

Stream #27

Who Deserves Support? Deservingness, Poverty, and Activation in Contemporary Welfare States

Conveners:

- Gianluca Busilacchi, University of Macerata
- Femke Roosma, Tilburg University

Over the past decade, the notion of welfare deservingness – who deserves what, and on what grounds – has taken on a growing centrality in both political debate and scholarly inquiry. This renewed attention unfolds within a broader transformation of welfare states, shaped by long-standing fiscal pressures, rapid and uneven social transformations, and the expanding influence of neoliberal ideas. In a context where public budgets are increasingly constrained, while new social risks proliferate, welfare systems are compelled to recalibrate both aims and instruments. As the balance shifts from public responsibility for universal social protection toward a stronger emphasis on individual responsibility for managing social risks, conditionality and targeting have become more prominent features of welfare design. Across countries, institutional arrangements and public attitudes toward beneficiaries differ, yet together they contribute to defining who is perceived as deserving of support (Van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). Despite national variation, converging trends are increasingly visible throughout Europe.

In particular, welfare programmes addressing people in poverty and/or out of work have become increasingly anchored in behavioural requirements, and eligibility criteria have tightened over recent decades (Clasen & Clegg, 2007; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). These developments signal a departure from welfare models primarily focused on insuring against social risks, toward one where welfare acts as a mechanism for shaping and correcting behaviour (Rodger, 2008). Mandatory participation in work activation schemes, for instance, is often justified as a means of distinguishing the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor.

This stronger reliance on deservingness thinking, exemplified in these social policies and politics, restricts access to social benefits and therefore threatens to undermine universal social rights for all European citizens.

In this session, we are interested in what deservingness criteria are, on the one hand, perceived by citizens across countries with regard to social policies

addressing people in poverty and/or out of work, and on the other hand, interpreted and translated by the state when designing these kinds of policies. Papers in this session could speak to both sides of the coin for this policy field: how deservingness criteria shape policy design, and how deservingness is perceived by citizens, including the kinds of reactions it may generate (e.g. stigmatization).

We welcome a variety of contributions from different disciplines (sociology, political science, economics, law, etc.) and employing diverse methodologies to examine welfare deservingness in relation to social policies for people in poverty and / or out of work, addressing these issues at both theoretical and empirical levels.