Rights and obligations in times of austerity: Citizens' perceptions of welfare conditionality and deservingness

Authors: Jan-Ocko Heuer and Katharina Zimmermann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Paper prepared for the annual ESPAnet conference 2017

Stream 4 - Welfare Reform and Austerity: international perspectives on increasing demand and diminishing resources; stream convenors: Christina Beatty, Larissa Povey, Jon Warren

1. Introduction

Welfare states treat different groups of people differently – that is: they distribute rights and obligations among various groups of citizens, and they target social benefits and services at specific groups. For example, some benefits are targeted at families, others are targeted at unemployed people, and still others are for people of pensionable age; and often there are further subdivisions within each target group regarding conditions or entitlements. Even a relatively universal benefit scheme like an unconditional basic income is targeted at a specific group, commonly at all adults who are citizens of the country. Thus, 'targeting' – "denoting that social policies and resources are directed at a delineated group of citizens" (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 7) – is a standard practice in all welfare states at all times.[1]

Yet, the targeting of social policies and resources has gained new relevance in current times of austerity and welfare state retrenchment. In the past decades, European welfare states have come under increasing financial pressure due to economic and political changes such as growing international competition, mass unemployment, population ageing, changing family structures and the emergence of 'new social risks' (Taylor-Gooby 2004). These pressures have aggravated more recently as the result of exploding sovereign debts in the aftermath of the Great Recession, increasing social inequalities, and high levels of immigration. The resultant shrinking financial capacities of contemporary welfare states have led to increasing rationing and conditioning of social benefits and services, as exemplified by spending cuts, privatization, marketization, welfare-to-work strategies, and an overall shift from collective to individual responsibility for social protection (Taylor-Gooby *et al.* 2017). This also means that competition among welfare target groups for scarce resources has increased, and thus "the basic welfare question of 'who should get what, and why' … is back to the fore again, and will possibly stay there for some time to come" (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 5).

A prerequisite for any kind of welfare targeting is support from the population. Although the welfare attitudes of the general public do not translate directly into social policies, they constitute the room for maneuver for governments and condition the success of policy measures

---

[1] From this definition of targeting it follows that "all social security benefits and services are targeted" (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 7), usually at 'reference groups' categorized along broadly defined risks or needs (e.g. 'people of 65 and older', 'unemployed people', 'families with dependent children'), with the possibility of further ('secondary') targeting within each group. Targeting can range from universal to highly selective benefits/services and should not be equated with means-testing or selectivity (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 7f.).

(e.g. Brooks and Manza 2007; Svallfors 2010). Studying public support for differently targeted benefits and services also offers insights into solidarities and cleavages among social groups that may shape future trajectories of welfare states (van Oorschot 2000: 34). Therefore, a growing literature has analyzed popular perceptions of the relative deservingness of various groups for social protection – that is, "the public's answer to 'who should get what, and why'" (van Oorschot 2000: 34).

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). Yet, it is unclear which criteria people do apply to assess the relative deservingness of different welfare target groups. While several criteria have been suggested in the literature – such as whether a group is considered particularly needy, or viewed as victims of bad circumstances, or seen as having earned support – a recent literature review states that "a problem in present-day deservingness research is that deservingness criteria are pre-determined by researchers, deduced from existing literature and theories, and that their importance is assessed with quantitative techniques of data gathering and analysis. What is lacking thus far is qualitative research, e.g. 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)

In this article we follow this suggestion and use data from focus groups with groups of citizens to analyze which criteria people apply in their reasoning about the deservingness of welfare target groups. We conducted four focus groups in fall 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 they exhibit shared meanings and collective understandings emerging from social interaction. 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.

We will answer three research questions. First, we will examine the *rank order* of deserving-ness: How are the vignettes ranked, is there a similar rank order across individuals and groups, and, if not, what are the main differences? This is a preparatory step to see if we can replicate the common finding that there is a universal rank order of deservingness perceptions. Our second question focuses 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? Finally, we turn our attention to the different *focus groups* and analyze which (combinations of) criteria each group applies, and if different groups use different criteria to justify the deservingness of welfare target groups.

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 examine whether different social groups tend to apply different criteria. The results of our study are useful for both quantitative studies and more detailed qualitative studies about the reasoning and criteria for welfare deservingness.

The article proceeds as follows: In the next section we will review the literature on popular perceptions of differently targeted benefits and services and derive 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.

2. Deservingness perceptions – target groups and criteria

An excellent overview of the literature on public perceptions of differently targeted benefits[2] has recently been provided by van Oorschot and Roosma (2015). The authors distinguish three research approaches. One seeks the source of differences in public support in *institutional*

---

[2] The authors note that their focus is on social *benefits*, not on social services such as healthcare, childcare and education, as the latter (except for healthcare) have rarely been studied (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 7). For our study this distinction is less relevant, as the focus groups were free to discuss both social benefits and services.

characteristics of benefit schemes by arguing that the characteristics of a benefit scheme create opportunity structures that affect the interests of individuals and groups in a scheme (as contributors or claimants) and influence the degree to which people trust in the fair operation of the scheme. A core finding is that the more selective (and less universal) a benefit is, the less it is supported by the population (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 9–12). A second approach highlights the role of *public images of target groups* in shaping support for benefit schemes, as socio-psychological research shows that stereotypes and corresponding stigmata – for example, of the 'undeserving poor' or the 'lazy unemployed' – are hard to change. This approach finds that benefit schemes targeted at groups with a (more) negative image have less support in the public (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 12–14).

The third approach identifies differences in *deservingness perceptions* as primary source of differences in public support. This approach is similar to the second one in that it stresses the perception of the target group as an important factor, but it is more nuanced in that it studies not only negative perceptions and does emphasize several criteria that may shape judgments. The main claim is that the more positive ('deserving') the target group of a benefit scheme is judged, the more support the scheme receives (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 14–18). While the authors discuss interrelations between the three approaches, they consider the 'deservingness' approach as pivotal, because it can incorporate insights of the 'public images' approach and it may be able to account for findings of the 'institutional' approach by understanding present-day benefit schemes as the result of deservingness perceptions in earlier times (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 19–22). Our study is situated within this deservingness approach, and we will henceforth focus on its main concepts and findings.

The term 'deservingness' describes a continuum – ranging from 'very deserving' to 'very undeserving' – upon which (members of) various social groups are placed depending on subjective judgments in the population about their attitudes or actions in the context of social policies. Deservingness is a relative concept, and research shows that (minor) specifications of the characteristics of a social group can have a large impact on deservingness perceptions; for example, elderly unemployed people are seen as markedly more deserving than young ones (Albrekt Larsen 2008). With few exceptions, research is based on analyses of standardized (national or cross-national) population surveys that generate representative results, but are often affected by problems of comparability and aligning concepts and data (cf. below). The

focus of research is on the relative rank order of various target groups in terms of deservingness, and on the criteria that people apply when making these judgments.

In regard to the *rank order* of groups, Coughlin (1980: 117) early on claimed the existence of "a 'universal dimension' of support", as population surveys in eight Western countries showed the same sequence of deservingness perceptions, with the public being most in favor of support for elderly people, followed by support for sick and disabled people, needy families with children, unemployed people, and least in favor of support for people on social assistance. Several studies have largely confirmed this finding (cf. sources cited in van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 15). The most comprehensive study analyzes data from the 1999/2000 European Values Study (EVS) survey on 23 countries and finds "that Europeans share a common and fundamental deservingness culture: across countries and social categories there is a consistent pattern that elderly people are seen as most deserving, closely followed by sick and disabled people; unemployed people are seen as less deserving still, and immigrants as least deserving of all." (van Oorschot 2006: 23)

This result has to be qualified in two respects: First, more recent research shows uniformly high support for elderly people and sick and disabled people (Jæger 2007), but less consistent attitudes toward unemployed people (e.g. van Oorschot and Meuleman 2014), people on social assistance (e.g. Kallio and Kouvo 2015), or immigrants (e.g. Kootstra 2016). And second, 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). Yet, by and large the finding holds that there is a relatively consistent rank order of public perceptions regarding the deservingness of various welfare target groups.

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) drawing on earlier studies (Cook 1979; de Swaan 1988; Will 1993). Five deservingness criteria are identified: control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity. *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. Earlier studies referred to this as 'locus of responsibility' (Cook 1979), and it seems to play an important role regarding perceptions of poor and

unemployed people (e.g. van Oorschot 2000: 38f.). *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 2015: 15). *Identity* is associated with the closeness between those providing support and those who are supported: people 'closer to us' are seen as more deserving. De Swaan (1988) calls this criterion 'proximity' and notes that it defines the boundaries of accountability based on kinship relations, area of residence or, more generally, any identity group (e.g. 'our family', 'our town', or 'our people'). *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. Finally, *reciprocity* denotes the degree of reciprocation, or having earned support: the more a person has contributed, the more deserving she is deemed. The concept can be extended to the willingness to 'do something in return' for support, or actively looking for a job or participating in training programs (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 15f.).

The rank order of deservingness is understood as the outcome of the application of these criteria. For example, it is argued that elderly people are deemed very deserving because they cannot be blamed for their age (criterion *control*); they might have extra age-related needs (*need*); they are close to 'us', as they can be our parents and grandparents (*identity*); they are seen as compliant, docile and grateful for public support (*attitude*); and they have earned their share during working age (*reciprocity*). By contrast, immigrants might be considered less deserving because they are seen as not belonging to the imagined community (*identity*), not having contributed to the welfare state (*reciprocity*), and being responsible for their neediness themselves (*control*).

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. Most notably, van Oorschot (2000) used the Dutch TISSER-Solidarity survey of 1995 to analyze if specific criteria play a role by contrasting groups of benefit recipients exhibiting the presence or absence of a criterion. He found that all analyzed criteria play a role; however, not all above-mentioned criteria could be studied, and their operationalization was difficult. For example, the contrasting pair 'jobless people vs. people with a job' was supposed to represent the 'need'-criterion, whereas the 'control'-criterion was measured via the pair 'not able to work vs. not willing to work' (cf. van Oorschot 2000: 39). Yet, these contrasts still do not tell us if the public

perceives unemployed people primarily as lazy or unlucky (*control*), and as needy or not (*need*). In other words, the actual reasoning of people when making deservingness judgments has not been studied so far. Hence, van Oorschot and Roosma (2015: 25) conclude their literature review with the diagnosis: "a problem in present day deservingness research is that deservingness criteria are pre-determined by researchers, deduced from existing literature and theories, and that their importance is assessed with quantitative techniques of data gathering and analysis."

From this fundamental gap in knowledge about deservingness criteria follow two further gaps. *First*, we do know little about the relative importance and patterns of deservingness criteria: in which combinations do they appear, are some more important for specific target groups than for others, and are the same criteria used to justify high as well as low deservingness? There is only one study suggesting – based on survey data from the Netherlands – 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 toward 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).

In sum, the lack of knowledge about one of the central concepts of deservingness research – the reasoning and criteria that people apply in judging the deservingness of welfare target groups – is striking. In order to close this gap, van Oorschot and Roosma (2015: 25) suggest "qualitative research … in which people are asked to freely discuss and reveal what kind of criteria they are inclined to apply to specific needy groups." Our study aims at taking a first step to realize this proposal.

3. Research design

In the present article we examine which criteria people apply when judging the relative deservingness of welfare target groups for social benefits and services. We analyze data from focus groups representing different socio-demographic groups that discuss and rank vignettes representing different target groups. We aim to answer three sets of questions:

(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?

(2) 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?

(3) Do the *focus groups* differ in their use of (patterns of) criteria to justify deservingness?

The first set of questions is preparatory and serves the purpose to find out if the focus groups' rankings reflect the results of population surveys showing a relatively consistent rank order regarding the deservingness of welfare target groups. The second set comprises the main analysis, as we allocate the participants' arguments to the deservingness criteria and analyze the relative importance of the criteria overall and regarding specific target groups and ranking positions. The third 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 judgments.

3.1. Data collection: focus groups and vignettes

Data were collected via focus groups conducted in October 2016 in Berlin, Germany, by a professional research institute under the direction of the academic research team.[3] Focus groups have the advantage over standardized surveys that they allow the analysis of arguments, justifications and judgments that lie behind evaluations and rankings. Moreover, in contrast to qualitative interviews, focus groups 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). The focus groups were supposed to stand for important social groups and cleavages (regarding social status and stage of life). The following four groups were recruited:

---

[3] The focus groups were conducted as part of the research project "Welfare State Futures: Our Children's Europe" (WelfSOC), funded by NORFACE and led by Prof. 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 German sub-project is led by Prof. Steffen Mau (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). The focus groups were implemented by the Qualitative Research Unit of Ipsos Germany led by Dr. Hans-Jürgen Frieß. For more details on data collection and analysis, contact the corresponding author.

(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. Each group had eight participants (seven in the 'young people' group) and lasted two 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 (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 anymore.'

(3) *Family* (with median income and dependent children): 'Family Meyenberg has two children under the age of three years. The family has € 2,940 per month at their disposal.'

(4) *Low-income earner* (full-time employment on German minimum wage): 'Hannes is thirty years old and earns € 1,400 gross per month. After taxes and social security contributions, he has € 1,045 net per month.'

(5) *Well-off earner* (roughly 160 percent of median income): 'Jens is thirty years old and earns € 4,500 gross per month. After taxes and social security contributions, he has € 2,660 net per month.'

(6) *Immigrant*: 'Adrian has immigrated to Germany.'

For each vignette, the group was asked what social benefits and services the person should receive and why, as well as what should be demanded from the person, and why; thus, the

---

[4] We chose forenames on the vignettes that are relatively common, status-neutral and not invoking stigmata. This worked well (e.g., the immigrant was seen by participants both as a Syrian refugee and a Swiss tax dodger).

discussions revolved around rights, entitlements, 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 specify the person; this was in order to learn which conditions and criteria are considered important. It was also tested how variations (e.g. in age, gender or income) affected judgments. 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.

3.2. Data analysis: categories and coding procedure

The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, translated into English, and coded by the research team using the software NVivo 11 Pro. 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 (cf. van Oorschot 2000: 36):

(1) *Control*: people's control over their neediness, or their responsibility for it (the less control, the more deserving);

(2) *Need*: people's need of support (the greater the level of need, the more deserving);

(3) *Identity*: people's proximity to the imagined community (the closer to 'us', the more deserving);

(4) *Attitude*: people's attitude towards public support, or their docility and gratefulness (the more compliant and grateful, the more deserving);

(5) *Reciprocity*: people's degree of reciprocation, or having earned support (the more reciprocal, the more deserving).

Each deservingness criterion was specified via 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 (cf. the next section). We thus used a coding strategy combining alloca-tions 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 anal-yses of the reasoning and justifications.

4. Analyses and findings

In line with our three research questions outlined above, we begin the presentation of findings with the *rank order* of deservingness (4.1), then turn to the deservingness *criteria* (4.2), and finally analyze differences between *focus groups* (4.3).

4.1. Rank order of deservingness

The ranking of the six vignettes by the focus groups' participants was not only relatively con-sistent 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:

Table 1: Rank order of vignettes representing welfare target groups across all participants

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
1	**Family**	2.03
2	**Elderly**	2.55
3	**Low-income**	2.57
4	**Unemployed**	3.07
5	**Immigrant**	5.17
6	**Well-off**	5.21

Source: Own data

As we can see from Table 1, families are considered most deserving of public support (mean: 2.0), followed by elderly people and low-income earners (both 2.6) and then by unemployed people (3.1). With considerable distance follow immigrants and well-off earners (both: mean of 5.2). Families were considered most deserving in three focus groups; only in the middle class group they were surpassed by elderly people and low-income earners and on a par with unemployed people (see Table 2). Elderly people were ranked especially high in the middle class group, slightly lower in the working class group, and still lower in the focus groups of elderly and young people. The low-income earner was considered particularly deserving in

comparison to the other vignettes in the group of elderly people and the group of young people, but reached a top-3 rank in all focus groups. The unemployed person was ranked in the middle – i.e., 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, thus affecting the overall rank order as shown in Table 1.

Table 2: Rank orders of target group vignettes per focus group

FOCUS GROUP: MIDDLE CLASS

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
1	Elderly	1,16
2	Low-income	2,83
3	Family	2,85
	Unemployed	2,85
5	Well-off	5
6	Immigrant	5,66

FOCUS GROUP: WORKING CLASS

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
1	Family	2,12
2	Elderly	2,25
3	Low-income	3,12
4	Unemployed	3,5
5	Well-off	4,87
6	Immigrant	5,12

FOCUS GROUP: YOUNG PEOPLE

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
1	Family	1,14
2	Low-income	2,28
3	Unemployed	3,28
4	Elderly	3,57
5	Immigrant	4,71
6	Well-off	6

FOCUS GROUP: ELDERLY PEOPLE

Position	Vignette	Mean (Ranking positions)
1	Family	2
	Low-income	2
3	Unemployed	2,5
4	Elderly	3
5	Well-off	5
6	Immigrant	5,28

Source: Own data

Overall, we found high agreement about the ranks of all vignettes across all participants.[5] Nevertheless, in some focus groups the agreement about the rank order was higher than in other groups. Table 3 exemplifies the ranking patterns for two focus groups: In the group of young people there was the highest agreement regarding the ranking of vignettes, in the working class group the lowest agreement. Yet, overall we find a relatively similar rank order of vignettes across participants and focus groups.

---

[5] The standard deviation ranges from 1.1 ranking positions for the family-vignette and the well-off-earner-vignette to a deviation of 1.4 for the unemployed-vignette.

Table 3: Participants' individual rank orders of target group vignettes in two focus groups

FOCUS GROUP: YOUNG PEOPLE

Participant	Position1	Position2	Position 3	Position 4	Position 5	Position 6
YO-6	Family	Low-income	Unemployed	Elderly	Immigrant	Well-off
YO-3	Family	Low-income	Elderly	Unemployed	Immigrant	Well-off
YO-4	Family	Low-income	Elderly	Unemployed	Immigrant	Well-off
YO-10	Family	Low-income	Elderly	Unemployed	Immigrant	Well-off
YO-8	Family	Elderly	Low-income	Unemployed	Immigrant	Well-off
YO-1	Family	Low-income	Unemployed	Immigrant	Elderly	Well-off
YO-7	Unemployed	Family	Low-income	Immigrant	Elderly	Well-off

FOCUS GROUP: WORKING CLASS

Participant	Position1	Position2	Position 3	Position 4	Position 5	Position 6
WC-8	Family	Elderly	Low-income	Well-off	Unemployed	Immigrant
WC-3	Elderly	Low-income	Unemployed	Family	Immigrant	Well-off
WC-5	Elderly	Family	Unemployed	Low-income	Well-off	Immigrant
WC-4	Immigrant	Family	Unemployed	Well-off	Elderly	Low-income
WC-10	Low-income	Unemployed	Elderly	Family	Immigrant	Well-off
WC-2	Family	Low-income	Elderly	Well-off	Unemployed	Immigrant
WC-7	Family	Elderly	Unemployed	Low-income	Well-off	Immigrant
WC-9	Elderly	Elderly	Low-income	Unemployed	Well-off	Immigrant

Source: own data

Our results thus reflect the results of cross-national population surveys (e.g. van Oorschot 2006) that there is a common and consistent pattern of deservingness perceptions, with elderly people near the top, unemployed people in the middle, and immigrants near the bottom. 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.

4.2. Deservingness criteria

The results of the coding of deservingness criteria are presented in Table 4. The table shows cross-tabulations for the quantity of statements referring to combinations of vignettes and deservingness criteria. (As the absolute numbers are not relevant, we replaced them with symbols; e.g. '++' represents a high number of references to a criterion in the discussions of the vignette and its ranking position, 'o' represents no or very few references.) As said in Section 3, the five criteria suggested by van Oorschot (2000) and commonly used in the literature – attitude, control, identity, need and reciprocity – were 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 – e.g., people use lack of control as a justification for more deservingness – were as hypothesized by van Oorschot (2000).

Table 4: Use of deservingness criteria for different target group vignettes

Criterion / Vignette	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.

With reference to our coding results, we argue that only 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 support in terms of compliance, docility and gratefulness). Two explanations are possible: Either this criterion might play no role in peoples' 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 analyzed in survey-based deservingness studies (e.g. van Oorschot 2000: 37).

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; cf. Table 4, last column). This might be seen as a sub-category of the 'reciprocity'-criterion, and indeed van Oorschot and Roosma (2015: 15) define 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, and the criterion attained a high number of allocated statements. 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; cf. Table 4). 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 behind 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 deservingness criterion.
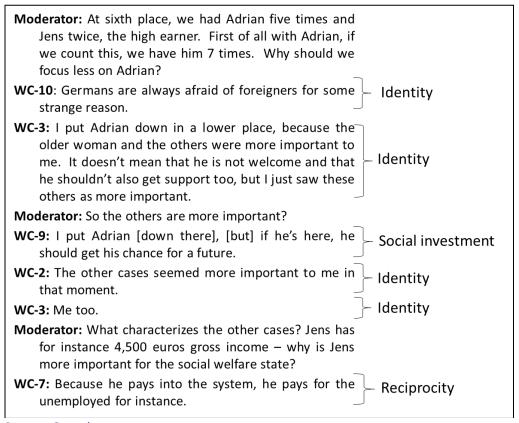
We now turn from the categorical framework to the main analyses of deservingness criteria. Both the question which criteria are considered important for each vignette and the question which combinations of criteria are common can be answered by analyzing the rows of Table 4. Evidently, different (combinations 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 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*. 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 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 must be: 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.

Finally, we turn to the question of the relative weight of the deservingness criteria. The answer based on an analysis of the columns of Table 4 – and of the underlying absolute numbers – would be two-fold: On the one hand, the weight of the criteria is highly dependent upon the welfare target group. For example, while *need* is a highly important criterion for considerations about the deservingness of families, of elderly people and of well-off earners, it plays a smaller role for the perceived deservingness of other target groups. On the other hand, in terms of absolute numbers of statements, *need* is more frequently utilized than any other criterion, and its usually considered in one form or the other for almost all target groups.

> **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?
>
> **WC-10**: Germans are always afraid of foreigners for some strange reason. ⎱ Identity
>
> **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?
>
> **WC-9:** I put Adrian [down there], [but] if he's here, he should get his chance for a future. ⎱ Social investment
>
> **WC-2:** The other cases seemed more important to me in that moment. ⎱ Identity
>
> **WC-3:** Me too. ⎱ Identity
>
> **Moderator:** What characterizes the other cases? Jens has for instance 4,500 euros gross income – why is Jens more important for the social welfare state?
>
> **WC-7:** Because he pays into the system, he pays for the unemployed for instance. ⎱ Reciprocity

Source: Own data

However, our qualitative analyses of the participants' reasoning suggest a more nuanced answer. What the quantifications cannot capture is that in specific instances participants create hierarchies of criteria, so that one criterion can overrule the other criteria. An example is presented in Box 1, in which the working class group discusses the low ranking of the immigrant-vignette (cf. also Table 3). The quoted sequence initially indicates the high importance of the 'identity'-criterion, as several participants insist upon the vague argument that 'the other cases seemed more important to me'. However, as the moderator draws a comparison to the well-off earner's higher rank despite lack of need and thus suggests that this criterion might be more important, the group is quick to counter this with reference to the higher relevance of the 'reciprocity'-criterion by pointing to the well-off earner's contributions to the financing of the welfare state. This sequence is one of many examples of how hierarchies of criteria are constructed, but we leave the detailed analysis of these hierarchies and their construction to future studies.

4.3. 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 Subsection 4.1 and Table 2) – 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; cf. Section 2). 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 turn its attention (again) to class and other differences in how welfare deservingness is perceived and justified.

The following examples, which show common patterns of reasoning that can be backed up by quantifiable evidence, could be referred to as 'similar ranking – different reasoning'. Box 2 shows in the upper part how the middle class justifies why it has ranked the elderly-person-vignette as the most deserving. The group highlights lack of control about their 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). In short, the middle class group emphasizes the criteria *reciprocity* and *control* as relevant for their deservingness judgments. The lower part of Box 2 shows how the working class group discusses the same topic (i.e., the high deservingness of the elderly person). Here the pattern of reasoning is primarily based on references to *need* ("When people are older, they want to live in dignity and not be afraid of old age"; WC-3) and, at the end, to *identity* ("We also know that this is the future that's waiting for us"; WC-9). These patterns of reasoning and the corresponding criteria were also used in justifications for low rankings, such as for the immigrant-vignette.

Box 2: Different deservingness criteria applied to justify similar ranking positions in two focus groups

FOCUS GROUP: MIDDLE CLASS

Moderator: Why should the state take care of the retired people and not so much the other people? Why the pensioners?

MC-3: Because they have the least chance to continue working and earn money in order to provide for themselves. — Control

MC-4: This says she is no longer working, but she did work in the past. — Reciprocity

Moderator: And that's something that's very important?

MC-3: They have the least future prospects so to say. — Control

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

MC-5: She worked her whole life. — Reciprocity

FOCUS GROUP: WORKING CLASS

Moderator: We have Gisela picked twice for first place and three times in second place – she is the pensioner, so the state should focus on her as well. What is the reason for that? Why Gisela?

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

WC-2: If they work all their lives and then all of a sudden have these issues to deal with. — Reciprocity

WC-3: And older people are often ignored and sort of disappear, people don't look at them really, people don't do much with them, and if they then also have existential fears, that is really very sad. Who would want to grow old under such conditions? — Need

WC-4: Gisela should be able to continue enjoying her previous living standard, even at 70. — Need

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

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

Source: Own data

These typical 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 (cf. Section 5).

5. Conclusions and discussion

This study offered the first analysis of the reasoning that citizens actually 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 criterion 'reciprocity' 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 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 (cf. also Raven *et al.* 2015).

And 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 popular perceptions obscure differences in the underlying patterns of reasoning and criteria. Our evidence suggests, for example, that the middle class assesses deservingness mainly 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 find ways of testing hypotheses generated from our study on differences in the application of deservingness criteria in representative population surveys and thus 'bring class back in' to deservingness research. Moreover, it might be fruitful to study popular perceptions of welfare deservingness drawing on works from comparative cultural sociology (e.g. Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992), on the (non-)productivist welfare state (e.g. Offe 1992; Goodin 2001), and, more specifically, on the turn of the middle class from collective risk sharing to individual status investments (e.g. Groh-Samberg *et al.* 2014; Mau 2015).

Finally, we are aware that the study has limitations, and we want to point out those two that we consider most important. First, our study can provide only a superficial answer to the question which deservingness criteria are most important. We showed that in their reasoning about deservingness, people construct hierarchies of criteria that they relate to different welfare target groups. Yet, a detailed qualitative analysis is necessary to examine which hierarchies are created, how systematically and under which conditions, and if these vary with the welfare target group under study. And second, as any focus group study, we cannot and do not claim representativity of our findings for the population at large: On the one hand, we did study only selected social groups, and on the other hand our focus groups were 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 to study which criteria various groups of citizens apply in varying cultural and institutional contexts to judge the deservingness of welfare target groups for public support.

References

Albrekt Larsen, C. (2008). 'The political logic of labour market reforms and popular images of target groups', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 18, 1: 50–63.

Brooks, C. and Manza, J. (2007), *Why welfare states persist: The importance of public opinion in democracies*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Cook, F. L. (1979), *Who should be helped? Public support for social services*, Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

Coughlin, R. M. (1980), *Ideology, public opinion and welfare policy: Attitudes towards taxes and spending in industrial societies*, Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

de Swaan, A. (1988), *In care of the state: Health care, education, and welfare in Europe and the USA in the modern era*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Goodin, R. E. (2001). 'Work and welfare: Towards a post-productivist welfare regime', *British Journal of Political Science*, 31, 1: 13–39.

Groh-Samberg, O., Mau, S. and Schimank, U. (2014). 'Investieren in den Status: Der voraussetzungsvolle Lebensführungsmodus der Mittelschichten', *Leviathan*, 42, 2: 219–48.

Jæger, M. M. (2007). Are the 'deserving needy' really deserving everywhere? Cross-cultural heterogeneity and popular support for the old and the sick in eight Western countries. In S. Mau, B. Veghte (eds), *Social justice, legitimacy and the welfare state*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 73–94.

Jeene, M., van Oorschot, W. and Uunk, W. (2013). 'Popular criteria for the welfare deservingness of disability pensioners: The influence of structural and cultural factors', *Social Indicators Research*, 110, 3: 1103–17.

Jeene, M., van Oorschot, W. and Uunk, W. (2014). 'The dynamics of welfare opinions in changing economic, institutional and political contexts: An empirical analysis of Dutch deservingness opinions, 1975–2006', *Social Indicators Research*, 115, 2: 731–49.

Kallio, J. and Kouvo, A. (2015). 'Street-level bureaucrats' and the general public's deservingness perceptions of social assistance recipients in Finland', *Social Policy & Administration*, 49, 3: 316–34.

Kootstra, A. (2016). 'Deserving and undeserving welfare claimants in Britain and the Netherlands: Examining the role of ethnicity and migration status using a vignette experiment', *European Sociological Re*view, 32, 3: 325–38.

Krueger, R. A. and Casey, M. A. (2015), *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lamont, M. (1992), *Money, morals, and manners: The culture of the French and American upper-middle class*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lamont, M. and Fournier, M. (eds) (1992), *Cultivating differences: Symbolic boundaries and the making of inequality*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mau, S. (2015), *Inequality, marketization and the majority class: Why did the European middle classes accept neo-liberalism?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Morel, N., Palier, B. and Palme, J. (2012). Beyond the welfare state as we knew it? In N. Morel, B. Palier, J. Palme (eds), *Towards a social investment welfare state? Ideas, policies and challenges*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 1–30.

Offe, C. (1992). A non-productivist design for social policies. In P. van Parijs (ed), *Arguing for basic income: Ethical foundations for a radical reform*, London: Verso, pp. 61–80.

Raven, J., Achterberg, P. and van der Veen, R. (2015). 'On support for welfare state reforms and deservingness in the Netherlands', *Policy & Politics*, 43, 1: 61–79.

Svallfors, S. (2010). Public attitudes. In F. G. Castles, S. Leibfried, J. Lewis, H. Obinger, C. Pierson (eds), *The Oxford handbook of the welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 241–51.

Taylor-Gooby, P. (ed) (2004), *New risks, new welfare: The transformation of the European welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor-Gooby, P., Leruth, B. and Chung, H. (eds) (2017), *After austerity: Welfare state transformation in Europe after the Great Recession*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Oorschot, W. (2000). 'Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public', *Policy & Politics*, 28, 1: 33–48.

van Oorschot, W. (2006). 'Making the difference in social Europe: Deservingness perceptions among citizens of European welfare states', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 16, 1: 23–42.

van Oorschot, W. and Meuleman, B. (2014). Popular deservingness of the unemployed in the context of welfare state policies, economic conditions and cultural climate. In S. Kumlin, I. Stadelmann-Steffen (eds), *How welfare states shape the democratic public: Policy feedback, participation, voting, and attitudes*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 244–68.

van Oorschot, W. and Roosma, F. (2015), 'The social legitimacy of differently targeted benefits', Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation (ImPRovE), *ImPRovE Working Paper*, 15/11, Antwerp.

Will, J. A. (1993). 'The dimensions of poverty: Public perceptions of the deserving poor', *Social Science Research*, 22, 3: 312–32.