

Doing deservingness - Deservingness criteria in discussions about migration in four European countries

Authors: *Mathias Herup Nielsen, Christian Albrekt Larsen & Morten Frederiksen, Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies (ccws.dk), Aalborg University, Denmark*

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Abstract:

The growing research in welfare deservingness perceptions studies the extent to which populations across countries deems different subgroups of citizens worthy or unworthy of receiving help from the welfare state. The concept of deservingness criteria plays a crucial role in this research, as it describes a generally shared heuristic that citizens mobilize in order to rank people in terms of their welfare deservingness. Due to the mainly quantitative nature of the research, and despite the indisputable progress it has made, the actual application of these deservingness criteria remains a bit of black box. Which criteria of deservingness do citizens actually apply doing discussions and how do they do so? This article sets out to shed some light on this black box and explores an extreme case in order to do so: Discussions among ordinary citizens about the immigrant – a highly disputed character in a very tense political climate who is more often than not deemed to be among the least deserving of welfare benefits and services.

Empirically, the article turns to 20 focus group discussions conducted in Slovenia, Denmark, the UK and Norway in the fall of 2016 including a total of 160 participants. All groups discussed the welfare deservingness of immigrants based on a comparable vignette stimulus. Our analysis contributes with knowledge regarding the actual application of deservingness criteria as it demonstrates (1) that deservingness criteria, rather than working independently of each other, tend to co-function when turned into discourse on migrants; (2) that the criteria of reciprocity can be used in various ways to stress a reciprocal relationship based on either monetary means, functionality or attitude. And finally, (3) that deservingness logics are supplemented by alternative moral logics, when citizens discuss migration. Particularly, we find a prominent ‘universalist moral logic’, defying the premise of deservingness logic by stating that everyone is equally deserving and a less prominent ‘moral logic of rejection’ stating that nobody can have anything.