Deservingness put into practice

Constructing the (un)deservingness of migrants in four European countries

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Deservingness put into practice: Constructing the (un)deservingness of migrants in four European Countries

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Abstract

The increased comparative research on perceptions of public welfare deservingness studies the extent to which different subgroups of citizens are deemed worthy or unworthy of receiving help from the welfare state. The concept of deservingness criteria plays a crucial role in this research, as it theorizes a universal heuristic that citizens apply 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 subjective existence and actual application of these deservingness criteria remain a bit of a black box. What criteria of deservingness do citizens actually apply, and how do they apply them? This article opens the black box of welfare deservingness and sheds light on the nature and practice of deservingness criteria. Empirically, the paper explores how the deservingness of immigrants is discussed and established within 20 focus groups conducted in Slovenia, Denmark, UK and Norway in 2016 with a total of 160 participants. All 20 focus groups discussed the welfare deservingness of immigrants based on similar vignette stimuli. Our analysis shows that (1) deservingness criteria are used both to construct images of target groups and as normative yardsticks; (2) deservingness criteria do not work independently of each other, but rather co-function in specific hybridized discourses; and (3) the moral logic of deservingness is supplemented by alternative moral logics, at least in the case of migrants.

Keywords: Deservingness, deservingness criteria, immigration, focus groups, social policy
**Introduction**

The growing body of comparative research on popular perceptions of deservingness (see van Oorschot and Roosma 2015) studies the extent to which different population subgroups are deemed worthy or unworthy of receiving help from the welfare state. Within deservingness research, the crucial concept of *deservingness criteria* describes a generally shared heuristic (Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011; Petersen et al. 2012) that people employ to rank other people in terms of their welfare deservingness (author; Van Oorschot 2000, 2006, 2017). 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 a black box. This article contributes to the literature on deservingness through a qualitative exploration of the actual application of deservingness criteria. More specifically, we study discussions about the deservingness of *immigrants*. We analyse statements from 20 focus groups with citizens across four European countries.

We focus on *immigrants* for two reasons. First, immigrant access to welfare benefits and services has been a salient issue in most European countries after the enlargement of the European Union eastwards in 2004 and the so-called migration crisis of 2015 (Jørgensen and Thomsen 2016; Reeskens and van der Meer 2018), which makes this a highly contentious topic in terms of deservingness. Secondly, immigrants are an ‘extreme case’ in terms of deservingness, a case type which potentially ‘reveal[s] more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied’ (Flyvbjerg 2006: 229). More than any other group, immigrants challenge the identity deservingness criteria and constitute ‘the other’ in regards to the notion of social
citizenship linked to the nation state. Consequently, discussions of immigrants make up a suitable case for studying how contemporary European citizens actually put deservingness criteria into practice.

In the first section of the article, we engage with the deservingness literature, unfold its key concepts and present our research questions. The second section presents our methodological approach of using focus group interviews across four countries and describes the processes of data collection, coding and analytical strategies. The third section presents our findings, and the final section summarizes and discusses the results.

**The deservingness heuristic**

Predominantly, attitudes about the social rights of various population subgroups is argued to reflect self-interest, class-interest, institutional feedback and the ideologies or perceptions of the effectiveness of various policies. While these are undoubtedly important factors in attitude formation, the deservingness literature approaches welfare attitudes from another perspective. Welfare attitudes are argued to also reflect moral and cultural principles that people employ when they decide, for example, whether a given subgroup is worthy of receiving help or not (van Oorschot 2000). One of the early main findings was the existence of what Coughlin (1980) labelled a ‘universal dimension of support’. Across eight different countries, he found similar rankings of deservingness, placing the elderly as the most deserving, followed by the sick, the poor, the unemployed and social assistance clients. Van Oorschot (2006) similarly found a strikingly consistent general pattern across 23 European countries: the elderly are perceived as the most deserving, followed by the sick and the disabled, while the unemployed are perceived as
less deserving and immigrants even less so. Similar rankings have been found in a number of follow-up studies (Coughlin 1980; Jaeger 2016; Kootstra 2016; Petersen et al. 2007; Van Oorschot 2006).

To account for this pattern, researchers developed the central concept of *deservingness criteria*, which theorizes a generally shared heuristic that people use to assess welfare deservingness and has proven helpful in accounting for the different levels of deservingness found in comparative survey research (Petersen 2012). The suggestion is that people knowingly or unknowingly make use of deservingness criteria to assess and measure the relative deservingness of subgroups. Van Oorschot (2000) has suggested five such criteria – called the CARIN criteria – which have found general acceptance within the literature (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015):

1: **Control** (the less in control of own situation, the more deserving);

2: **Attitude** (the more grateful, the more deserving);

3: **Reciprocity** (the more reciprocation, the more deserving);

4: **Identity** (the closer to ‘us’, the more deserving); and

5: **Need** (the needier, the more deserving)

The CARIN criteria have primarily been deduced from historical studies of legislation (Cook 1979; De Swaan 1988; Will 1993) and survey data. For instance, surveys have documented that a person who is not able to work is perceived as being more deserving than a person who is not willing to work; older people are perceived as more deserving than young people, and ethnic minority groups are seen as *less* deserving
then the average population (Van Oorschot 2000). This indicates the existence of criteria for control, reciprocity and identity, respectively.

Existing deservingness research comes with some natural limits, however. First, the abovementioned deductions are qualified guesses with no firm empirical connection to the actual processes of deservingness judgments. Favouring the person who is unable to work over the person who is unwilling to do so, for example, might suggest the importance of the control criteria, but it could also suggest the importance of attitude, because the unwilling can be seen as showing a lack of good faith. Likewise, favouring the pensioner over the younger person may emphasize the importance of the criteria of reciprocity – because the elderly has perhaps contributed more to society – but it could also be a question of need (‘the elderly are more needy’) or control (‘the young person is, to a larger degree, in control of his/her situation’). Put differently, the actual functioning of the specific deservingness criteria – how citizens apply these criteria when making judgments – remains a black box. We agree with Oorschot and Roosma (2015: 25) when they note that there is a lack of qualitative research ‘in the form of in 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’. Second, the deservingness literature often discusses the five criteria as more or less independent dimensions in which a given person or subgroup can score higher or lower. From this follows a discussion of which criterion matters the most, which is typically investigated by the strength of correlations in survey data or the effect sizes in experimental vignette studies. Rather than hierarchizing the criteria based on their respective importance, a qualitative approach makes it possible to study how the criteria are used and how they co-function
and form hybrids when citizens argue. Third, the deservingness literature has had a common verification bias following most other research traditions. Unsurprisingly, literature on welfare deservingness is mainly focused on the presence of, rather than on the absence of, the deservingness heuristics, so the exploration of possible alternative normative logics of welfare worthiness has been somewhat neglected.

This article seeks to address these limitations by posing the following three questions: (1) Which deservingness criteria do citizens apply when discussing the welfare worthiness of immigrants? (2) How do the criteria interact and relate to each other during such discussions? (3) Which alternative normative logics do citizens rely on when morally assessing immigrants?

Methods and data

Data from four countries

We analyse data from a comparative focus group study from 2016 on deservingness containing five focus groups in each country, with a total of 160 participants, that was conducted in Oslo, Norway; Copenhagen, Denmark; London, UK; and Ljubljana, Slovenia. The 20 focus groups were carried out with a shared structure and a comparable format. During each focus group session, participants discussed the welfare worthiness of six specific subgroups, including migrants.

Focus groups were conducted in two countries within a social democratic welfare regime (Denmark and Norway), one within a liberal welfare regime (the UK) and one within a post-communist welfare regime (Slovenia). The deservingness literature typically assumes deservingness discussions to be quite similar across countries (see e.g.
Aarøe and Petersen 2014, for an example rooting deservingness in human biology). However, there is a large literature focusing on the ways in which public attitudes towards social benefits and services are shaped by differences in the institutional structure of so-called welfare regimes (author; Esping-Andersen and Esping-Andersen 1999; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014; author; Svallfors 2003). In discussions of deservingness, people’s perceptions are typically believed to be much more important than the factual composition of the target groups. Thus, it is more important for our analysis that the migration crisis of 2015 made migration a salient issue throughout Europe than the fact that the inflow of immigrants in 2016 was around 20,000 in Slovenia, 60,000 in Denmark and Norway and 454,000 in the UK.1

We focus our qualitative analysis particularly on similarities in argumentative patterns across the otherwise very different country settings, because looking for similarities across very different cases can pave the way for analytical generalization (Flyvbjerg 2006): if you can find a similar pattern across highly different cases, the pattern is likely to be found in other cases as well. Consequently, we primarily include points in the analysis where empirical evidence is found in the material from all four countries.

**Focus groups and vignettes**

Professional market research companies recruited participants for the focus groups and moderated the sessions in three of the four countries. They followed recruitment and moderation guidelines from the team of researchers, including the

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authors. In the fourth country (Denmark) the research team recruited participants and moderated the focus groups themselves.ii

Within focus groups, participants were recruited with a certain degree of sociodemographic homogeneity – an approach dubbed ‘homogeneous strangers’ (Kitzinger 1995) – to capitalize on potential shared experiences or ideas and prevent dominant participants from overriding others who do not share their experiences (Smithson 2000). Five focus groups were conducted in each country, consisting of 5–10 elderly citizens, young citizens, women with children living at home and people from a middle class or working class background.iii For all focus groups, we sought to achieve a ‘representative’ balance in terms of gender (besides, of course, the women with children-group) and political views.iv However, due to absenteeism and other unforeseen events, the Danish and some of the UK groups saw an overrepresentation of left-leaning participants. This may have contributed to the facilitation of more ‘migrant-friendly’ conversations than can otherwise be expected. Participants were informed in advance that the topic of the sessions was the welfare state and the distribution of goods and services. Participants were not informed about the migrant topic, making it unlikely that participants with extraordinarily strong views on migration issues were over-recruited. Small financial incentives were provided to encourage participation.

The sessions lasted for two hours and followed a very similar structure in all countries. After brief introductions, the participants were presented with six minimal vignettes, one at a time and with very little information given. Vignettes are typically defined as ‘short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios’ (Hill 1997: 177). Each vignette represented a typical policy target
group (Schneider and Ingram 1993) and was introduced to the participants with only the
information given below:

An unemployed person of working age.

A person aged 70.

A family with average wages with children under three years.

A person in a low-paid job above the age of 25.

A comfortably-off worker.

An immigrant.

After presenting each vignette, the moderator opened the discussion by asking:
‘What welfare services and benefits should this person/this family have – and why?’ At
the end of each focus group, the moderator would ask participants to rank the six
vignettes according to welfare deservingness, and participants were encouraged to come
to an agreement about this.

Minimal vignettes, with limited information given, were chosen to ensure that
discussions were focused on the welfare deservingness of certain policy target groups,
while avoiding the channelling of responses (Barter and Renold 1999) and allowing the
focus groups to be lightly moderated to activate the vocabularies and sense-making of the
participants. The minimal vignettes effectively facilitated such group discussions (e.g.
Brondani et al. 2008) and functioned as useful common external reference points
(Kitzinger 1995: 107) for comparative analysis across the four countries and the 20 group
sessions. Using vignette-based focus group discussions allowed us to investigate the
discursive and evaluative practices involved in assessing immigrant deservingness. On the one hand, we gathered rich, qualitative data on the evaluative practices involved and, on the other hand, the vignettes were sufficiently general to keep the discussions in the domain of general welfare attitudes rather than the domain of experience-based narratives about particular immigrants. While minimal vignettes do not allow the comparison of small vignette differences (e.g. Ejrnæs and Monrad 2012), the possibility for exploring participants’ self-directed constructions of deserving and less deserving citizens is correspondingly higher, which was in line with our research objectives. Compared to the survey measurement of deservingness, we re-balanced control over data production between participants and researchers in favour of the participants’ own contributions (see Taylor-Gooby, Leruth and Chung 2018). To achieve this, moderation was light, mostly keeping discussions on track by asking questions when necessary, encouraging participants to explicate or further develop their arguments and making sure that all participants were able to be heard. Likewise, when participants occasionally asked the moderator specific questions about the vignettes – such as, ‘does the migrant have a job?’ – the moderator systematically returned those questions with counter questions such as ‘why do you think is important?’ The short vignettes initially prompted group responses building on stereotypical notions of immigrants. However, as the discussions progressed, the participants criticized these notions, presenting other stereotypes or building alternative, counter narratives of the immigrant to explore different levels and types of deservingness. Consequently, the minimal vignettes allowed participants to use different notions of deservingness to explore a range of ‘variations’ on the immigrant theme.
Data and data analysis

All focus groups were audio and video recorded, transcribed in their entirety and translated into English.

The analysis is based on the discussions about the immigrant vignette and the sorting exercises in which participants discussed how to rank the six vignettes according to their welfare deservingness. In the first coding pass, we deductively coded the material using the five commonly used CARIN-criteria as codes. To be assigned a code, the statement should generally (a) be normative rather than descriptive, (b) be about whether or not the immigrant should be granted the right to certain welfare services and (c) include some form of justification. Consequently, many statements were excluded from the deductive coding, including merely descriptive statements, normative statements unconnected to migration and statements that lacked any kind of justification. However, we did choose to categorize statements in which participants gave implicit justifications for their stand – for example, by nodding and saying ‘I totally agree’ with a justificatory argument raised by another participant.

The deservingness criteria were operationalized as follows: The control criterion categorized statements about the immigrants’ imagined control of the situation – such as when stating or implying that someone who deliberately chose to migrate is less deserving than someone who had no other choice. The criterion of need categorized statements linked the level of some form of need to the welfare deservingness of migrants. Reciprocity included all statements linking the welfare deservingness of the immigrant to a material or immaterial contribution to society in the past, present or future. Attitude was used to code statements linking the behaviour and the will of the
immigrant to the question of deservingness. Finally, the *identity* criterion categorized statements that ascribed differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’ relevance for the perceived level of deservingness. Several statements referred to more than one deservingness criterion, and in such cases we ascribed the statements more than one code.

A second inductive coding pass coded moral statements that were normative, about migration and provided justification but still did not match the logic of deservingness. We found particularly one such alternative moral logic in all four countries which we shall call *universalism*. Table I shows the distribution of coded statements within each of the four countries as percentages of the total amount of coded statements in the country. It provides some transparency to our coding. However, the significance of the specific percentages should not be overstated: in our quantification of statements, a brief remark stating that a participant agrees about something counts just as much as a monologue in which an informant actively seeks to convince others with well-reflecting arguments.

All five criteria were found in the material from all four countries. In particular, many references were made to the reciprocity criterion. Existing research on attitudes to immigration would suggest that the identity criterion should be prevalent, but this is not the case. The relatively sparse use of the identity criterion does not, however, indicate that identity is unimportant. On the contrary, we defined the two alternative moral logics found in the material as, respectively, the total dismissal of the identity criterion and the total embrace of its importance, connecting to our choice of immigrants as an extreme
case in terms of the identity criterion. Before exploring these two alternative moral languages further, the following sections dig into the ways in which citizens apply criteria of control, need, attitude and reciprocity when discussing the welfare deservingness of migrants.

The application of criteria of control, need, reciprocity and attitude

The migrant is by no means an unambiguous character for the participants (see Reeskens and van der Meer 2018). Presented with the immigrant vignette, participants in all 20 focus groups sought to elaborate on the vignette to specify who the immigrant under discussion is. Often, the criteria of control and need were applied by participants across the four countries to establish two different and very well-known stereotypical images of what the migrant is (e.g. O’Rourke and Sinnott 2006; Sales 2002), calling for very different deservingness assessments for ‘the economic migrant’ and ‘the refugee’.

Generally, the economic migrant is implicitly or explicitly defined as a character for whom migration is a choice. Participants applied a range of words emphasizing this. They talked about ‘the intention’ of people coming here, while others mentioned ‘benefit tourism’ as a problem and emphasized how welfare benefits could function as ‘financial incentives’ and generate a ‘desire’ to migrate:

People are being sold a dream in other countries, that they are coming over here and they will live in a nice semi-detached house and have a 50-inch TV. They want to have those things. They might be living on top of each other, but for them it is worth it. [British participant, group 2]

In such statements, migration is clearly connected to will. It is about following a dream, about desiring and wanting to have certain things. Often, this narrative of unforced
migration is naturally connected to another narrative, namely that of economic migrants as resourceful people with ‘savings’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘plans for their future’:

This is the middle class, they are educated. Two-thirds of them speak English and have a university education. That is to say that they are not exactly poor here, right? [Slovenia participant, group 1]

In a very similar vein, several statements across the four countries expressed how economic migrants ‘have knowledge’, ‘thick wallets’, ‘iPhones’ or ‘some savings’. They ‘know why they’ve come here and where they want to live. They’re prepared.’ Thus, when establishing the stereotypical image of the economic migrant, the deservingness criteria of need and control are intertwined and used to create a character, who is in control of his or her situation and who does not need a lot of public help. As expressed by one participant:

[P]eople who are capable of supporting themselves, people who have cash, should receive less from the state than people who don’t have anything. [Slovenian participant, group 3]

This statement is typical and shows how participants applied criteria of control and need to establish a less deserving migrant who is in control (capable) and without needs (has cash). Opposing the economic migrant stereotype is ‘the refugee’. The refugee is most often defined as a person deprived of any form of control, being pushed into the present situation, fleeing from a war zone or something close to it, in contradistinction to other immigrants:
There are those fleeing from war-torn countries. Europe is different again because they can get anywhere in Europe. And then those that are just trying to get here for all sorts of other reasons. [Slovenian participant, group 5]

The refugee is believed to have little control over his or her situation and a correspondingly high level of need:

[I]f you flee to Denmark as a refugee and don’t have anything, I mean, then I think that of course you should get the same as everyone else. You might even have a greater need for help to get into society. [Danish participant, group 1]

In all four countries, we find this co-functioning of (a surplus of) need and (a lack of) control, having fled from a war and being deprived of other options:

[t]he situation worsens up to a point where you cannot stay there in fear of being killed. Then they come to Norway, and speaking from a humane point of view, even though there is an economical difference between us, I think that they deserve the same benefits that we have. Especially if he can’t live in his country any more. [Norwegian participant, group 2]

Whereas the economic migrant is constructed as being in control and having a low level of need, the refugee, in contrast, is defined as a needy person with a low level of control of the situation. Participants explicitly used comparisons of the two in the dimensions of control and need to create a hierarchy of deservingness. This Slovenian participant, for example, establishes an opposition between two stereotypes based on the need and control criteria:

It [how much help they should receive] depends on how they get here. The economic migrants, I mean. My brother, for example, moved to the Netherlands. He had some savings and didn’t need immediate help. But the refugees that have come recently,
they need things immediately, they need a place to stay, food and medical care.
[Slovenian participant, group 2]

Participants sceptical of immigration tend to emphasize the characteristics of the economic migrant stereotype (‘only those who are well-off have the means to get up here’) and vice versa: participants with more immigration-friendly views tend to emphasize the characteristics of the refugee stereotype when defining the immigrant (‘many are forced to come here’). Rather than tacit moral yardsticks, participants in these instances use deservingness criteria as tools to construct different target groups during discussions, and the criteria of need and control seem to form a hybrid criterion in discussions about migration. Claims that a person has no control of the situation, very often comes with the implicit or explicit claim that the person has a high level of need. Conversely, claims that a person is in control of a certain situation is often implicitly or explicitly linked to a claim that the person does not have much need (e.g. ‘The people who are fleeing Syria, they have witnessed things that I have never witnessed in my life, like horrific things, so obviously they are going to need mental health support’).

Rethinking the theoretical separation of deservingness criteria, this strong relationship between need and control may suggest that, in the context of welfare, only needs beyond the control of the individual are ever truly deserving.

The three forms of reciprocity – monetary, functional and behavioural

Reciprocity was the criterion most often used across all four countries (see Table 1). This resonates with recent survey studies showing that the issue of giving back to society is pivotal for understanding migrant deservingness (Reeskens and van der Meer 2018). The
reciprocity criterion was derived by van Oorschot from De Swaan’s criterion of docility and Cook’s criterion of gratefulness and pleasantness (Van Oorschot 2000: 27). They both pointed to a ‘deeper criterion of reciprocity’ in social relationships, where reciprocity may take on an array of different forms, including symbolic forms such as compliance or a smile of thanks (van Oorschot and Roosma 2015: 15).

Despite this broad conceptual definition, reciprocity is mostly operationalized narrowly as exchange by repaying society through labour market participation and tax-payments – in the past, present or future. Thus, Reeskens and van der Meer (2018) use ‘labour market consistency’ and ‘labour market reintegration strategy’ as means to measure reciprocity and Van Oorschot (2000), similarly, uses ‘pensioners’ versus ‘young people’ and ‘extended work history’ versus ‘short work history’ to measure the importance of reciprocity.

Our qualitative material reveals a number of important nuances for the reciprocity criterion. Across the four countries, we found not just one, but three dominant ideas about what it means for the migrant to ‘give something back to society’ – ranging on a continuum from material to immaterial or symbolic contributions. Thus, the migrant can contribute (or fail to contribute) to society through a reciprocal relationship based on monetary means, functionality or behaviour.

First, and unsurprisingly, the migrant can reciprocate through monetary means – for example, tax-paying – echoing either a buyer-seller relationship, where taxes are a currency used to purchase welfare benefits and services, or a debtor-creditor relationship, where the migrant is granted a state loan that needs to be paid off – interest included. Either way, the contributions are monetary and are balanced on the border between
reciprocity and negotiated exchange. Several Slovenian participants, for example, linked the deservingness of the migrant directly to their contribution to ‘the Slovenian state treasury’. Thus, it was unjust when migrants, ‘who contributed less to the state budget’, were granted certain welfare benefits. Similarly, this British participant reflected upon the deservingness of a migrant:

A lot of this [how much they deserve] is looking at how much they contributed through tax and to the actual resources they are going to be getting, which obviously you have just arrived in this country you haven’t paid any tax yet. [British participant, group 2]

Using this monetary reciprocity criterion, migrant deservingness is determined by the former, present or expected future tax contribution ascribing importance to ‘having a job’ and being ‘employable’:

Isn’t the intention behind the low benefits precisely to get people onto the labour market, and thereby turn them into tax-paying citizens? [Danish participant, group 5]

One Slovenian group even suggested that migrants looking for work should pay upon arrival, depending on the expected length of the stay. Such ‘pre-paid taxes’ would reduce the state’s risk of making bad investments:

That’s not such a stupid idea! To have them pay when they arrive. A foreigner, an immigrant who comes here, should come with knowledge. We will ask: ‘For how long are you staying? One month will cost €500, two months… So you pay this much and can stay this long.’ And only then will our country take care of you. That’s not such a stupid idea. [Slovenian participant, group 4]

Requiring monetary reciprocation in exchange for welfare deservingness seems to work as an entry-fee incurred for symbolic and monetary debt. Consequently, it is questionable
whether this is reciprocity – in which people respond to a positive action by other positive actions – or if it is an implicitly negotiated exchange in which there is a price for access to welfare benefits and services.

Second, the migrant can contribute by being useful. In contrast to monetary reciprocity, usefulness is about helping society function – about ‘doing those things that needs to be done’:

[Without them] no one would clean up after us, or work for us. [Slovenian participant, group 1]
It is not the immigrants’ fault. They have come here to work. They tried to get local people to do the fruit picking and they wouldn’t do it. They have got to have someone to do it. [British participant, group 5]

In discussions across all four countries, participants emphasized specific things that would never be done if not for the usefulness of migrants. Cleaning in Slovenia, newspaper delivery in Denmark, fruit-picking, ‘working in the NHS’ in the UK and ‘volunteer work’ are suggested means of reciprocating. Usefulness is not always about getting migrants to do work that nobody else wants to do. Other participants point to the ‘special talents’ of some migrants, which enable them to perform tasks that nobody else can do:

- We just don’t have the skills and the qualified British people to fill all of the jobs that we have within this country, particularly in areas like technology. We are just so far behind in growing our own talent, we have always imported talent from elsewhere.
- I think it is difficult because this country doesn’t produce enough of its own talent so we are quite dependent on immigration.

[British participants, group 3]
Many immigrants come here with long educations. I mean how many professors haven’t been hired by Xx University, or other universities, who are migrants? [Danish participant, group 5]

The third form of reciprocal currency is what we call *behavioural reciprocity*.

Reciprocating through behaviour requires that immigrants show the right attitude, making this a strictly immaterial and symbolic criterion.² This suggests that there is a blurred line between the reciprocity criterion based on behaviour and the attitude deservingness criterion, and numerous statements in our material have indeed been coded as both. In practice, the migrants’ attitude is often used to assess and articulate ‘the degree of reciprocation’ (van Oorschot 2000). Showing good behaviour thereby functions as an immaterial means of reciprocating to society, just as monetary means and usefulness does. Attitude, in this regard, is not primarily about being ‘docile’ or ‘compliant’, but about actively paying back to society in the symbolic currency of ‘respect’, ‘willingness’ and ‘having the right intentions’.

Showing good behaviour is important in all countries, but is of particular importance in the Slovenian focus groups, where participants often separated ‘the willing’ from the ‘unwilling’ to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving immigrants. A refugee with no savings can still contribute to society by having the right ‘intentions’. Rather than monetary reciprocation, attitude as behavioural mode of reciprocity involves ‘not just accepting, but respecting our culture’ and showing ‘willingness’, wanting to stay in the country and ‘expressing a desire to get involved in activities.’ The migrant with the right attitude is ‘full of energy’ and willing to build a
new life in Slovenia, in contrast to the ‘ill-mannered’ migrant who is disrespectful towards Slovenian culture and has come ‘only to waste air’ and to ‘destroy, refuse, criticize or disregard our culture’. In all such cases, the right attitude is part of a reciprocal relationship between the migrant and society, increasing the migrant’s deservingness.

When applying the criteria of reciprocity to argue for the perceived deservingness of the migrant, participants across the four countries referred to three established reciprocal currencies – that is, three different kinds of contributions the migrant can make or be unable to make: one can contribute – or fail to contribute – through monetary, functional or behavioural reciprocity. The latter of these seems to span the boundary between the reciprocity criterion and the attitude criterion.

**Alternative moral logics**

Deservingness theory assumes that citizens evaluate welfare deservingness based on differences between groups or individuals in terms of their level of need, control or contribution. This presupposes a connection between individual characteristics and the perceived level of deservingness, where the former determines the latter. However, when discussing migrant deservingness, some citizens turned to alternative moral logics in their assessments and openly opposed the logic behind theories of deservingness.

We found evidence of one such alternative moral logic and traces of another. These alternative logics defy the deservingness logic through a refusal to link deservingness to differences in control, need, identity, attitude and reciprocity. We label the first a universalist moral logic and the second a moral logic of rejection.
The universalist logic, found in all four countries, rejects deservingness criteria as unimportant – occasionally even unethical – because they rely on human differences instead of unity and equality. The moral language of universalism refuses to recognize the importance of deservingness criteria because *everyone* should receive in equal measure. The moral language of rejection refuses to recognize the importance of deservingness criteria because *no one should receive*. Either way, deservingness criteria are deemed insufficient or irrelevant tools for morally judging the welfare deservingness of migrants. In the following, we provide a brief sketch of the two moral logics and emphasize how they differ from the deservingness logic. Drawing on the logic of universalism, entitlement is ascribed universally to people in need, refusing to differentiate along the dimensions prescribed by logic of the deservingness heuristics such as, for example, by refusing the importance of distinguishing ‘migrants’ from ‘natives’:

> The same criteria should be in place for all, right, I think. For they aren’t anything special, whether they’re a woman or a man, or an immigrant or refugee, or if you are just Slovenian or a Martian. Equal conditions for all! [Slovenian participant, group 1]

The universalist logic denounces the idea of deservingness criteria and emphasizes instead the need for equal treatment of all – regardless of varying degrees of control, need or contributions to society. People, when drawing on such a logic, recognize individual or inter-group differences, but refuse to link these to welfare deservingness:

> It’s *not* okay to treat people differently, I think. If we have a person, who has come to our country, who we call an immigrant and who doesn’t have a job, then they
should have the same possibility to receive financial help. [Danish participant, group 3]

But it should of course be free, I think. If we accept people to our country, and they come from different places, I mean I think they should get the same as us, as you also say Xx. They should get the same benefits as a family that’s born and raised in this country for generations. [Danish participant, group 5]

The universalist language is sometimes activated by participants explicitly to criticize policies targeting selected groups of migrants:

- Well, regarding our conversation about everyone being equal in the face of the law, then I was shocked when this new integration benefit was passed in parliament, where immigrants […] receive less in social assistance. Because this directly affects the children. I thought it was so shocking that we could treat them so differently here in Denmark.
- I agree completely. They should have the same conditions as everyone else who lives in Denmark. [Danish participants, group 1]

In all four countries, participants drew on such universalist logic, valorizing ‘equality’, ‘equal rights’ and ‘a shared human nature’ and thus ironing out the importance of intra-group or intra-individual differences. Occasionally, a moral logic based on distinctions was even explicitly denounced as unethical, as in the following example from the UK:

I think it is just a terrifying level of *othering* that is going on where people see immigrants and refugees as different to them. At the moment it is just a bit chilling for me. You are getting more cases of race hate crimes and things like that but it is a slippery slope because that is how it always begins. It always begins with othering the person. It is like they are a different sort of person. ‘An immigrant is not a British person’. That othering is dangerous. [British participant, group 2]

The moral logic of universalism breaks down the connections between citizenship, nation
and social rights entrenched in the identity logic of the deservingness logic. Given the contentious status of immigrants, the moral logic of universalism may be particularly relevant to this group. However, we do see the logic of universalism employed in discussions of other citizen vignettes as well, for example when participants stated that *all* elderly people should be entitled to certain benefits or when participants refused to rank the different vignettes on scales ranging from the most deserving to the least deserving, despite being explicitly instructed to do so.

We also found traces of a moral logic of rejection, though less prominent in our material than the universalist logic. We found very few examples of it in the groups from Norway, Denmark and UK and a few more in the Slovenian groups. Participants applying this logic typically spoke of ‘natural limits’ to the number of immigrants the country can handle, because ‘we’ are not able to take everyone in. This logic, like universalism, denounces the connection between individual merit and welfare entitlement, making welfare entitlement a matter of what ‘we’ can afford or what ‘we’ can handle, rather than individual desert. The logic of rejection draws on bureaucratic or logistical concerns, rather than concerns for the deservingness of the individual migrant. Whereas the universalist language functions as a total dismissal of the identity criterion – stating that everyone deserves equally because everyone is made of the same flesh and blood, and identity can therefore never provide an argument for denying entitlement – the rejectionist logic contrarily functions as the total embrace of the identity criterion, stating that no one who does not belong to the community of ‘us’ can have anything.

The logic of rejection could very well have been more prominent had it not been
for (a) a potential normative bias in the focus group setup preventing participants from expressing what they might think of as unwelcome politically incorrect reflections, and (b) the fact that some of the groups (cf. the section ‘Focus groups and vignettes’) were imbalanced in terms of the political views of the participants. Still, tracking the rejectionist language under these circumstances indicates that it is worth looking for in future analyses.

**Conclusion: Opening the black box of deservingness**

This study offers insights into the discursive and evaluative practices of deservingness criteria. The analysis offers three main contributions to the existing literature on deservingness.

First, criteria of deservingness are usually conceptualized as automatized heuristics, mobilized by citizens to evaluate the deservingness of needy groups. Our study suggests that these criteria are more than a passive heuristic, as participants actively use deservingness criteria to construct and elaborate on stereotypical images of the (non)deserving immigrant. Consequently, deservingness criteria function both as tools for constructing images of the (non-)deserving and as normative yardsticks, applied by citizens explicitly to back up and justify their judgment. On the basis of this, we argue that deservingness criteria are not detached instruments, but part of a complexity-reducing sense-making process where people construct and classify images of needy groups that allow them to justify a particular judgement about deservingness. This sense-making process is strongly connected to a set of stereotypical images of the needy, which makes deservingness criteria an imagery or vocabulary, rather than a heuristic. This suggests that notions of deservingness are not very stable, because the justification of
deservingness depends on the same heuristic as is used to construct an image of the deserving. Deservingness is, consequently, a process of ascription as much as it is a process of evaluation – a fact that is invisible to survey measurements.

Second, our analysis indicates that the relationship between deservingness criteria is more complicated than suggested by the deservingness literature. Some deservingness criteria tend to co-function rather than to work independently. In particular, the criteria of need and control are fused to form an antithetical relation, establishing two stereotypes characterized by, respectively, a surplus of control and a lack of need (the economic migrant) and a surplus of need and lack of control (the refugee). Need and control appear to be mutually and hierarchically defined, so that only needs without control are truly needs. Combined with the constructive nature of the deservingness heuristic, this indicates that an increasing emphasis on personal responsibility in social policy may prevent different types of need from appearing as deserving. Further theorizing deservingness, the hierarchy between the two criteria suggests that need must become subject to deservingness evaluations, but it is the issue of control that determines the level of deservingness. Arguably, control may be pivotal here, because deservingness is a question that arises when individual need becomes a collective problem, which is strongly connect to the issue of control.

The reciprocity criterion comes in three varieties and establishes reciprocity based on either monetary means, functionality or attitude. Migrant reciprocity is thus only in part linked to monetary contribution, so the narrow focus on labour market participation in the survey literature on deservingness misses other more symbolic forms of reciprocity which are co-constitutive of deservingness perceptions. Our analysis also suggests that
the relationship between the attitude and reciprocity criteria is more complex than assumed in much deservingness literature. The attitude of the deserving is not only quiet gratitude but also active demonstrations of willingness and respect. We suggest that attitude, in such instances, functions as a subcategory of the reciprocity expected from deserving migrants. To what degree these different forms of reciprocity may substitute for each other and whether there is a minimum requirement of each form is a question for further research.

Third, our analysis shows that the deservingness logic competes with alternative moral logics in discussions of migrants’ entitlements. Evaluating the needy based on individual characteristics is certainly not the only way to argue for the distribution of welfare benefits and services. In particular, we find a prominent universalist moral logic that defies the premise of deservingness logic by stating that everyone is equally deserving. As a result, one may question whether the deservingness concept underestimates the ability and willingness of people to make moral judgements about entitlement and need outside the logic of intra-group or personal differences that characterize the deservingness heuristic. Arguably, the deservingness criteria connect to a bureaucratic problem of making sure that sparse resources are directed according to the best claims for these resources. In contrast, the universalist logic is based solely on the universal moral entitlement associated with human need. In that sense, it is not only a logic that does not differentiate between us and them, but is also a logic that does not recognize the restrictions imposed by political community, nation or welfare state.
References


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Notes

i Besides discussing the deservingness of migrants, participants discussed the deservingness of an unemployed person, a pensioner, a family with average income, a person in a low-paid job and a comfortably well-off worker.

ii The focus groups were organized and conducted by the Breaking Blue Research agency in London (UK), by the Aragon Agency in Ljubljana (Slovenia) and by TNS in Oslo (Norway).

iii Participants in the different groups had the following characteristics. Middle class: completed higher education (i.e. 3 years or more); an income level equivalent to 150% of national median wage for a full-time worker over 25; homeownership for the majority of the participants; maximum two students or unemployed; and variation in their marital status (e.g. married/partner, single parent, parent with primary school children, parent with teenage children, empty nest parents, persons without children, etc.). Working class: less than 3 years higher education; the presence of at least 4 persons in the group without higher education; household income level below the third decile (e.g. under £348 weekly for UK); maximum two students or unemployed; and variation in marital status. Old age pensioners: aged 62 to 75 years (with majority age 67+); variation in pension benefit level (with at least two persons on lowest pension level/minimum pension);
sufficient hearing as a condition for participation; some participants from single person households (widow, divorced etc.); and some childless participants or with children who live far away. **Young adults**: aged 18 to 35 (with the ideal aim to achieve as even an age distribution as possible); three students; at least three parents; and with some variation in family status. **Women with care responsibilities**: women with children living at home. iii When using quotations from the focus groups in our analysis, we state the country of the participant and a group number between 1 and 5. Group 1 refers to women with care responsibility groups, group 2 to the young adult groups, group 3 to middle class groups, group 4 to working class groups and group 5 to elderly groups.