**Varieties of Scandinavian universalism: Hybrid evaluations of Swedish and Danish welfare.**

**Abstract**

Attitudes research shows that the Scandinavian, universal welfare regime receives strong popular support. Why the inhabitants consider this universal model of welfare appropriate is, however, all but unknown. This paper explores below the level of welfare attitudes and welfare legitimacy to investigate the cultural standards of worth which justify the universal welfare state to people in Sweden and Denmark. A total of 115 qualitative interviews conducted in Denmark and Sweden in 2013-2014 are analysed to determine and compare the principles of valuation Danes and Swedes employ in evaluating their universal welfare states. Findings include a general cross-country consensus on generalised reciprocity; however, Swedes emphasise security and emancipation, while, in contrast, Danes emphasise societal efficiency and risk pooling.

Keywords: Welfare attitudes, Universal welfare regime, Comparative interview study, Sweden, Denmark, Moral economy, Justification

**Introduction**

The attitudes underpinning the Scandinavian, universal model of welfare are well known from welfare attitude research: trust, egalitarianism, solidarity, and confidence in government and public institutions (Svallfors 2006, 2003, Kildal, Kuhnle 2005). In contrast, the cultural notions of worth justifying these attitudes among Scandinavians are all but unknown: why do trust, equality and solidarity seem justified to Scandinavians? Research is needed on the subjective principles of worth that Scandinavians use to justify their attitudes to welfare. Knowledge of these notions will both increase our understanding of the more durable, cultural underpinning of e.g. social cohesion and redistributional legitimacy and further sociological understanding of national differences in attitude formation at the level of intersubjective meaning. Furthermore, such notions of worth are important since they constitute the conditions of legitimacy for policies and institutions. This paper contributes to filling this gap by investigating the notions of worth Swedes and Danes employ in evaluating the welfare state. The paper is based on 115 qualitative interviews conducted in Denmark and Sweden in 2013-14.

Welfare attitudes research predominantly investigates correlations between welfare attitudes – evaluations in my application – and socio-economic and institutional conditions. Another equally important set of correlates to welfare evaluations are, however, the subjective, moral notions of worth: perceptions of right or wrong and good or bad which people employ in these evaluations. Subjectively people are, for example, egalitarian, because fairness and equality are important and meaningful to them, not because they belong to a specific social class. Social-economic conditions may significantly influence and shape cultural notions of worth available to groups and social classes, but this influence is mediated by intersubjective meaning. Furthermore, notions of worth emerge in the intersection between culture and socio-economic conditions; the one is not the sole cause of the other (Lamont 1992, 2000). While welfare attitudes are developed at a specific time as evaluations of specific policies and institutions, the cultural standards of worth involved in welfare evaluations and justifications of the evaluations are more enduring and provide indications of potential future evaluations (Boltanski, Thevenot 2000).

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

* What standards of worth do Swedes and Danes draw on in justifying their evaluations of the Swedish and Danish welfare state?
* To what degree do these correspond to the ideal type of generalised reciprocity and the civic standard of worth usually assumed to be characteristic of Scandinavian welfare states?

Scandinavia is interesting for two reasons. First, Scandinavian countries are usually considered quite homogeneous in terms of attitudes and policies. While one might expect these attitudes to be founded in similar justifications, theory suggests that similar evaluations may draw on different standards of worth (Boltanski, Thevenot 2006). Historical-institutional research suggests that there may be differences within Scandinavia which do not show up in survey-based attitude research (Knudsen and Rothstein 1994). Consequently, using Denmark and Sweden in a most similar case study is helpful in determining the relevance of studying justifications. Secondly, the European Union is advocating that member states should adopt many of the institutional characteristics of the universal Scandinavian model of welfare (Kvist 2015). The potential legitimacy of such policy learning would, however, much depend on citizens evaluating these policies by the same standards of worth as in the Scandinavian countries.

The analytical framework is drawn from the Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation (Lamont 2012) emerging in the intersection between political sociology and comparative cultural sociology. This approach suggests that differences exist between groups and nations regarding cultural notions of what is right, good and just. People employ these different cultural yardsticks of worth in making evaluations. This paper investigates the standards of worth Swedes and Danes employ in evaluating their universal welfare states.

In the following, I first present the sociology of valuation and evaluation, connecting to research on reciprocity and welfare attitudes. Secondly, the research questions and methodology of the study are set out. Thirdly, the analysis and findings are presented. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the study. The words universal and universalism are used in the following only to denote the principles governing Scandinavian welfare institutions, rather than universalism as a value or attitude.

**Welfare valuations and evaluations**

Contemporary welfare attitudes research successfully measures support for welfare institutions and identifies the socio-economic and institutional conditions conducive to specific attitudes (Svallfors 2006, Larsen 2006). Consequently, we know who supports welfare institutions and to what degree they do so. However, *why* people evaluate such policies the way they do remains to be investigated. It is this *why* which this paper engages by investigating the standards of worth people employ in evaluating welfare. In the following, I introduce the valuation and evaluation concepts to theoretically operationalize the object of investigation. Secondly, I relate it to theories on the justification of welfare attitudes to which the findings of the empirical study will be compared.

The sociology of valuation and evaluation suggests that any evaluation is based on a valuation (Lamont 2012). To carry out an evaluation people draw on a cultural standard of worth providing a metric of high and low worth. Standards of worth are stable, intersubjectively shared notions of worth within a cultural community, whether social class or nation, which derive from the social, economic and cultural trajectories of social classes and nations. Valuation describes that a specific type of worth emerges as relevant to a specific situation or object in contrast to other standards. Valuation defines the object under evaluation as an instance of a greater overarching order of things. If the standard of valuation is one of fairness, high worth is ascribed fairness and low worth unfairness. High and low worth, consequently, only refer to the applied standard of worth and not to a type of general moral notion of worth. Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) theorise six overarching orders of worth with different standards. Three are particularly relevant to this study: the civic order, the industrial order, and the market order. The market order emphasises the high worth of revenue, competition and market position, and the low worth of stagnation and failing. The civic order emphasises the high worth of the collective will and the equality of citizens’ rights and status and the low worth of division, particularity, and arbitrariness. The industrial order emphases the high worth of efficiency and performance and the low worth of the inefficient and non-optimal. These orders of worth are theoretical constructs which highlight fundamental differences between justifications and will, in this paper, serve as set of theoretical references used to describe the inductively developed typology of justifications.

When a person chooses an appropriate standard of worth, an evaluation is carried out, judging the specific object against the metric of high and low worth of that specific standard. When asked to justify and explain their evaluations, their justifications are based on, and refer to, the standard of worth employed in the evaluation.

The question then becomes, what justifies welfare states? Boltanski and Thevenot (2006:325f) theorise that justifications of welfare states are a compromise between the civic order of worth and industrial order of worth which emphasises both equality and efficiency. A similar suggestion can be found in Titmuss’ (1964; 1974) discussion of the connection between welfare states, social citizenship and industrial citizenship. Drawing on reciprocity theory, Mau (2003) proposes a typology of four fundamental justifications of redistribution.   
1. Generalised reciprocity denotes a mutual obligation among citizens, in which contributions and benefits are justified by a social contract of equality. This describes the ideal type of social-democratic or universal welfare state.   
2. Risk reciprocity describes insurance-like risk ‘pooling’ that protects members from the uncertainties and contingencies of life. This describes the ideal type of liberal welfare state.  
3. Obligating reciprocity obtains only if all other resources are exhausted and benefit recipients incur a debt to the community. This describes the ideal type of residual welfare state.  
4. Balanced reciprocity involves a level of benefit worth commensurate to the level of contributions, thus underwriting inequalities produced by the market. This describes the ideal type of conservative welfare state.

Consequently, we should expect citizens of Scandinavian countries to express generalised reciprocity as the justification of the universal welfare state, referring to the community of moral obligations rather than to the rights and responsibilities of the individual. In terms of standards of worth, civic notions of citizenship and equality should prevail in evaluations of universal welfare. Universalism, the core principle of the Scandinavian welfare states, has two main dimensions (Kildal and Kuhnle 2005:14). In the membership dimension, universalism includes everyone on the basis of citizenship or residency, while in the allocation dimension universalism is juxtaposed to discretionary allocation of benefits. Universalism is the object of long-term political commitment in Scandinavia, despite increasing market focus and institutional reforms (Nygård 2006, Arndt 2014). While institutions and policies change, the fundamental characteristics of the universal welfare state are argued by most to remain intact (Larsen 2006, Mishra 2014, Anttonen et al. 2012). Scandinavian welfare states generally remain distinct in regards to policy objectives and the universal nature of most services and benefits. Welfare attitudes are largely supportive of the universal welfare state and less prone to fluctuations than in other welfare regimes (Jordan 2013, Svallfors 2012). Researchers find that Danes and Swedes continue to support the principles of redistribution, inclusiveness, public provision, and the high level of taxation (Svallfors 2014, Greve 2016). This is in part explained as the result of welfare attitudes founded in fundamental values and perceptions of the welfare state, rather than the specific policy objectives (Roosma et al. 2013, Kulin and Svallfors 2013).

Knudsen and Rothstein (1994) suggest that differences between the countries may exist. They characterise Denmark as the liberal member of the Scandinavian group and Sweden as the statist – a difference which they trace to the historically greater involvement of market and civil society in the Danish welfare state compared to the Swedish, and to a historically more successful trajectory of elites and centralism in Sweden leading to more widespread use of intrusive, interventionist policies, compared to Denmark. This would suggest that risk reciprocity or obligating reciprocity may be more characteristic of the Danish case and generalised reciprocity to be more pronounced in the Swedish. Using the vocabulary of Boltanski and Thevenot, Danes should favour industrial worth (efficiency) more than Swedes and Swedes favour civic worth (equality of rights) more than Danes. Finally, it is worth noting that the Scandinavian welfare states are currently undergoing institutional transformations and experiencing increasing levels of migration, and such changes are necessarily part of the evaluations people make of welfare states.

**Methodology**

The paper reports the findings of a qualitative interview study carried out in 2013-2014 investigating Swedish and Danish valuations and evaluations in regards to welfare. Interview themes included social and redistributive justice, welfare institutions, taxation, and work related issues. This paper engages the part of the interviews which concerned perceptions of social justice, redistribution, and welfare institutions.

The 115 semi-structured interviews (54 in Denmark and 61 in Sweden) had an average duration of 1½ hours, were conducted by the author and both Danish and Swedish research assistants and transcribed in full and anonymised. To ensure comparability, the interview guide provided a structured set of general themes, a number of mandatory subthemes and suggested probing questions in regards to each mandatory theme. Following Lamont (1992), participants were contacted on the basis of residency. Two large cities were selected in each country: the capitals of Stockholm and Copenhagen and the industrial cities of Gothenburg and Aalborg. Within each city, one working class neighbourhood and one middle/upper-middle class neighbourhood were selected, ensuring a diversity of social backgrounds within countries. This was done to ensure that between-country differences were relatively robust to socio-economic differences within each country. Potential participants were contacted by telephone (mobile and landline) in all eight residential areas. To be eligible, participants had to be employed, because the interviews also concerned work-related values. The study population was balanced in terms of age (20 – 65), gender and social background.

The data was submitted to inductive analysis, taking the conceptual distinction between valuation and evaluation as point of departure. The interpretation of data involved identifying notions of worth characteristic to different types of justification (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This interpretation started from descriptive coding of justifications similar in the type of arguments and references involved. Justification types were then analysed to identify the notions of worth involved. The derived set of justifications and standards of worth was then employed in a second round of coding of the entire dataset to ensure consistent coding (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2015). The analysis was carried out using matrix coding (Miles, Huberman 1984) of both descriptive and analytical codes employing cross-code queries in analysing the interviews (Chamberlain, 2006). The patterns identified in this study are grounded in the entire dataset. In appendix 1, information is provided on the percentage of participants making each type of justification within each country. This merely serves as a device for communicating data patterns. Quotes have been selected within relevant codes to best represent and communicate the patterns of meaning identified in the analysis. Words and sentences in inverted commas are examples of the words actually used by interviewees.

While a large and diverse set of interviewees does lend credibility to the importance of the themes which emerge in these interviews, no statistical generalisations can be made. The analytical generalisations made here will have both conceptual and empirical relevance to comparable parts of the Swedish and Danish populations, but to what degree they are transferrable and whether other issues are as or more important can only be ascertained by further empirical research.

**Analysis**

The question is not whether there is support for the universal model of welfare, since these interviews largely confirm what is already known from survey research in this area (Svallfors 2011), i.e. people in Scandinavia strongly support the universal model of welfare. Rather, the question is why the Swedes and Danes consider high levels of welfare generosity and inclusiveness to be justified. What are the standards of worth that justify this model in preference to others? The following paragraphs will engage that question at the general level and in regard to the different universal welfare institutions.

In the following sections, the three forms of justification which have emerged as dominant in the data and the cultural standards of worth they draw on are presented: universalism as a collective obligation, universalism as rational, and universalism as equitable access. Each of these represent shared characteristics of both cases which have been inductively developed from data and characterise shared types of justification which emerge in both country cases in similar ways. However, within each of the three types of justifications, important differences between the cases have also emerged from the analysis. Both similarities and differences are presented within each of the three forms of justification.

*Collective obligation*

This first type of justification of universalism ascribes high worth to collective obligation. In both countries’ cases, people define a unity or community – ‘we’ – morally obliged to take care of each other:

*Man (55) Translator, Gothenburg  
Int.: Why do you think it’s [universal benefit entitlement] a good thing?  
IP: Well it’s sort of a foundation. Since we have a democratic society where we consider  
everyone to have equal worth, then we should secure basic comfort and security for everyone. Therefore, it doesn’t matter whether you’re making a million a month or if you don’t have anything. If you get sick, you get treated – I think that’s fair.*

The moral obligation to take care of others by ‘securing basic comfort and security’ is presented as ‘fair’, and both stems from and is directed at society. Society – referred to as ‘we’, ‘Denmark’, ‘Sweden’, ‘this society’, or ‘our welfare society’ – is essentially defined as a community of moral obligation where everyone has ‘equal worth’ and everyone should help provide security for other members. Within this moral community of reciprocal obligations, membership appears to supersede other differentiating characteristics and defines society as a community of members with equal worth and, consequently, equal rights: ‘if you get sick, you get treated’. Being part of this community means that one is subject to a universal obligation – ‘our responsibility’ – to help those who need it:

*Man (36) Manual Labourer, Copenhagen  
IP: No, that [paying for welfare services] is not something you should be required to do. It’s part of living and being that people have decent conditions. It is our responsibility that everyone in our society has a decent life.*

This obligation serves as a standard of worth by which to evaluate universalism. Paying for welfare services is, consequently, ascribed low worth.

The justification of this moral obligation is naturalised in the sense that it does not seem to require further justification:

*Man (33) Research Scientist, Copenhagen  
IP: I think we all gain if we carry this burden together.  
Int.: So it is simply a good way of solving this?  
IP: Yes, I think so. And as to responsibility: why are people responsible for other people? Isn’t it a fundamental duty as a human being to be responsible for your life and those around you?*

As expressed in this quote, the universal rights to public welfare services hinge on the obligation to contribute as a ‘burden we carry together’, rather than on the right to receive. The obligation is, in the final instance, justified as ‘a fundamental duty’ characteristic to all human beings, indicating a type of generalised reciprocity justified by a mutual commitment to equality among all citizens (Mau 2002). This becomes particularly obvious in discussions of benefit entitlement for refugees and immigrants, which many consider to be dependent only on the willingness to contribute, rather than citizenship.

Particular to the Danish case, generalised reciprocity is often intertwined with risk reciprocity where rights to receive depend on participating in the shared risk-pooling system:

*Woman (60) Healthcare Assistant, Aalborg  
Int.: Why is that [free, universal care for the elderly and disabled] important?  
IP: Yes, well they have been contributing throughout a long life as well. Many have been employed. I think they are entitled. […] And they still contribute and pay tax. Maybe not a huge contribution, but they are still contributing, nonetheless.*

Entitlement is linked to the fact that people ‘contribute and pay tax’, rather than their citizenship or group membership. The right to receive is justified because people have contributed to the collective welfare arrangements, emphasising the insurance-like aspects of these. However, the Danes often explicitly disregard contribution size, in contrast to a balanced reciprocity system. In many interviews, welfare benefits and services are evaluated positively because they pool risk through tax financed, insurance-like arrangements.

In the Swedish case, in contrast, generalised reciprocity intertwines with justifications, which ascribes intrinsic high worth to a society where no one is threatened or at risk, regardless of issues of equality and reciprocity:

*Man (39) High-School Teacher, Gothenburg  
IP:[…] requiring payment or that sort of thing from an old person in the last stages of life, no. It doesn’t matter whether they have been working all their life or if they just moved here. When someone is so old as to need care because they can’t take care of themselves, then the only decent thing is to help as much as we damn well can.*

The moral obligation of the community to ensure safety, security and comfort – ‘trygghet’ in Swedish – is a recurrent standard of worth in the Swedish interviews. This type of justification makes no reference to contribution, membership or citizenship, but makes references to ‘here’, ‘Sweden’, or ‘this country’. Trygghet ensures a safe place - rather than just the security of individuals - where citizens have peace of mind and protection from the risks posed by infirmity, unemployment, and socio-economic disadvantage.

In both countries’ cases, justifications of universal welfare rights ascribe high worth to the moral obligation of taking care of each other within the national community through contributing to the welfare state. This obligation is taken as self-evident by most interviewees and connects to the civic order of worth, where universalism is valued as a collective obligation and the equality of rights. However, justifications of the right to partake of welfare services and benefits also draw on other standards of worth in the two cases.

In the Danish case, the right to partake of welfare benefits and services also rests on the implicit expectation of risk pooling: that recipients contribute, have contributed or will contribute in the future, to the best of their ability. This evaluation draws on a market standard of worth associated with risk reciprocity, as high worth is ascribed to individuals who take responsibility for paying to maintain the collective pool of resources while also buying the right to draw from that pool.

In the Swedish case, moreover, individual rights are of high worth because they are part of making the welfare society a safe haven for everyone. Consequently, the ambition to afford everyone ‘trygghet’ appears to be a more important standard of worth, emphasising the outcome of generalised reciprocity rather than the principle. Thus universalism is justified by the type of society it produces, rather than rights, obligations and redistribution which it comprises. It connects to the civic order of worth valuing the collective will and the good of society much more than is the case in the Danish interviews.

Any standard of worth also defines different states as low worth. Generally, low worth is ascribed the unwillingness to be part of the collective obligation:

*Woman (25) Ph.D. Student, Gothenburg*

*IP: I think that we must take care of people and care about people and people who are worse off shouldn’t suffer. […] and I don’t like people who do not want to be part of that or disagree. If they don’t like the system they have the opportunity to move to another country with a different system.*

Furthermore, particular conditions such as being unemployed or an immigrant also appear to test these justifications of universalism. Unemployed people shirking from their moral obligation to the community are of low worth because they are ‘lazy’ or ‘too picky’ rather than because they are unable to contribute. Similarly, some ascribe immigrants and refugees low worth because their contribution to – and membership of – the community of obligations is questioned. Swedes and Danes share evaluations of low worth in the face of universal welfare rights when it comes to people who put themselves outside community of moral obligations.

*Rational*

The universal welfare state is also ascribed high worth as rational and efficient in obtaining ‘stability’, ‘prevention’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘mutual understanding’, and avoiding low worth states of disruption and inefficiencies of such as ‘conflicts between social groups’, ‘suspicion’ or ‘envy’:

*Woman (67) Community College Teacher, Aalborg  
Int.: So a certain level of equality is desirable?  
IP: Yes it is….. I may be repeating myself but large economic differences between people make them unable to understand each other’s lives. And suspicion and blame abounds. Being unfamiliar with each other stokes envy and prejudices, misinterpretations of each other – it is damaging to society.*

The stability achieved through equality and mutual understanding pays off in the form of avoided damages.

In both countries’ cases, universal welfare institutions are justified as rational because they create social and economic equality making society stabile and free of disruptive conflicts. Moreover, universal welfare institutions are justified as superior to individual level strategies for staying safe and secure which people would adopt if left to their own devices. Such strategies are seen as ‘egotistical’, ‘bad choices’ and ‘short term’. Universal, inclusive institutions remedy this, providing preventive solutions:

*Man (33) Research Scientist, Copenhagen:*

*IP: It [inclusiveness] is economically beneficial to society in the long run, because if people’s problems are allowed to get out of hand it takes much more resources to get them back on track.*

It is argued that the population is kept ‘healthy’ and ‘productive’ through inclusive, generous health policies and social policies, that free education allows students become ‘better at their work’ by choosing education from interest and abilities, and that universal welfare alleviates social tensions abolishing the need for gated communities and other enhanced security measures.

Particular to the Danish case, universalism is ascribed high worth as a societal investment in individuals making society ‘richer’, ‘more productive’ and ‘competitive’. In this quote, this is achieved by allowing people to pursue education from interest, rather than need or financial possibility:

*Woman (55) Nurse, Aalborg   
IP: Well, I think that one gets better employees out of letting people get the education that they want. All things being equal, you perform better if you wind up in the sort of position where you belong.*

Welfare institutions, in particular education and healthcare, are justified by increasing general wealth, tax revenues, and national competitive advantage by investment in the health and ability of individuals.

Thirdly, in the Swedish case, universalism is ascribed high worth by increasing people’s societal participation by alleviating poverty and exclusion. This justification both extends to education, which increases ‘democratic participation’, and to universal welfare benefits, which allow people to ‘take part in social life’ and in civil society in ways otherwise impossible.

*Woman (27) Shop Assistant, Stockholm  
IP: [free education] results in reduced social divides and a large part of the population getting an education or a high level of education. […] I think free education creates a much larger middle class and it’s beneficial to the cohesion of society, because it enables people to be critical of those in power which, in turn, makes the country less corrupt and hopefully results in better political decision-making to the benefit of the most of the population.*

This type of progressive, emancipatory justification is a type of political counterpart to the trygghet justification of collective obligation and is absent in the Danish case.

Evaluations of universalism as rational to society ascribe high worth to an efficient, prosperous, and peaceful society which allows people to pursue personal goals, both inside and outside the market, without coming into conflict with each other. The universal welfare state shepherds the general processes of society in ways that are also beneficial from the perspective of society, rather than only the individual perspective. Furthermore, universalism is justified as producing individual level outcomes superior to those obtainable in an institutional environment without universal welfare rights. This relates to the industrial order of worth by setting up efficiency and productivity as valuable goals for society, obtainable through making society free from disruption and irrationalities.

Danes, moreover, justify universalism because it makes society more profitable and competitive. These notions of worth connect to the market order through seeing welfare services and benefits as investments in competitiveness, market position and future profit. The Swedes ascribe high worth to welfare universalism securing social and democratic participation, connecting both to the efficiency notions of the industrial order of worth and the notions of citizenship and equality of the civic order of worth.

Low worth is ascribed to disruptions resulting from socio-economic inequalities, social tensions, and different states of want. Disruption also includes the ‘egotistical’ strategies people follow without universal welfare institutions:

*Woman (41) Kindergarten Teacher, Copenhagen:*

*IP: You can’t have people going without income. It’s a chain reaction and crime would increase. There is an immigrant family living just over there […] and they are on social assistance and their children are stealing like crazy, getting picked up all the time. If we didn’t give them any money then where would they live and what would they do? You have to secure people and their home to root out crime.*

In Denmark, low worth states include wastefulness in regard to society’s resources, which obtains when poor health or lack of education prevent people from being as productive citizens as they can be. In Sweden, in contrast, low worth states also include social exclusions due to limitations in their health, resources or employment.

*Man (57) IT specialist, Stockholm:*

*IP: A society is a contract where you have to take care of each other. In America, the health care system is bizarre and you can fall in misery and exclusion so hard it is actually perverse and then they are thrilled that they all have the chance to become president.*

Inclusion means the possibility to participate in democracy, gaining knowledge, and generally not having your life chances and happiness depend entirely on success within the labour market.

*Equitable access*

Finally, high worth is ascribed welfare universalism as the most equitable way of granting rights and access to common goods preventing different forms of low worth and inequities in access. The high worth ascribed equitable access obtains in three different ways each targeting three different forms of inequity – inequities which express different forms of low worth. The first form of inequity obtains when limited economic resources restrict access, which to interviewees from both countries, justifies universalism as a more equitable alternative. Whether in regards to health problems, the infirmities of old age, or education equal access to public support is ascribed high worth because it prevents ‘unfair barriers’, ‘random’ or socially ‘unequal’ allocation of resources and problems producing *downwards* inequality of the less fortunate compared to the majority. Universalism is justified by separating economic resources and market opportunities from resource issues regarding health, education, parenting, and aging. Such resources ‘shouldn’t make a difference’ and needs should be catered for regardless of market position in order to prevent the low worth forms of socio-economic exclusion and ‘dropping people on the floor’. This is a theme which emerges often in interviews from both countries, making it the most dominant use of equitable access as a justification for the universal welfare state. It is, furthermore, strongly shared and highly similar between countries, making it the defining characteristic of this shared type of justification.

The second form of inequity concerns inequitable bias, such as educational ‘opportunities’ obtained through wealth rather than merit or jobs are obtained through networking rather than competence. High worth is explicitly ascribed ability in terms of ‘intelligence’ and ‘making an effort’ over wealth, making meritocracy and equal life chances pivotal to this valuation. Universal welfare institutions are justified because they level the playing field, making opportunities free of bias, but specifically not justified by an equality of outcomes. Bias constitutes the relevant form of low worth associated with access and opportunities gained on criteria other than merit.

*Man (51) Machinist, Aalborg  
IP: […]…I think it is important that we help young people on their way and give them the opportunity. Otherwise we get a society that’s divided into classes, right? The guy coming from a disadvantaged family, he should get the same chances as everyone else. He can be just as bright as the guy who lives in [affluent neighbourhood], right? It has to be fair, damn it, so we have some tools to help people regardless if they are from a poor or rich family. So yes, one has to help young people, we should invest in them, they’re our future.*

While less prominent than the downwards inequality justification, this valuation is presented by many, but is much more prominent in the interviews from Denmark than those from Sweden.

The third form of low worth inequity – *upwards inequality –* which universalism prevents, involves welfare privileges bought with market gains and ‘inheritance’ or obtained through ‘status’, job, and ‘social networks’ giving privileged access and ‘preferential treatment’:

*Woman (66) Teacher, Stockholm  
Int.: Some people take out private health insurance or their employer provides one. In regards to healthcare, what are your thoughts on that?  
IP: They are the same as in the other case [private education] because it’s unethical that some people can take a short cut. I think that’s unethical. It’s unethical to treat people differently.   
Int.: So that’s your objection?  
IP: Yes, we’re all humans. So even if I’m prime minister it’s the same healthcare system.*

Particularly recurrent is the evaluation that wealth should not lead to ‘privileges’, preferential treatment or privileged access to healthcare services, as in the above quote, or to public or private educational institutions such as elite boarding schools. However, as in the above quote, some also extend this argument into the area of healthcare. It is argued that illness is random and ‘treatment should never depend on wealth’. Consequently, private arrangements delivering healthcare or education outside the public system are evaluated as unfair, low worth privileges by some, particularly if those private arrangements are thought to be superior to public services. This valuation is also quite prevalent in the data, though less so than the downwards inequality valuation. Importantly, this valuation is characteristic of the Swedish interviews, while it is almost absent in the Danish interviews.

In sum, high worth is ascribed universalism in rights and access to welfare services due to increased equality of outcomes and opportunities. This connects to the civic order of worth and equitable treatment of citizens. Universalism prevents three types of inequity. First, universalism treats the disadvantaged equitably leading to socio-economic inclusion and countering downwards inequality. This valuation primarily connects to the civic notions of equality and equity. Secondly, in Denmark universalism is justified as a way of letting people compete on more equitable terms and gain equal access to opportunities on the basis of merit and effort. This type of justification combines civic notions of equity and equality with notions of competition and achievement characteristic of the market order of worth. Finally, in Sweden high worth is ascribed to universalism because it constrains the upwards inequality of privileges. Universalism creates equity by removing rather than extending rights and resources. This connects with the civic notions of equality and equity in a critique of market based inequalities.

**Conclusion and discussion**

The main finding of this study is that Danes and Swedes ascribe high and low worth in evaluating the universal welfare state by drawing on the same three general forms of justifications, as presented in figure 1. Moreover, these separate forms of justification combine in a hybrid structure of valuations which has common features between countries. However, within each form, an important difference between these two otherwise similar cases emerges, suggesting that the hybrid structure of justification differs more than institutional similarity would suggest.

*Figure 1 about here*

First, justifications of welfare universalism as collective obligation draw on the high worth of community contribution and the way universalism generalises obligation from individuals to the community. Rather than redistribution among particular others, universalism redistributes to the generalised community, making it a defining characteristic of community. Consequently, the individual moral obligation is to contribute to maintaining community and it is this contribution which is of high worth. However, the moral obligation is more strongly connected to notions of democratic civic inclusion and citizenship in Sweden and more strongly connected to reciprocity norms and market participation in Denmark, as other researchers have also suggested (Hedetoft 2006).

In the Danish case, collective obligation is a hybrid between generalised reciprocity and risk reciprocity: on the one hand, the collective is defined as a collective of contributors while, on the other, it is also a community of mutual insurance and risk pooling. In the Swedish case, universalism is justified by generalised reciprocity and ‘tryghett’ as a project of generalised safety, security, and comfort. In both country cases, low worth is associated with shirking: avoiding contributing to the community of universal rights, whether committing tax fraud or being voluntarily unemployed.

Secondly, universalism is justified as rational and efficient to society. While having beneficial effects at the individual level, such as living without fear, the true benefits of universalism obtains at the society level. Universalism is a rational means for achieving efficiency, suspending the individual pursuit of personal interest which disrupts societal efficiency. In the Danish case, universalism is justified as contributing to productivity and the national competitive advantage keeping the workforce healthy and well-educated. The reverse form of this is wastefulness, in which people critique non-universal models as not being able to realise the full productive potential of the population. In the Swedish case, in contrast, universalism is ascribed high worth as progressive by increasing public participation in society and democracy. The associated form of low worth is exclusion, barring people and groups from social participation and thus failing to realise the emancipatory and democratic potential of universalism. The Danish emphasis of productivity suggests a settlement between industrial and market standards of worth rather than the inclusive, democratic notions connected to the civic standard of worth as in the Swedish case.

Finally, justifications of universalism as equitable access to rights and resources ascribe high worth to the equitable treatment of each individual. Universalism prevents market inequalities from creating inequities in other parts of life or for the following generations. In both countries, this justification predominantly concerns the underprivileged, who are otherwise barred from social rights and treated inequitably. The Swedes also apply this form to elites and upper class privileges thought to be curtailed by universal welfare institutions. This justification connects to the Social Democratic trajectory of the Scandinavian welfare states: it is by taking away the privileges of the rich and powerful and binding their interests to those of the working class that an equitable society can be achieved. In the Danish case, the adoption of universal welfare policies is ascribed high worth by substituting the market with a meritocracy in granting rights and opportunities. Universalism thus allocates resources on fair standards of evaluation, rather than preferential treatment or socio-economic advantages. These justifications connect to the equity, rather than the equality, aspects of the civic order of worth in a critique of the market order of worth. Esping-Andersen’s (1985) claim of ‘politics against markets’ seems, in particular, a pertinent description of the Swedish case. The Danish case, somewhat paradoxically, ascribes high worth both to civic equity in hindering market inequality and to the fair market competition which obtains due to welfare universalism, producing a compromise between market and civic notions of worth.

This study shows that principles of generalised reciprocity are highly valued and dominant in both Sweden and Denmark, as predicted by Mau (2003). However, the study also confirms Knudsen and Rothstein’s claim that Denmark conforms to a more liberal tradition while Sweden appears as the more full-flung statist, institutional model of welfare. Justifications of universalism are hybrids combining generalised reciprocity with different, secondary standards of worth in Sweden and Denmark – the first drawing more on substantive equality, anti-elitism, and emancipatory ambitions, the latter on principles of meritocracy, global competitiveness, and risk pooling. The Swedish case supports Boltanski and Thevenot’s claim that welfare states are a compromise between the civic order and the industrial order emphasising rights and equality on one side and efficiency and order on the other. The Danish case, however, heavily emphasises the market order of worth in welfare universalism, producing a three-way hybrid between the civic order, the industrial order, and the market order. Compared to the Swedish case, this comes at the cost of the collective project: the Danes scarcely refer to the moral project of building and maintaining the welfare state or the purpose of participatory inclusion. In contrast, the more pure industrial and, in particular, civic model of valuation in the Swedish case appears to ignore questions of funding and reproduction of the welfare state – issues which are an important part of justifications of the universal welfare state as a rational investment made in Denmark.

The kind of strong ties of community obligation, which is so apparent in the interview data, usually comes at the price of a strong division between insiders and outsiders. Arguably, this can be seen in the increasing levels of welfare chauvinism in Denmark and, more recently, Sweden, even if this development is not particularly evident in the interviews. However, the strong emphasis on democracy and inclusion may account for the less culturalist type of nationalism characteristic to Sweden compared to the emphasis put on norms, language and culture in the Danish nationalist narrative. The road to inclusion in each country would seem to follow different paths: citizenship in Sweden and market participation in Denmark. Connecting to van Oorschot’s (2000) theory of welfare deservingness criteria, this study suggests that Danes emphasise identity in the form of proximity whereas Swedes emphasise identity in the form of citizenship. However, the strong Danish emphasis on contribution through market participation opens a door for joining the identity category, which is absent in the Swedish case.

The presented study shows some of the potential advantages of applying the framework of valuations and evaluations to the study of welfare attitudes and justifications of welfare institutions. First, the analysis demonstrates that similar institutional arrangements can, indeed, be justified in different ways, drawing on different cultural yard sticks of worth. This indicates three potentially interesting avenues of investigation. First, similar analyses of welfare states from within the same regime type may reveal important differences invisible to survey methodology. Secondly, welfare states built on markedly different institutional structures may, conceivably, be based on the same notions of worth, but are applied in different ways. For instance, we might investigate whether the Scandinavian notion of collective obligation is in fact similar to the US notion of community obligation. Thirdly, many of the control and context variables used in quantitative analyses of welfare attitudes may successfully be investigated using this approach. The importance of Protestantism versus Catholicism to European welfare attitudes may be investigated within and between countries using this type of qualitative methodology, giving us a better understanding of the valuations that produce quantitative differences.

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**Appendix 1: Interviews coded at each form of justification, in per cent\***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Denmark | Sweden |
| Collective Obligation |  |  |
| *Generalised Reciprocity* | 74 | 97 |
| *Risk Reciprocity* | 52 | 15 |
| *Trygghet* | 4 | 59 |
| Rational |  |  |
| *Efficiency* | 74 | 89 |
| *Productivity* | 43 | 10 |
| *Progressiveness* | 7 | 72 |
| Equitable Access |  |  |
| *Downwards Equality* | 74 | 98 |
| *Meritocracy* | 63 | 20 |
| *Upwards Equality* | 2 | 59 |
| N= | 54 | 61 |

\*The table is presented in per cent to make countries comparable despite differences in number of participants. The table includes information on whether a specific form of justification of universalism appeared in the interview, but not the number of times it appeared which varies considerably between interviews.

Table1 Three justifications for universal welfare, Country characteristics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Justifications of Scandinavian Universalism | | | |
| Valuations | Collective obligation | Rational | Equitable access |
| Denmark |  |  |  |
| *Form of high worth* | Contribution and risk pooling | Efficiency and  Productivity | Downwards equality and Meritocracy |
| *Form of low worth* | Shirking and non-membership | Disruption and wastefulness | Social-economic exclusion and Bias |
| *Order of worth* | Civic and Market | Industrial and Market | Civic and Market |
| Sweden |  |  |  |
| *Form of high worth* | Contribution and ’Trygghet’ | Efficiency and progressiveness | Upwards equality and Downwards equality |
| *Form of low worth* | Shirking and non-membership | Disruption and participatory exclusion | Socio-economic exclusion and Privilege |
| *Order of worth* | Civic | Industrial and Civic | Civic |