

The institutional logic of welfare distribution preferences. A qualitative analysis of deservingness discussions among citizens in three welfare regimes.

Authors: Tijs Laenen, Federica Rossetti and Wim van Oorschot (Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven)

Project: WelfSOC

Abstract

This article argues that the ever-growing research field of welfare deservingness is in need of qualitative research. Using data from focus groups conducted in three different welfare regimes, we aim to unravel which deservingness criteria citizens apply when discussing welfare distribution, and what concrete meaning such abstract criteria have to them. Our analyses show that the focus group participants applied the criteria of control, reciprocity and need, but not attitude and identity. Participants also articulated a number of alternative normative criteria (i.e. equality/universalism, cost awareness, social investment, family/birth rate), which are different from deservingness in that they refer to the broader context instead of characteristics of welfare targets. Furthermore, our findings suggest the existence of an 'institutional logic' to welfare preferences, as the focus group participants to some extent echoed the normative criteria that are most strongly embedded in the institutional structure of their country's welfare regime. Whereas financial need was the guiding criterion in 'liberal' UK, reciprocity was dominant in 'corporatist-conservative' Germany. In 'social-democratic' Denmark, it proved impossible to single out one dominant normative criterion. Instead, the Danish participants seemed torn between the criteria of need, reciprocity, and equality/universalism.