original development of the CARIN criteria by Van Oorschot goes back to existing literature from which the author distilled the five criteria as relevant dimensions for people's judgement of deservingness (Van Oorschot, 2000: 35–37). In his seminal works from 2000 and 2006 on deservingness, he did not operationalize the CARIN criteria themselves, but analysed respondents' concerns towards the living conditions (Van Oorschot, 2006) or their opinion regarding the right to financial support (Van Oorschot, 2000) of contrasting groups of benefit recipients in order to infer the presence or absence of a criterion. Only very few studies measure the deservingness of a welfare target group *and* the role of the CARIN criteria in this regard. The most important is from Kootstra (2017), who in a survey experiment on the deservingness of minority groups combined a question on deservingness with questions on the different criteria (Kootstra, 2017: 270). Yet, even this study had to pre-define the CARIN criteria and thus might not capture all relevant deservingness criteria. Furthermore, due to the experimental design, we do not have information on the relative deservingness of a target group in the eyes of a respondent (Meuleman et al., 2017: 348). In short, the actual reasoning of people when making deservingness judgements has not been studied so far. From this gap follow two further gaps: first, we know little about the relative importance and patterns of deservingness criteria, and studies suggest that people judge deservingness using several criteria (Raven et al., 2015). Second, we know little about the question if different social groups apply or emphasize different criteria; only a survey-based study examining attitudes in the Dutch population towards disability pensioners suggests that individuals place different emphasis on different criteria, and that this emphasis varies with socio-structural and cultural factors (Jeene et al., 2013).

The limited knowledge about deservingness criteria has been recognized as a fundamental gap in the deservingness literature, and it has been stated that

what is lacking thus far is qualitative research, for example, in the form of depth interviewing or forum groups, in which people are asked to freely discuss and reveal what kind of criteria they are inclined to apply to specific needy groups. (Van Oorschot and Roosma, 2015: 25; see also Meuleman et al., 2017: 350)

Our study is a first step to realize this proposal.

Research design

We examine which criteria people apply when judging the relative deservingness of social policy target groups by analysing data from focus groups representing different socio-demographic groups that discuss and rank vignettes representing different target groups. Our empirical work contains three sets of questions. We begin with a preparatory set that serves the purpose to find out if the focus groups' rankings mirror the results of population surveys showing a relatively consistent rank order regarding the deservingness of welfare target groups:

1. What is the *rank order* of deservingness (i.e. how are the vignettes ranked)? Is there a similar rank order across individuals and groups? If not, what are the main differences?

The following two sets of questions comprise the main analysis:

1. Which *criteria* are seen as important for each target group/vignette? Which criteria are mainly used to justify high deservingness, and which to justify low deservingness? What is the relative weight of each criterion, and which patterns of criteria are common?
2. Do the *social groups* represented by the focus groups differ in their use of (patterns of) criteria to justify deservingness?

In the first main set of questions, we allocate the participants' arguments to the deservingness criteria and analyse the relative importance of each criterion overall and regarding specific target groups and ranking positions. The second question is exploratory: by showing similarities and differences in the use of criteria among focus groups, we hope to

stimulate further research on factors shaping deservingness judgements.

Data collection: focus groups and vignettes

Data were collected through focus groups conducted in October 2016 in Berlin, Germany[1] as part of the research project 'Welfare State Futures: Our Children's Europe' (WelfSOC), funded by NORFACE and led by Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby (University of Kent). The project studies citizens' attitudes to the future of the welfare state in five countries (Denmark, Germany, Norway, Slovenia and the United Kingdom) using qualitative research methods. The focus groups were implemented by the Qualitative Research Unit of Ipsos Germany led by Hans-Jürgen Frieß in collaboration with the German research team led by Professor Steffen Mau (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). All groups were audio- and video recorded and professionally transcribed and translated into English by Ipsos.[2]

Focus groups have the advantage over standardized surveys in that they allow the analysis of arguments, justifications and judgements that lie behind evaluations and rankings. Although framing effects might be a problem,[3] focus groups also have several advantages compared to qualitative interviews. They generate insights into shared meanings and processes of collective reasoning and create 'a natural environment [. . .] because participants are influencing, and influenced by others – just as they are in real life' (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 7). As usual, in our study the focus groups were supposed to stand for social groups and cleavages (regarding social status and stage of life). Thus, participants were professionally recruited by 'items', a company specializing in recruitment for qualitative research. The following four groups were recruited:

1. *Middle class*: relatively high social status (as determined by household net income, education level and occupational status);
2. *Working class*: lower social status (as determined by household net income, education level and occupational status);
3. *Young people*: people below 35 years of age;
4. *Elderly people*: people aged 60 years and above.

Within the given parameters, in each group, we strived for a broad mix of people in terms of age, gender, education, occupation, household net income, family status, housing situation, migration background and political orientation (see Supplementary Information for details on all participants). Each group discussion had 8 participants (7 in the 'young people' group) and lasted 2 hours. The structure was as follows: after an introductory round and a brainstorming on the welfare state and its target groups, the participants were successively presented the following vignettes on a card and read out by the moderator (here preceded by the welfare target group they represent):[4]

1. *Unemployed person*: 'Udo is 45 years old and in good health. He has been unemployed for some time'.
2. *Elderly person* (above German standard retirement age): 'Gisela is 70 years old and in good health. She is not working any more'.
3. *Family* (with median income and dependent children): 'Family Meyenberg has two children under the age of three years. The family has €2940 per month at their disposal'.
4. *Low-income earner* (full-time employment on German minimum wage): 'Hannes is 30 years old and earns €1400 gross per month. After taxes and social security contributions, he has €1045 net per month'.
5. *Well-off earner* (roughly 160% of median income): 'Jens is 30 years old and earns €4500 gross per month. After taxes and social security contributions, he has €2660 net per month'.
6. *Immigrant*: 'Adrian has immigrated to Germany'.[5]

For each vignette, the group was asked what social benefits and services the person(s) should receive and why, as well as what should be demanded from the person(s) and why; thus, the discussions revolved around rights, entitlements, conditions,

obligations, responsibilities, needs and deservingness. If the group required further information to make a judgement, they were asked which information they needed and how they would further describe the person; this was to learn which conditions and criteria are considered important. It was also explored by the moderator how variations (e.g. in age, gender or income) affected judgements. At the end, each participant should rank the vignettes in regard to the question about whom the welfare state should care most and care least (by assigning the vignettes to boxes from '1=*should care most*' to '6=*should care least*'; one vignette per box; all participants at the same time), and the resultant rank order was discussed.[6] Our analysis of the use of deservingness criteria is based on this discussion of the rank order, as here the participants were asked to explicitly justify their deservingness judgements; an exercise which links perceptions of the relative deservingness of welfare target groups to the underlying deservingness criteria.

Data analysis: categories and coding procedure

The transcribed recordings of the focus groups were coded using the software NVivo. The coding scheme comprised the type of focus group and vignette and the deservingness criteria suggested in the literature, with the possibility to amend or refine these categories. As elaborated in the previous section, the five criteria are control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need ('CARIN': Van Oorschot, 2000: 36).

Each deservingness criterion was specified through coding instructions with several examples. In order to allow basic quantitative analyses – such as counting the number of codes – it was defined that each coherent contribution by a participant represented one classifiable statement (including short statements expressing approval or disapproval, such as 'I agree'). While it was initially deemed necessary to first develop codes inductively paraphrasing an argument and only later to allocate these arguments to the deservingness criteria suggested in the literature, it turned out that most statements could be easily assigned to the criteria – which is already a first result (see next section). We thus used a coding strategy combining allocations of statements to the five criteria with inductive categories for those statements that did not fit into the predetermined categories. In the following section, we will combine rough quantifications showing the relative importance of criteria with exemplary qualitative analyses of the reasoning and justifications.

Analyses and findings

As outlined earlier, we begin the presentation of our empirical analyses with the *rank order* of deservingness and then turn to our two main questions focusing on the deservingness *criteria* and the differences between *focus groups*.

Rank order of deservingness

A qualitative study with a total of 31 participants can and should of course not be used for quantifying arguments and statistical claims. Yet, a comparison of the rankings in our data with rankings in existing (quantitative) studies can serve as a good starting point for the subsequent qualitative analyses because it provides a first test whether our data mirror previous findings about the rank order of deservingness – which would provide a good starting point for the following analysis. Indeed, the ranking of the six vignettes by the focus groups' participants was not only relatively consistent among individuals and groups, but also similar to the results of population surveys. If we calculate for each vignette the mean of its ranking position across all 31 participants, we find the following pattern (see Table 1): families are considered most deserving of public support (mean: 2.03), followed by low-income earners and elderly people (2.67 and 2.89), and then by unemployed people (3.05). With considerable distance follow well-off earners and immigrants (5.12 and 5.27).

Families were considered most deserving in three focus groups; only in the middle-class group they were surpassed by elderly people and almost on a par with unemployed people (see Table 1). Elderly people were ranked especially high in the middle-class and the working-class focus groups, and somewhat lower in the focus groups of elderly and young people. The low-income earner was considered

Table 1. Rank order of vignettes representing different welfare target groups (across all focus group participants and for each individual focus group).

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
Across all focus group participants		
1	Family	2.03
2	Elderly	2.67
3	Low-income	2.89
4	Unemployed	3.05
5	Immigrant	5.12
6	Well-off	5.27
Focus group: middle class		
1	Elderly	2.40
2	Family	2.83
3	Unemployed	2.86
4	Low-income	3.25
5	Well-off	5.00
6	Immigrant	5.25
Focus group: working class		
1	Family	2.13
2	Elderly	2.25
3	Low-income	3.13
4	Unemployed	3.50
5	Well-off	4.88
6	Immigrant	5.13
Focus group: young people		
1	Family	1.14
2	Low-income	2.29
3	Unemployed	3.29
4	Elderly	3.57
5	Immigrant	4.71
6	Well-off	6.00
Focus group: elderly people		
1	Family	2.00
2	Low-income	2.00
3	Unemployed	2.57
4	Elderly	3.33
5	Well-off	4.60
6	Immigrant	6.00

Source: Own data.

particularly deserving in comparison to the other vignettes in the group of elderly people and the group of young people. The unemployed person was ranked in the middle – that is, at positions three or four – in all groups. High agreement can also be observed in the ranking of the immigrant and the well-off earner, who occupied the last two ranks in all four focus groups; yet, while in three groups the immigrant was ranked behind the well-off earner, in the group of young people the well-off earner was unanimously placed at the last position. Overall, we found high agreement about the ranks of all vignettes across all participants.[7]

Our results thus mirror the results of cross-national population surveys that there is a relatively consistent pattern of deservingness perceptions, with elderly people near the top, unemployed people in the middle and immigrants near the bottom (e.g. Van Oorschot, 2006). To this rank order, we add categories that have not been included in surveys and might be interesting to include in the future: median-income families, low-income earners and well-off earners. Our results suggest that families and low-income earners might score near the top of deservingness rankings, well-off earners near the bottom. In sum, the similarities of our findings to those of population surveys on welfare deservingness are a good starting point for the analysis of deservingness criteria.

Deservingness criteria

The results of the coding of deservingness criteria are presented in Table 2. The table shows cross-tabulations for the quantity of statements referring to combinations of vignettes and deservingness criteria. Our first main result is that the criteria suggested by Van Oorschot (2000) and commonly used in the literature – control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need (CARIN) – are highly useful to capture the reasoning of citizens about the deservingness of welfare target groups, and most statements clearly referred to one (or more) of the criteria and could be easily allocated to the criteria. Also, the assumed directions of effects – for example, people use lack of control as a justification for more deservingness – were as hypothesized by Van Oorschot (2000).

Based on our coding results, we argue that mainly in two respects, the categorical framework of deservingness criteria could be improved. First, there were almost no references to the *attitude* criterion (which represents the recipient's perceived attitude to public

Table 2. Use of deservingness criteria for different target group vignettes.

Vignette	Criterion					
	Attitude	Control	Identity	Need	Reciprocity	Social investment
Family	o	o	++	++	o	++
Elderly	o	++	+	++	++	o
Low-income	o	+	o	o	+	++
Unemployed	o	++	o	+	+	o
Immigrant	o	o	++	+	++	++
Well-off	o	+	o	++	o	o

Source: Own data. o = no or few references; + = intermediate number of references; ++ = high number of references.
As the absolute numbers are not relevant and might be even misleading (as for instance in some groups the overall amount of statements per participant is higher than in others), we replaced them with symbols.

support in terms of compliance, docility and gratefulness). Two explanations are possible: either this criterion might play no role in people's reasoning about welfare deservingness; or this criterion is less distinct than the others, because in the few instances in which it was coded, it was often in combination with other criteria (especially *reciprocity* and *control*). In any case, our findings indicate that it is no serious problem that this criterion was not operationalized and analysed in survey-based deservingness studies (e.g. Van Oorschot, 2000: 37), even though in experimental designs it was significant (e.g. Kootstra, 2017).

Second, it might be useful to add a further deservingness criterion called '*social investment*', as participants frequently referred to future returns on investments (especially for the family, the low-income earner and the immigrant; see Table 2, last column). This might be regarded as a sub-category of the *reciprocity* criterion, and indeed Van Oorschot and Roosma (2017: 13) use *reciprocity* to refer to both people who have contributed to society earlier and those 'who may be expected to be able to contribute in future'. Yet, we argue that there are three reasons for creating a separate *social investment* criterion: first, the underlying reasoning was very noticeable and salient in the coding process. Second, and more importantly, justifying deservingness on the grounds of either previous contributions or future expected returns involves different assumptions about risks, efforts and motivations of benefit recipients. This is also reflected by the fact that some vignettes score high on the *reciprocity* criterion (e.g.

elderly people), and others score high on the *social investment* criterion (e.g. families; see Table 2).

Especially noticeable is the need for an additional criterion in the case of the immigrant vignette: while people used the *reciprocity* criterion to justify low deservingness ('Adrian hasn't done anything for this country yet'; OL-7), they made use of the *social investment* criterion to discuss higher deservingness ('We want to invest in him while he's still young, and then maybe in five years he has a good job and can pay into the social welfare system himself'; MC-3). Without an additional criterion, these distinct types of reasoning would simply level out. And third, in line with common understandings of the 'social investment' concept in social policy research (e.g. Morel et al., 2012: 6), the arguments using the *social investment* criterion often emphasize that future returns would be higher than current investments (in contrast to the idea that someone earns only her 'fair share'): 'If I support this man and pay for his further training, then he can get a better job, he earns better and therefore pays more taxes' (OL-7). Put another way: while the existing deservingness criteria imply conditionality, the *social investment* criterion implies potentiality. This criterion also first requires action from the public, and only then from the recipient of public support. On these grounds, we propose, and use, *social investment* as an additional criterion.

We now turn to the questions about which criteria are important for each target group/vignette and which criteria are used to justify high and low rankings by focusing on the rows in Table 2. Evidently,

differing (combinations of) criteria play a role for the different welfare target groups. In the case of the family vignette, people mainly refer to *identity, need* and *social investment*, while for the elderly person vignette *need, reciprocity* and (lack of) *control* are emphasized. The criteria are often combined to justify the deservingness of a specific group. For instance, the participant YO-4 from the group of young people brings in *need, social investment* and (lack of) *control* when she argues that

> They [the family] have two family members who need to be provided for, but who cannot work. The unemployed person for instance can work himself and make an effort, but the children can't do that yet, and they need support now so that they can then give back later on.

Similarly, participant WC-5 from the working-class group combines *reciprocity* and *need* when stating 'I put her [the elderly person] in first place, because if I've worked hard all my life, even if I wasn't a high earner, if the state does not step in, then I'll be poorly off'.

The rather low deservingness of immigrants was justified with references to (lack of) *identity* and (lack of) *reciprocity*, whereas *social investment* arguments were frequently utilized to justify higher deservingness, but seem to have barely influenced the final ranking of this vignette. The low deservingness of well-off earners was unanimously and solely justified with (lack of) *need*: 'He doesn't have these problems or needs. He can provide for himself' (WC-3). For low-income earners, the importance of *social investment* considerations was emphasized; another line of argument that could be summarized as 'they work and do not just cash up social benefits' was difficult to allocate and eventually – depending on the exact reasoning – assigned to one or more of the criteria *reciprocity, control* or *attitude*. For the unemployed vignette, *control* was the most important criterion, and several statements dealt with questions of personal responsibility, like the one made by participant OL-7 from the elderly group: 'I feel it's also important to know if the person who is in this situation is at fault for his or her situation or not. Did they steal something for instance?' More generally, it was

highly controversial if and how far unemployed people are responsible for their situation.

If we now ask which criteria are mainly used to justify high deservingness and which to justify low deservingness, the answer is: it depends on the welfare target group. All criteria are commonly used to justify high (and low) deservingness, and no criterion can be singled out as being used solely to justify low (or high) deservingness. For example, *need* justifies high deservingness in the case of families and elderly persons, but (lack of) *need* is also used to account for low deservingness of well-off earners; and *identity* (or its absence) is supposed to justify high deservingness of families as well as low deservingness of immigrants.

Differences between groups

The final question we want to answer deals with differences between groups in their reasoning about deservingness and the criteria they apply. From the ranking results – which were relatively similar across the focus groups (see Table 1) – it might seem that all groups by and large share the same reasoning and criteria. This would be in line with results of survey-based deservingness research suggesting that 'across countries and social groups Europeans share a common deservingness culture' (Van Oorschot, 2006: 23). However, by contrasting the reasoning in the middle-class focus group with the one in the working-class focus group, we want to challenge the assumption of homogeneity between social groups and suggest that future research should (re-)turn its attention to class and other differences in how welfare deservingness is perceived and justified.

The following examples, which exhibit common patterns of reasoning, could be referred to as 'similar ranking – different reasoning'. As we have seen in Table 1, the middle-class group and the working-class group both ranked the elderly person vignette relatively high (on position 1 or 2), and the immigrant vignette relatively low (at position 6). However, if we dig deeper into the patterns of reasoning and justifications, we can observe remarkable differences. Box 1 shows how the middle-class group[8] (on the left side of the box) and the working-class group[9] (on the right side) justify the high rank of the elderly person

Box 1. Excerpts of deservingness criteria used to justify high and low ranking positions in two focus groups (middle class and working class).

	FOCUS GROUP: MIDDLE CLASS	Criterion	FOCUS GROUP: WORKING CLASS	Criterion
Reasoning for HIGH RANKING of elderly person	**Moderator:** Why should the state take care of the retired people and not so much the other people? Why the pensioners?		**Moderator:** We have Gisela picked twice for first place and three times in second place. [. . .] What is the reason for that?	
	MC-3: Because they have the least chance to continue working and earn money in order to provide for themselves.	Control	**WC-3:** When people are older, they want to live in dignity and not be afraid of old age so that they can live, even when they get older.	Need
	MC-4: This says she is no longer working, but she did work in the past.	Reciprocity/ Control	**WC-2:** If they work all their lives and then all of a sudden have these issues to deal with.	Reciprocity
	Moderator: And that's something that's very important?		**WC-3:** And older people are often ignored and sort of disappear. [. . .] if they then also have existential fears, that is really very sad. Who would want to grow old under such conditions?	Need
	MC-3: They have the least future prospects so to say.	Control	**WC-4:** Gisela should be able to continue enjoying her previous living standard, even at 70.	Need
	MC-4: We don't know how much she earned, and in principle it's not important. She did in fact go out and do something.	Reciprocity	**WC-5:** I put her in first place, because if I've worked hard all my life, even if I wasn't a high earner, if the state does not step in, then I'll be poorly off.	Need
	MC-5: She worked her whole life.	Reciprocity	**WC-3:** I don't think such a person should have to mess around going to some welfare office to go begging in order to be allowed to stay in her own apartment – of course this is justified.	Need
			WC-9: We also know that this is the future that's waiting for us, and I want to be able to enjoy it.	Identity
Reasoning for LOW RANKING of immigrant	*During vignette discussion:*		**Moderator:** At sixth place, we had Adrian five times and Jens twice, the high earner. First of all with Adrian, if we count this, we have him 7 times. Why should we focus less on Adrian?	
	MC-7: If it's possible that the starts work right away, then fine. If he's in his twenties and has been trained as a baker or something, then if it's possible, then why not?		**WC-10:** Germans are always afraid of foreigners for some strange reason.	Identity
	MC-9: So that he becomes an important part of the society as quickly as possible.	Reciprocity	**WC-3:** I put Adrian down in a lower place, because the older woman and the others were more important to me. It doesn't mean that he is not welcome and that he shouldn't also get support too, but I just saw these others as more important.	Identity
	[. . .]		**Moderator:** So the others are more important?	
	Moderator: They should be allowed to work immediately?		**WC-9:** I put Adrian [down there], [but] if he's here, he should get his chance for a future.	Social investment
	MC-2: Yes. [. . .] If they're receiving benefits, why shouldn't they also pay in?	Reciprocity	**WC-2:** The other cases seemed more important to me in that moment.	Identity
	After card ranking exercise:		**WC-3:** Me too.	Identity
	Moderator: [. . .] Why should Adrian not be a central focus of the social welfare state?	Identity		
	MC-2: Because he must return to his homeland sooner or later.			
	Moderator: He should go back, therefore we shouldn't invest too much. Are there other reasons?	Reciprocity		
	MC-8: What bothers me is that, even if he's a refugee, that he doesn't pay into the system here at all. [. . .]			

vignette (in the upper half of the box) and the low rank of the immigrant vignette (in the lower half).

In their justifications for the high ranking of the elderly person vignette, the middle-class group highlights lack of *control* about older people's situation ('they have the least chance to continue working and earn money in order to provide for themselves', MC-3) and *reciprocity* by referring to the elderly person's presumed work history ('This says she is no longer working, but she did work in the past', MC-4), culminating in the unfounded claim 'She worked her whole life' (MC-5). *Reciprocity* is also the dominant criterion brought up by the middle-class group when discussing the low deservingness of the immigrant vignette ('if they are receiving benefits, why shouldn't they pay in', MC-2).

By contrast, the working-class group stresses in their reasoning about the high rank of the elderly person vignette primarily the criteria *need* ('When people are older, they want to live in dignity and not be afraid of old age', WC-3) and, ultimately, *identity* ('We also know that this is the future that's waiting for us', WC-9). A similar pattern occurs in the discussion about the low ranking of the immigrant vignette, as the working-class group does not stress *reciprocity* – as had been done by the middle-class group – but *identity* by arguing that the immigrant is farther away from oneself as other target groups ('The other cases seemed more important to me', WC-2).[10]

While we want to stress that these are exploratory findings that should be further tested, these examples point to the possibility that behind the apparent similarity in deservingness perceptions among social groups – and behind the actual similarities in the rank order of deservingness – linger differences in the application of, or the emphasis on, deservingness criteria, while the middle class highlights *control* and *reciprocity*, the working class emphasizes *need* and *identity*. This, in turn, might be due to differences in economic and financial circumstances, conceptions of social justice and perceptions of the principles and operation of welfare states that should be further looked into. Here, not only broad survey studies or experimental designs are suitable but also interpretative methods such as the 'documentary method' (e.g. Bohnsack, 2010) that specifically focus on the mutual implicit or intuitive understanding within social groups. An initial application of this method to our dataset found that the middle class and the working class group indeed exhibit various class-specific orientations, such as an emphasis on moral virtues like solidarity, honesty and work ethos in the working-class group, and on individual achievements and ambitions in the middle class (Claus, 2017); a finding that relates to our preliminary findings about class differences in deservingness perceptions.

Conclusions and discussion

This study offered the first analysis of the reasoning patterns that citizens apply to determine the deservingness of various welfare target groups for social benefits and services. We can draw three main conclusions: first, the deservingness criteria suggested in the literature (e.g. Van Oorschot, 2000) do capture most arguments and patterns of reasoning that people use to justify welfare deservingness. References to the criteria *need, identity, reciprocity* and *control* were abound, whereas the fifth criterion – *attitude* – was rarely found; this might point either to lack of importance or to the need for conceptual clarification and extension (e.g. to include not only gratefulness for public support, but also aspects of personal motivation and effort). Based on our analyses, we also propose to include *social investment* as an additional deservingness criterion. This criterion would differ from the *reciprocity* criterion in both its definitional intensions – as it highlights potentiality instead of conditionality of public support – and its extensions, as it applies to other welfare target groups than the *reciprocity* criterion. The prevalence of this criterion in citizens' reasoning about welfare deservingness also strikingly shows that people got the message of the 'social investment' paradigm in social policy.

Second, our findings show that different combinations of deservingness criteria are applied to different welfare target groups. For instance, while people emphasize *need, reciprocity* and (lack of) *control* in regard to elderly people, for families they highlight *identity, need* and *social investment*. This target group-specific use of criteria overshadows other potential patterns; for example, no criteria were

predominantly used to justify either high or low deservingness. In future survey-based research, it would be interesting to study how different welfare target groups – including those newly introduced by us: median-income families, low-income earners and well-off earners – score on each of those deservingness dimensions (see also Raven et al., 2015 and contributions in Van Oorschot et al., 2017b).

Third, in contrast to survey-based studies suggesting a 'common and fundamental deservingness culture' (Van Oorschot, 2006: 23) across social groups, our results indicate that the similarities in the rank order of welfare target groups in public opinion obscure differences in the underlying patterns of reasoning and criteria (for a similar conclusion, see Meuleman et al., 2017: 338). Our evidence suggests, for example, that the middle class assesses deservingness especially with reference to the criteria *reciprocity* and *control*, whereas working-class people primarily emphasize *need* and *identity*.

Especially, the third finding has broad implications for future research on popular perceptions of welfare deservingness, because it indicates that beneath the 'common deservingness culture' – as exhibited by high uniformity in the ranking of welfare target groups found in population surveys – linger class and other differences in the underlying reasoning and the patterns of deservingness criteria. It would be promising to test the insights from our study on differences in the application of deservingness criteria in representative population surveys and thus 'bring class back in' to deservingness research (Kulin and Svallfors, 2013). It might also be fruitful to study popular perceptions of welfare deservingness using frameworks and insights from comparative cultural sociology (e.g. Lamont, 1992), post-productivism (e.g. Goodin, 2001) and studies about the turn of the middle class from collective risk sharing to individual status investments (e.g. Mau, 2015).

Finally, we want to point out the two most important limitations of our study. First, we did not deal with the question of whether some deservingness criteria are overall deemed more important than others. While our data allow such an analysis, this would require in-depth analyses of whether and how citizens create hierarchies among criteria, and under which conditions – and this is beyond the scope of

this article. And second, as any focus group study, we cannot and do not claim external validity of our findings for the population at large: on the one hand, we studied only selected social groups, and on the other hand our research was conducted in the context of the German welfare state regime. While previous research had suggested that, at least within Europe, the type of welfare state regime has little impact on the 'common deservingness culture', the results of our study put exactly this result into question, as they point to underlying differences in deservingness criteria. We thus suggest studying which criteria various groups of citizens apply in varying cultural and institutional contexts to judge the deservingness of welfare target groups for public support.

Authors' note

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Timing is always an issue when studying public opinion and attitudes, and it is also relevant in our study. Examples are the minimum wage or migration.

As for the minimum wage (which was introduced in Germany in 2015 after intensive debates), several people were well informed about it and raised the topic themselves (particularly in the case of the low-income vignette). In the case of migration, debates on asylum, refugees and their integration were still vivid in Germany in 2016 after the high influx of refugees in 2015, and most likely these topics were more pronounced in the discussion of the migrant-vignette as they would have been before 2015. However, these topics did not dominate the discussions, and participants brought up other forms of migration (labour migration within Europe, tax evasion and so on) and other forms of support for low-earners (topping up with social assistance, further qualifications and so on). However, whether and to what extent timing – as well as the local setting – has influenced our results is a question that cannot be answered with our data, so that our results should be understood within its context.

2. The transcribed data as well as background information on data collection and data processing are publicly available at the UK Data Service: UK Data Service. SN: 8496, http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8496-1.

3. As focus groups usually use discussion stimuli, like the vignettes in our study, and require a relatively dense facilitation of the debate, the moderators need to be well-experienced in order to reduce the risk of framing effects. In our case, we carefully designed the vignettes in cooperation with the moderator and tested the stimuli in a pre-test in order to avoid as many framing risks as possible.

4. The vignettes were designed to provide the least information necessary to identify a certain welfare target group, so that an open discussion about this specific target group would be fostered. Yet, we tried to avoid technical discussions (e.g. on gross and net income in the case of minimum wage) or misleading debates (e.g. on disability/illness in the case of the 'unemployed' vignette) by providing some specific characteristics. We chose names on the vignettes that are common, status-neutral and not invoking stigmata. This seemed to work well; for example, the immigrant was seen by participants as a Syrian refugee and a Swiss tax dodger. Furthermore, our information on income also seemed to work well, as all groups came soon to the conclusion that 'Hannes' was a low earner (and in some groups they even identified his income as the minimum wage for a full-time job) and the Meyenberg family an 'average family'.

5. In German: 'Adrian ist nach Deutschland eingewandert'. We deliberately used the rather neutral term 'eingewandert' (immigrated to) instead of 'Ausländer' (alien, non-native) to reduce framing effects.

6. As some vignettes were accidently misplaced (e.g. two vignettes per participant in the same box), unclear cases were omitted from the analysis.

7. The standard deviation ranges from 1.05 ranking positions for the 'family' vignette to a deviation of 1.44 for the 'low-income earner' vignette. In the Supplementary Information, the ranking patterns for two focus groups are exemplified.

8. The middle-class group was composed of four females and four males, all with higher education entrance level degrees or above (>ISCED 3 or 4). Three participants had a HHNI above €3500, one between €2100 and €4200, three between €1700 and €3500, and one (a single mother working part-time) between €1200 and €2200. More detailed information can be found in the online appendix.

9. The working-class group was composed of four males and four females. All except one had a secondary school degree (ISCED 2; the exception has a higher level education entrance qualification; ISCED 3 or 4). Five participants have a HHNI below €1200 or €1100, two below €2100 and one (married with two children) below €2500.

10. While the finding holds that overall the application of criteria depends strongly on the target group, our examples for focus group-specific emphasis on criteria can also be backed up by quantitative evidence: the most frequently used criterion in the middle-class group was control (31% of all criteria), whereas in the working-class group it was need (34%). While these overall shares are obviously shaped by the time devoted to each vignette (which differed slightly between focus groups), our results also hold for individual vignettes: for example, for the elderly person vignette the middle-class group most often referred to reciprocity (59%), the working-class group to need (59%).

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