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# Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public

*Wim van Oorschot*

## English

With the recent reconstruction of welfare states the social protection of citizens has become more conditional and selective – the basic welfare question of ‘who should get what, and why’ has come to the fore again. To understand the societal legitimation for the new conditionality of welfare it is important to know which deservingness criteria are acknowledged by the public and their relative importance; whether people differ in the degree to which their solidarity with others is conditional, and which groups in society tend to be most or least conditional in their views; and factors that might explain differences in people’s views. Conclusions are drawn through the analysis of existing literature and a public opinion survey carried out in The Netherlands in 1995. The survey responses reveal some clear deservingness criteria and differences in conditionality, which can be linked to three different sets of explanatory variables: socioeconomic and demographic characteristics; opinions on and perceptions of social security and the welfare state; and basic values and attitudes.

## Français

Lors de la récente reconstruction des états providence, la protection sociale des citoyens est devenue plus conditionnelle et sélective, et la question essentielle s'impose: “Qui a droit à quoi, et pourquoi?” Pour comprendre la justification sociale des nouvelles conditions de couverture sociale, il est important de savoir quels sont les critères de mérite validés par le public, ainsi que leur importance relative ; si les individus varient en fonction du degré de leur solidarité les uns avec les autres, quels groupes sociaux ont tendance à être les plus ou moins conditionnels, et quels sont les facteurs qui pourraient expliquer ces différences. Des conclusions ont été tirées d'une analyse de la documentation disponible et d'un sondage auprès du public effectué aux Pays-Bas en 1995. Les réponses à ce sondage révèlent des critères de mérite bien définis et des différences dans la ‘conditionnalité’ des individus, pouvant être liées à trois ensembles de variables: les caractéristiques socio-économiques et démographiques; les opinions et les perceptions au sujet de la couverture sociale et de l'état providence; et les valeurs et les attitudes fondamentales des individus.

## Español

Con la reciente reconstitución de los estados de bienestar, la protección social de los ciudadanos se ha vuelto más selectiva y sujeta a más condicionamientos – las preguntas características del estado social, es decir, quién debe recibir ayuda, qué es lo que debe recibir y porqué, han empezado a discutirse de nuevo. Para comprender la legitimidad social de las nuevas condiciones de las que depende la recepción de ayudas, es importante conocer cuáles son los criterios de merecimiento aceptados por los ciudadanos y su importancia correspondiente; si la gente difiere en el grado de condicionalidad, cuáles son los grupos sociales que tienden a establecer más o menos condiciones y los factores que explican las diferencias de opiniones entre la población. Las conclusiones se han obtenido a partir del análisis de estudios ya existentes y de una encuesta entre la población de los Países Bajos realizada en 1995. Los resultados de la encuesta ponen de manifiesto la existencia de algunos criterios claros de selección de beneficiarios y revelan diferencias en cuanto a las condiciones mencionadas para la recepción de ayuda. Las respuestas obtenidas dependen de tres tipos distintos de variables: las características socioeconómicas y demográficas; las opiniones acerca de la seguridad social y del estado de bienestar; y los valores y actitudes elementales.

**Key words:** solidarity • welfare • deservingness • public opinion

## Introduction

Welfare states are under reconstruction everywhere. In Western industrialised countries rethinking flowed from the economic and fiscal crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which led to demands for cutbacks in social expenditures. In Eastern European countries it came about as a result of political transformation, which required the redesign of social policies and institutions. A number of recent comparative welfare state studies show that national reconstruction processes share some common tendencies (see George and Taylor-Gooby, 1996; Ploug and Kvist, 1996; Daly, 1997). In many countries access to universal protection schemes has been limited; solidarity ties in social insurance schemes between good and bad risks and higher and lower incomes have been reduced; the role of means-testing has increased; welfare to work strategies have been implemented; and citizens' individual responsibilities have been stressed more explicitly. With these measures the collectively organised social protection of citizens has become less universal, more selective and conditional in many European countries. This new conditionality shows that nowadays, well after the fiscal crisis of the 1980s, policy makers are more preoccupied with the problem of the rationing of welfare than with the problem of getting it funded. It also indicates that their answer to the crucial welfare question of 'who should get what, and why' has changed drastically. For needy citizens it is no longer so easy to achieve the status of 'deserving of support', as it was in the West during the prosperous 1970s or in the East under socialist ideology.

While the policy trend of an increasing conditional and selective rationing of welfare is clear there seems to be a paradox with regard to its societal legitimacy. On the one hand it looks as if the public at large agrees with it, since the reconstruction measures generally do not seem to have met with open and strong societal resistance. Experts do warn against certain measures, interest groups raise their voice from time to time, but nowhere in Europe does the process of reconstruction lead to overt and fierce social conflict. On the other hand, however, there is the fact that in opinion surveys the European public repeatedly expresses its general preference for

collective and solidaristic welfare state arrangements (see Ferrera, 1993; Pettersen, 1995; Ploug, 1996; Van Oorschot et al, 1996; Abrahamson, 1997). Whether the new conditionality has a societally legitimate base or not, and on what values, attitudes and perceptions it is precisely grounded, is a crucial question if we are to understand its further development and viability. It is therefore a central question with regard to what the future character of our welfare states might be. An answer to this question would require detailed information on the public's opinions on specific conditional and selective welfare policies – information which is not available. Existing international comparative surveys, like the International Social Justice Project, the European and World Values Surveys, the International Social Survey Programme and the Eurobarometer surveys, do address relevant welfare state values and opinions, but at too general and superficial a level. Therefore, information on the criteria and conditions the public at large applies to the rationing of welfare would be very helpful to contribute to an understanding of the legitimacy of the new conditionality and selectivity.

More generally, knowledge of popular deservingness criteria, or the public's answer to 'who should get what, and why?', would help policy makers to predict the likely legitimacy of any change in social arrangements. For instance, if a majority of citizens were of the opinion that support in cash or care for people in need should depend on the extent to which they were to blame for their situation, cutbacks on benefits for widow(er)s would get less support than cutbacks on benefits for divorced people, and tightening access to work injury schemes would be less legitimate than tightening access to disability schemes in general. Interest groups might also profit from information about popular deservingness criteria, because it could help them choose the most appealing arguments for their case. Again, if the principle of control or blame is important among the public, single parents on social assistance could promote their interests by arguing that single parenthood is not really a deliberate choice.

From a sociological point of view, insight into prevailing deservingness criteria is interesting because it helps us to understand the character

and intensity of solidarity patterns between societal groups. It allows us not only to analyse what principles and norms people deem important when thinking about a just distribution of life chances in society, but also how strictly and strongly they tend to apply such principles and norms when it comes to helping those in need. There might be ‘selectivists’ and ‘universalists’, or ‘conditional’ and ‘unconditional’ solidarists, i.e. people who tend to apply a number of norms quite strictly and people who do not or to a lesser degree.

So, questions relevant to the legitimacy of welfare rationing are:

1. Which deservingness criteria are acknowledged by the public and what is their relative importance?
2. Do people differ in the degree to which their solidarity with others is conditional, and which groups in society tend to be most or least conditional in their views?
3. What factors might explain differences in people’s conditional views on support for the needy?

To answer these questions the article presents a brief overview of existing research, deduces a number of deservingness criteria from it, and tests their empirical validity against data from a public opinion survey carried out in The Netherlands in 1995. In it people were asked, among other things, what level of collective financial protection they would prefer for a number of specified groups in society. Their answers reveal some clear deservingness criteria and differences in conditionality.

## Deservingness criteria

Early poor laws, like the British Poor Law of 1834 or the Dutch *Armenwet* of 1854, often implicitly or explicitly distinguished between those categories of poor people who were seen to be deserving of relief – aged, sick and infirm people, children, in short ‘impotent poor’ – and those who were regarded as undeserving – unemployed people, idle paupers, those capable of work (see Golding and Middleton, 1981; Katz, 1989). These distinctions still persist among the public at large, as was found by Coughlin (1980) and

Pettersen (1995) in their international comparative studies of opinion surveys on welfare state issues. Coughlin’s conclusion that there was “a universal dimension of support” is corroborated by Pettersen. In modern, Western welfare states the public is most in favour of support for old people, followed by support for the sick and disabled, needy families with children and unemployed, while they least support people on social assistance. What interests us here is what lies beyond this dimension, ie what are the exact criteria of deservingness which underlie such categories and their relative order. Despite its relevance, detailed knowledge of popular deservingness criteria is lacking. Literature that goes beyond mentioning deserving and undeserving types and categories of poor people is scant, though not totally absent.

For instance, in his historical study on the development of modern welfare states, De Swaan (1988) describes three criteria which he found to have been present in almost all classifications of the deserving versus the undeserving poor: disability, proximity and docility. Disability refers to the incapacity to make a living through one’s own efforts. According to this criterion, the undeserving are those people who could make a living on their own, if they only tried hard enough, ie people who have a certain control over their neediness. The deserving are those poor who lack such control. Of these three criteria de Swaan sees disability as the most important, since throughout the history of poor relief it has functioned as a necessary, though not always sufficient, condition.

The second criterion of proximity defines a social area of accountability. The deserving are those incapable poor who are in this area; the undeserving or the responsibility of others are those outside this area. According to De Swaan, the boundaries of the area may be defined by kinship relations, by place of residence, or more generally, by the boundaries of a certain identity-group, like ‘our family’, ‘our town’, ‘our church’, ‘our people’. According to this general principle of in-group preference (Messé et al, 1986), the deserving are those poor people who belong to ‘us’. In modern societies this criterion might result in an unwillingness to support needy people from ethnic minorities or foreign residents in general.

De Swaan's third criterion of docility refers to the degree of passivity with which the poor address the redistribution of life chances. The decent and embarrassed poor who hide their misery and ask for nothing are seen as deserving, while the undeserving are those needy who are seen to make impudent demands. The persistence of this type of norm was shown, for instance, by Knegt (1987) who observed how municipal social service officers in the Netherlands had developed an informal code, implying that compliant clients were treated more generously than demanding clients.

In her survey of American views on supporting the poor, Cook (1979) explicitly studied which characteristics of poor people influenced the preferences people had about the levels of support which should be provided. The deservingness criteria she found were level of need, locus of responsibility, gratefulness and pleasantness. The level-of-need criterion simply means that people are willing to offer more support for those in greater need. Apart from level of need, locus of responsibility was the most important criterion. Support was generally higher for cases in which being in a needy situation was seen as beyond the control of the individual or household involved. Without the possibility of control, people cannot be held responsible and thus are seen as deserving. This criterion corresponds with De Swaan's disability criterion. The gratefulness criterion indicates that the inclination to support is higher towards those people in need who respond gratefully to help. This corresponds closely to De Swaan's criterion of docility. Both authors link this criterion to what seems to be a deeper criterion of reciprocity. Given the basic tendency of people to value reciprocity in social relations of giving and taking (Komter, 1996), and given the fact that the poor have little to offer, people are sensitive to reciprocal substitutes. Examples of these are the smile of thanks, compliance and gratefulness, but also, in a modern context, actively looking for a job, or willingness to participate in a re-insertion programme. This reciprocity norm can easily be extended to situations in which the needy, not being able to reciprocate at the time, have earned support in earlier times. The norm would then imply higher support for older people than for younger people, since the first have already con-

tributed to society during their active years. The norm would also support higher benefits for the unemployed who paid higher amounts of contributions from their previous earnings. Cook's pleasantness criterion, derived from psychological experiments, holds that people we like and with whom we feel comfortable, usually get more help. From a sociological perspective, this criterion might suggest that the willingness to support is higher in cases where the needy belong to 'us', which would correspond with De Swaan's criterion of proximity.

Will's empirical study of public perceptions of the deserving poor in America shows that respondents clearly discriminated between factors and conditions faced by the poor in determining the levels of support poor families deserved (Will, 1993). The dominant criterion he found was the degree to which the problems facing poor families were beyond the immediate control of the individual family. The characteristics which elicited the highest levels of generosity were large family composition, unemployment and physical disability. In addition, respondents indicated much more support for those persons who, despite hardship, were still actively working to help themselves get out of their difficulties.

Thus, the evidence on deservingness criteria suggests the following five dimensions:

1. *control*: poor people's control over their neediness, or their responsibility for it: the less control, the more deserving;
2. *need*: the greater the level of need, the more deserving;
3. *identity*: the identity of the poor, ie their proximity to the rich or their 'pleasantness'; the closer to 'us', the more deserving;
4. *attitude*: poor people's attitude towards support, or their docility or gratefulness: the more compliant, the more deserving;
5. *reciprocity*: the degree of reciprocation by the poor, or having earned support: the more reciprocation, the more deserving<sup>1</sup>.

From these criteria we can understand what underlies people's preferences for supporting specific groups. For instance, we can understand why, as Coughlin and Pettersen found, the public generally favours support for elderly people more than support for the unemployed. Reach-

ing pensionable age, and getting older, is not something people have much control over, while there is always doubt whether unemployment is a result of people's own passivity. Such doubt seems to be stronger in Anglo-Saxon individual-oriented countries like the UK, the US and Australia than in collectivity-oriented continental European countries (Feather, 1974; Feagin, 1975; EC, 1977). Elderly people generally will be seen more as belonging to 'us'. They are closer to the rich than the unemployed because we all have bonds with them (they are our parents) and we all have a good chance of belonging to this category in the future. As for their attitudes towards support, elderly people are known to be undemanding, grateful and not rebellious, while situations in which the unemployed aggressively demand their rights in social service offices are highlighted in the media. (The unemployed man in Tilburg who crashed into the social services' front door with his Jaguar after having been denied a one-off payment received nationwide attention in The Netherlands.) Finally, in the public's eye, elderly people will be seen as having earned their right to be supported because of all the years of their active life in which they contributed to society, while the unemployed, especially the young among them, still have to prove their worth to society. In short, support for elderly people will generally be higher because the group 'scores higher' on all the criteria, with the possible exception of the level of need criterion, although even there, elderly people tend to have higher health-related needs.

The deservingness criteria are taken as a starting point for our empirical analysis. Given the universal character of the distinctions between deserving and undeserving categories of the poor, not only between countries as shown by Coughlin, but apparently also over time as De Swaan suggests, it can be safely assumed that the significance of our analyses extends to the Dutch situation.

## Method

### Data

The data are from the TISSER-Solidarity study, a national representative survey (N=1500) of the Dutch public of age 16 years and older, carried

out in the autumn of 1995. The survey was specifically designed to measure people's opinions, perceptions and attitudes regarding the welfare state in general, and the system of social security in particular. In relation to social security, questions were also put about re-insertion policies, the division of paid and unpaid work, and the rights and duties of unemployed people (see Van Oorschot, 1998 for a summary of the survey's full results).

### Instruments

#### *Deservingness criteria*

The data enabled us to operationalise the criteria of control, need, identity and reciprocity. No items were available for the attitude criterion. The basis for the operationalisation is the following survey question put in the TISSER-solidarity study: 'If we cut back on benefits, the question of who has a greater or lesser right to financial support from society will become more important. We will mention a number of groups. Would you like to say to what degree each group, on a scale from 1 (no right at all) to 10 (complete right), should have a right to financial support from society?'. A total of 29 different groups were put to the respondents (see Appendix A for the groups and the average scores). The central idea of the analysis is that whether a specific deservingness criterion plays a role in people's opinions on the right to financial support is revealed by people's preferences regarding contrasting groups. If groups who on average contrast with each other on the criterion have the same score on the 1 to 10 generosity scale, the criterion then appears not to play any role. If, however, the average scores differ greatly, the criterion is clearly important in determining the levels of support and solidarity. On the basis of this reasoning we operationalised the different deservingness criteria by assigning contrasting groups to them from the 29 available. The results can be seen in Table 1. The identity criterion is operationalised in a very specific way in the sense that it is limited to ethnically based identities: 'foreigners' versus the overall average, indicating 'Dutch people in general'. This is due to the fact that no other identity indicators were available. In itself this limitation is not a serious shortcoming, since in modern wel-

fare states it is mainly the national, rather than the local, religious, age group or professional group identity which forms the cultural legitimisation basis for collective, redistributive welfare arrangements (Offe, 1988). The averages for groups suggested that there might be another criterion, which we could call 'social risk'. It showed that groups of people who are apparently confronted with one of the broadly acknowledged social risks all have above average scores: sick people, disabled people, pensioners and widow(er)s. We have contrasted their scores with those of the 'social assistance beneficiaries', a group which in most social security systems functions as a residual category for people whose neediness cannot be attributed to one of the defined social risks. The social risk criterion thus holds that support will generally be higher for people whose neediness is due to having been confronted with one of the acknowledged modern social risks, than for people whose neediness cannot be clearly attributed to one of these risks.

### *Explanatory variables*

While empirical research on deservingness criteria is scant, explanatory models of factors influencing whether and to what degree criteria are applied by the public simply do not exist. Rather than developing such a model, as we think that comparative material is not available, we would like to offer an exploratory view on which factors might be involved. From our data three distinct sets of relevant variables (presented in Appendix B) were identified. A distinction is made between personal characteristics, opinions and perceptions regarding the social security system, and general values and attitudes.

## **Results**

### ***Which deservingness criteria are present and what is their relative importance?***

This question can be addressed by using the information contained in Table 1, which shows the differences in average scores on the 1 to 10 scale for the pairs of contrasting groups.

Since the differences between averages are all significant, an initial conclusion is that the Dutch

public does differentiate between all of the contrasting groups involved. The difference between some contrast groups is relatively large. For instance, the public is very generous towards those who are not able to work (this group has an average of 7.6 on the 1 to 10 scale), and very reserved towards those who are not willing to work (an average score of only 2.3). This large difference of 5.3 points indicates that the issue of whether needy people are not able or not willing to work is an important criterion for the Dutch public in deciding about the degree to which the needy have a right to financial support from society. But there are also smaller differences between other contrasting groups, such as between people with a low and a high educational level.

That all differences between contrasting groups are significant implies that all the criteria play a role in people's preferences for financial support towards the needy. In line with Cook's and Will's empirical findings in the US, discussed earlier, the most important of these criteria is control, since the average difference of 3.6 over the three constituting contrasts is the largest compared with the other four criteria. The second important criterion is identity, with an average difference of 2.27, and the third is reciprocity, with an average difference of 1.85. Less important criteria are the level of need (average of 1.31) and whether neediness is the result of having been confronted with a social risk (average of 1.35). So, the most important questions the Dutch public would ask when confronted with somebody who requests their support are: 'Why are you needy?', 'Are you one of us?' and 'What have you done, or can you do, for us?'

Whether they would always start with the same question and successively pose the others, in other words, whether there is a conditional hierarchy among the five criteria and what specific order it takes, cannot be deduced from our data. As we have seen, De Swaan suggests such a hierarchy when stating that his criterion of 'disability' is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for people to support the poor. Although our data do not allow us to test this suggestion, the fact that the control criterion is the most important one does not contradict it.

With the results thus far one could predict for specific categories of needy people whether their

**Table 1: Differences between the average scores on the 1 to 10 generosity scale for contrasting groups**

	Differences between average scores*	Average difference over contrasts
<b>Control</b>		3.60
Not able to work – not willing to work	5.30	
Disabled as a result of work – disabled as a result of own behaviour	3.50	
Weak health – strong health	2.00	
<b>Reciprocity</b>		1.85
Pensioners – young people	2.00	
Extended work history – short work history	1.70	
<b>Need</b>		1.31
Jobless people – people with a job	2.30	
Single income – double income	1.90	
Families with children – families without children	1.50	
Beneficiaries with children – beneficiaries without children	0.90	
Low education – high education	0.90	
<b>Social risk</b>		1.35
Sick people – social assistance	2.10	
Disabled people – social assistance	1.70	
Pensioners – social assistance	1.30	
Widow(er)s – social assistance	1.10	
<b>Identity</b>		2.27
Average – ethnic minority groups	1.20	
Average – asylum seekers	1.90	
Average – illegal foreigners	3.70	

Note: \* all differences significant at the 5% level: the average score for each separate group is shown in van Oorschot, 1998.

request for help would be welcomed or rejected. There is of course a variety of types of needy groups, but the extremes can be sketched. On the welcoming side, there is the picture of a person who, beyond his/her own control and responsibility, and as a result of being confronted with a known social risk, is unable to satisfy the need by him/herself, who has previously contributed to the interests of the group from which he/she is asking for help, or who is able and willing to comply with possible requirements related to the support to be provided, whose needs are high and who shares the identity of the potential helpers. A sick or disabled pensioner, with seri-

ous needs due to his/her health problems, who has lived and worked all his/her life among the group whose help s/he now needs would come close to this extreme.

On the rejection side the picture is that of a needy person who is able but not really willing to get him/herself out of trouble, who has not contributed a great deal to the collectivity he or she is now begging for help, whose neediness is not that serious and who has an identity different from that of the potential helpers. Close to this extreme would come a young, single foreigner, who has just moved into the country and prefers living on benefit to doing paid work.



**Conditionality of solidarity: selectivism and universalism**

Further analyses revealed that there are positive correlations between applying the distinctive criteria (Table 2). This indicates that there are ‘selectivists’ and ‘universalists’ among the public. That is, there are some groups of citizens who tend to apply more, or even all, of the criteria and other groups of citizens who apply fewer of the criteria, or none at all.

**Table 2: Bivariate Pearson correlations between scores on deservingness criteria (p < 0.000)**

	Reciprocity	Need	Social risk	Identity
Control	0.32	0.43	0.25	0.28
Reciprocity		0.11	0.30	0.33
Need			0.24	not sign.
Social risk				0.22

Who are these selectivists and universalists? Which groups in society tend to be more conditional in their views than other groups? And, what other welfare opinions and values relate to conditionality? To address these questions we constructed a measure of the degree of conditionality by adding respondents’ scores on the various criteria. People with high scores on this conditionality scale (alpha reliability of 0.73) are more conditional in their views, while people with low scores are more unconditional. Table 3 shows the results of a linear regression analysis of the three sets of explanatory variables on this scale.

*Personal characteristics*

On examining the results regarding the set of personal characteristics, we see that conditionality is higher among older people, people with a lower educational level and a lower socioeconomic status (indicated by educational level and job level), and among voters on parties of the religious right, which in The Netherlands are mainly orthodox Protestants. By way of contrast, selectivity is less favoured by young people, those with a higher level of education and a high-

er socioeconomic status who do not vote for the religious right. We can understand these findings when we realise that the more educated, younger people with better jobs are not the citizens with the greatest likelihood of becoming needy. As such they have little to gain from a highly selective and conditional welfare system. Our interpretation therefore is that such better-off people imagine that they will only gain from a more universal, less conditional system in which social welfare policies are not restricted only to those who meet stringent criteria of deservingness. Older, low-skilled persons in lower level jobs, on the other hand, are in a more risky position, and might well prefer conditionality in order to prevent the social protection they might need in future being available to people who do not really need it. However, there could be an alternative explanation. Golding and Middleton (1982) found that those who were socioeconomically closest to beneficiaries and the poor had the strongest negative beliefs and feelings about these groups. Their explanation, that such people regard the poor as direct competitors for their own economic and cultural life chances and therefore develop strong negative feelings about them, would also suggest that the older, low-skilled worker would indeed be less sympathetic towards supporting needy groups.

*Class variables*

We also conclude from Table 3 that ‘social division’ or ‘class’ variables like income level and whether one is working or on benefit do not play a role in the conditionality of solidarity. We would also stress that other variables, such as educational level and socioeconomic status, have only a small influence. It is interesting that these results are common across a range of studies of welfare state opinions. In the TISSER-Solidarity study we found little or no influence of ‘class’ variables on other dependent variables, such as the types of motives people have for supporting collective welfare arrangements (such as self-interest, moral duty, fellow feeling or accepted authority; van Oorschot, 1997b), or the level of support itself (van Oorschot, 1997a). Ploug found in his data on a variety of Danish opinions on the welfare state that “... there was very little variation in the answers given by different age and

**Table 3: Factors influencing the application of deservingness criteria\* (standardized linear regression coefficients with sig T < 0.05, method = stepwise)**

			Conditionality
<i>Personal characteristics</i>			
Gender	male	female	
Age	young	old	0.21
Education	low	high	-0.10
Income	low	high	
Socioeconomic status	high	low	0.10
Participation			
employed			
on benefit			
pensioners			
no work, no benefit			
Political preference			
Christian democrats			
social democrats			
conservative liberals			
strong Left			
religious Right			0.07
progressive liberals			
other			
<i>Opinions and perceptions</i>			
Individual effects of social security	negative	positive	
Moral effects of social security	negative	positive	-0.10
Social effects of social security	negative	positive	
Economic effects of social security	negative	positive	
Misuse of social security	low	high	0.11
Self-interest in social security	disadvantageous	advantageous	
Level of benefits	lower	higher	-0.12
<i>Values and attitudes</i>			
Interest orientation	self	others	
Work ethic	low	high	
Equality ethic	low	high	
Overall support	low	high	-0.16
Proportion of explained variance(R <sup>2</sup> )			20%

Note: \* A linear regression on the set of personal characteristics separately yielded the same coefficients as regards their significance, direction and relative order, and showed a proportion of explained variance (R<sup>2</sup>) of 11%. The sets of opinions and values significantly add another 9% to the explanation of differences in conditionality.

socioeconomic groups” (1996: 6). Taylor-Goo-  
by (1983) found that social division variables did  
not influence opinions on welfare spending in  
Britain. Aguilar and Gustafsson (1988) did not  
find a relationship between socioeconomic back-  
ground variables and Swedish opinions about  
social assistance levels. In all these examples  
opinions and attitudes have been analysed, and

it may therefore be, as Ploug suggests, that the  
lack of correlation between class variables and  
welfare state opinions is due to the fact that opin-  
ion data are less robust and more vulnerable to  
‘politically correct answering’ than behaviour  
data. However, we tend to believe that a socio-  
logical explanation of the phenomenon is  
possible, in addition to the methodological one

suggested by Ploug (1996). Such an explanation bears on the possibility that people's opinions, values and ideologies have become more fragmented and less strictly tied to clearly delineated societal groups or classes, as a result of the different aspects of the ongoing processes of individualisation and societal differentiation (Beck et al, 1994, Harvey, 1989/1990). The process of individualisation not only implies that people increasingly make their personal choices from the plurality of cultural, religious and ideological values and norms that are present in postmodern societies, but also that people move more freely through society and its constituent groups. As a result of an ongoing differentiation of social structure, these groups themselves have become more obscure and less well marked. In other words, in an individualistic, pluralistic and differentiated society one would not expect opinions and attitudes to correlate strongly with objective group or class boundaries. On the contrary, one would expect them to be fragmented over classes and groups, which was what was in effect found in the longitudinal European Values Survey (De Moor, 1995).

That there is no difference in conditionality between workers and people on benefit may also be explained structurally, by pointing to the dynamics of belonging to each of the groups. Incorporating time in unemployment and poverty studies has shown that in many cases it is a mistake to assume that there are clear and permanent boundaries between poor and non-poor, employed or unemployed, working people or people on benefits. On the contrary, evidence repeatedly shows that over a period of years there is an enormous movement of people entering and leaving these groups (Walker, 1994; Leisering and Walker, 1998). If one assumes, which it is reasonable to do, that people do not change their opinions, perceptions, values and attitudes overnight, each time they change their position in society, then one would expect, just as we found, little or no differences between workers and people on benefit. If we furthermore assume that it is not only people's personal experiences as workers or as beneficiaries which influence their opinions, perceptions, attitudes and values regarding social security and the welfare state, but also those of the people who are near to them, such as household members and friends, then

there is an even broader base for understanding why there is little or no difference between the views of workers and beneficiaries.

### *Opinions and perceptions*

As for opinions and perceptions, we see that conditionality is more marked among those who believe strongly that social security support has negative effects on people's morality. These are people who believe that, as a result of social security support, people tend to get lazy, become less responsible, more egoistic and less willing to take care of each other, and divorce more readily. It seems that it is the possible negative moral effect upon the poor themselves which makes some people hesitate to support the needy, rather than any concern about the possible positive effects on the individual (who might enjoy a happier life and more opportunities to make something of it), the positive social effects (of a more stable and just society), or the possible negative economic effects (higher labour costs with higher unemployment). What these people seem to fear is a 'moral hazard' or a sort of 'moral poverty trap': by giving needy people financial support, their behaviour and attitudes change in a way which makes them even more dependent.

Conditionality is also higher among those who have less faith in the fair functioning of the system, who perceive a higher degree of benefit fraud. Although separate from the moral effects variable, this finding also suggests that a certain fear of or distrust in the moral standards of the poor plays a significant role in (some) people's readiness to support them. If true, it might explain why the control criterion is important, why support generally is higher if neediness is not seen as being the responsibility of the needy themselves. In these circumstances people can be more certain that they are not being cheated or deceived by the poor.

Furthermore, conditionality is higher among those who think benefit levels should be cut back to lower levels. Not only are these people of the opinion that benefits are too high and generous, but they also believe that access to them should depend on proof of deservingness.

## Values and attitudes

Table 3 shows for values and attitudes that the level of overall support influences conditionality. Those who are basically less supportive towards the needy tend to be more conditional. From such people, a person in need will not only tend to get less help, but the help will also be given less freely, ie only after a number of criteria are met. A second finding is that the other attitudes listed have no influence: whether people are primarily self-interested or interested in others, whether they have a high or a low work ethic, or favour income equality or not. Conditionality does not go along with, as we expected, a strong self-interest, a high work ethic and a low equality ethic. We derived such expectations from previous analyses of our data, in which the dependent variable was not people's preference for the rationing of welfare support, but whether they had altruistic reasons for contributing to welfare in the first place by paying social premiums and taxes, reasons based on identification with the needy and moral convictions (Van Oorschot, 1997b). From that analysis we saw that such altruism was stronger among those with a general other-directedness, those with a high equality ethic and those with a lower work ethic. These outcomes suggest that, for understanding citizens' support for welfare policies, it is important to distinguish between their support for what they are expected to offer as (financial) inputs to the system, and what they regard as just rules or criteria for redistributing the total sum of contributions. In fact, analysis showed that there is only a small Pearson correlation of -0.10 ( $p > 0.0001$ ) between willingness to pay for welfare and conditionality.

## Conclusions

Dutch people applied a number of deservingness criteria when asked to rate 29 different groups on a 1 to 10 financial support scale. The most important among these criteria are control, identity and reciprocity. That is, when confronted with somebody asking for their support the Dutch public is likely to ask first: 'Why are you needy?', 'Are you one of us?' and 'What have you done, or can you do, for us?'. That control was the strongest criterion among these three confirms

the results from American empirical studies, as well as the theoretical propositions of de Swaan in his study on the historical development of (state) social policy. Whether people in need can be blamed or can be held responsible for their neediness seems to be a general and central criterion for deservingness.

From the results it was also possible to understand the favourable position of elderly people compared to that of unemployed people on Coughlin's 'universal dimension of support'.

It showed that some members of the public apply certain of the different deservingness criteria more strongly. Such 'selectivists' have a more conditional solidarity with the needy than the 'universalists'. The selectivist tends to be an older person with a low level of education and a low-level job who votes for the religious right, and is also a person who believes that social security has a bad moral effect on people, who thinks that benefits are too high and widely misused, and who typically is not very generous. The universalist tends to be a younger, highly educated person with a good job who does not believe that social security support makes people more lazy or less caring or that people widely misuse the system, and who tends to have a more generous attitude.

The dynamics of exclusion (poverty and unemployment) and the fact that people are influenced by the position and experiences of those who are close to them, might explain why workers are not more conditional than people on benefit.

As in other studies, little or no correlation was found between social class variables and welfare state opinions. This might be explained by the fact that such opinions could be vulnerable to 'politically correct answering'. But it could also be explained by the fragmentation of opinions and values, as well as the fading away of rigid class boundaries, both of which are features of an individualising, pluralistic and differentiated postmodern society.

Finally, our findings indicate that people's preferences for the rationing of welfare are independent of the reasons why they are willing to pay for welfare. This suggests that welfare state solidarity is not a simple, unidimensional concept. At present, much of the empirical research on solidarity is dominated by an approach in

which solidarity is seen as the degree to which people are willing to pay for (various types of) social expenditure. To understand welfare state solidarity patterns, however, issues of motivation and preference for rationing rules are just as important, particularly when we realise that the current restructuring of welfare states seems to be more concerned with the way in which welfare is redistributed (more market-led, more selective), rather than with the degree to which it is paid for (Ferge, 1997).

Knowledge of deservingness criteria prevailing among the public can therefore add to our understanding of the legitimacy of the welfare state of the future and of the de facto solidarity links it produces among new generations, professional groups and social classes. Although this article offered a systematic empirical contribution to such knowledge, more comparative data, over time and place, will be necessary to complete the picture.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Piven and Cloward (1972) argued that welfare redistribution may function as a way of preventing social disorder, ie of 'regulating the poor' (see also Simmel, 1908). We recognise this 'fear of social disorder' as a possible motivation for the rationing of welfare, but do not regard it as a deservingness criterion as such. (Potentially) rebellious poor may be feared and therefore be given support, but they will hardly be seen as deserving.

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**Appendix A: Opinions on right to financial support for specified groups  
(Scale 1–10: 1= no right, 10=absolute right)**

<b>Right to financial support</b>	<b>Mean score</b>	<b>Deviation from score overall mean (5.6)</b>
People disabled as a result of their work	8.1	+2.5
Sick people	7.7	+2.1
People not able to work	7.6	+2.0
Disabled people	7.3	+1.7
People with poor health	7.0	+1.4
People with an extended work history	7.0	+1.4
Pensioners	6.9	+1.3
Single mothers on assistance	6.8	+1.2
Households with children	6.8	+1.2
Widow(er)s	6.7	+1.1
Heads of a family	6.2	+0.6
Jobless people	6.1	+0.5
People with low educational level	6.0	+0.4
Social assistance beneficiaries	5.9	+0.3
Single people	5.9	+0.3
Students (overall mean)	5.6	0.0
Households on a single income	5.4	-0.2
People with a short work history	5.3	-0.3
Households without children	5.3	-0.3
People with high educational level	5.1	-0.5
People with good health	5.0	-0.6
Young people	4.9	-0.7
Ethnic minority groups	4.7	-0.9
People disabled as a result of their own behaviour	4.6	-1.0
People with a job	3.8	-1.8
Asylum seekers	3.7	-1.9
Two-income households	3.5	-2.1
People who are not willing to work	2.3	-3.3
Illegal foreigners	1.9	-3.7

**Appendix B: Explanatory variables**

**Personal characteristics**

- Gender
- Age
- Educational level
- Income level
- Socioeconomic status (educational level x profession)
- Participation position (working, on benefit, not working and not on benefit, pensioners)
- Political preference (which party one would vote for if there were to be an election next week)

**Opinions and perceptions**

Individual effects of social security:  $\alpha=0.64, m=2.2, sd=0.55, range=1-3$

Opinion on the effects of social security on individuals: negative – positive

*The system of social security can have positive and negative effects. Do you think that the system has the following effects? Because of social security:*

(1=yes; 2=to some extent; 3=no)

- a. the life of many people is more pleasant and free
- b. the Dutch population at large is happier
- c. everybody gets a chance to make something of his or her life

Moral effects of social security:  $\alpha=0.67$ ,  $m=2.0$ ,  $sd=0.54$ ,  $range=1-5$

Opinion on the moral effects of the system of social security: negative – positive

The system of social security can have positive and negative effects. Do you think that the system has the following effects? Because of social security:

(1=very disadvantageous; 2=disadvantageous; 3=on balance; 4=advantageous; 5=very advantageous)

- a. people get lazy
  - b. people's sense of self-responsibility decreases
  - c. people get egoistic and calculating
  - d. people divorce too easily
  - e. people do not want to take care of each other any more
- 

Social effects of social security:  $\alpha=0.67$ ,  $m=2.2$ ,  $sd=0.55$ ,  $range=1-3$

Opinion on the effects of social security on society: negative – positive

The system of social security can have positive and negative effects. Do you think that the system has the following effects? Because of social security:

(1=yes; 2=to some extent; 3=no)

- a. societal unrest is prevented
  - b. large-scale poverty and misery is prevented
  - c. there is a more just distribution of life chances
- 

Economic effects of social security:  $\alpha=0.65$ ,  $m=2.0$ ,  $sd=0.55$ ,  $range=1-3$

Opinion on the economic effects of social security: negative – positive

The system of social security can have positive and negative effects. Do you think that the system has the following effects? Because of social security:

(1=yes; 2=to some extent; 3=no)

- a. Holland can compete less with other countries
  - b. labour costs are too high
  - c. unemployment increases
- 

Misuse of social security:  $\alpha=0.72$ ,  $m=2.4$ ,  $sd=0.48$ ,  $range=1-3$

How frequently do people misuse:

(1=never; 2=now and then; 3=often)

- a. disability benefit
  - b. sickness benefit
  - c. social assistance
  - d. unemployment benefit
- 

Self-interest in social security:  $\alpha=0.72$ ,  $m=2.9$ ,  $sd=0.85$ ,  $range=1-5$

Do you think that on balance social security is advantageous for you, or disadvantageous:

(1=very disadvantageous; 2=disadvantageous; 3=on balance; 4=advantageous; 5=very advantageous)

- a. at this moment of your life
  - b. over the whole of your life
- 

Level of benefits:  $\alpha=0.71$ ,  $m=3.0$ ,  $sd=0.54$ ,  $range=1-5$

Opinion on whether benefit levels should be decreased or increased

If it was up to you, would you increase or decrease the level of benefits, or would you keep them as they are now? Take note of the fact that an increase in benefit levels results in higher taxes and contributions, and that a decrease in benefit levels results in lower taxes and contributions.

(1=strongly decrease; 2=decrease; 3=no change; 4=increase; 5=strongly increase)

- a. unemployment benefit
  - b. social assistance
  - c. minimum benefits in general
-



### Values and attitudes

Interest orientation:  $\alpha=0.72$ ,  $m=2.3$ ,  $sd=0.49$ , range=1–5

Basic attitude in life: generally directed at ones own interests or at the interests of others

Answers to statements:

(1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree)

- a. solidarity is nonsense, everybody has to take care of himself
  - b. in life you have to follow your own plans not bothered by others
  - c. mostly I put my own interests first in stead of those of others
  - d. I enjoy it doing other people a pleasure
  - e. if I do something for someone else, I want something in return
  - f. I never think of the interests of other people
  - g. I easily get interested on behalf of other people
- 

Work ethic:  $\alpha=0.69$ ,  $m=3.6$ ,  $sd=0.74$ , range=1–5

Answers to statements:

(1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree)

- a. work is a duty towards society
  - b. you can do as you please after having done your duties
  - c. work has to come first always even if it means less free time
- 

Equality ethic:  $\alpha=0.62$ ,  $m=3.1$ ,  $sd=0.64$ , range=1–5

General attitude towards levelling of the income distribution

Answers to the questions:

- a. Do you regard the inequality between incomes in Holland at this moment to be very large–large–neither large nor small–small–very small?
  - b. Would you like have a larger–equal–smaller inequality between incomes?
  - c. Do you regard the inequality between benefits and incomes in Holland at this moment to be very large–large–neither large nor small–small–very small?
  - b. Would you like have a larger–equal–smaller inequality between benefits and incomes?
- 

Overall support:  $m=5.6$

People's general level of generosity towards people in need

Mean score over all specified groups on the 1 to 10 scale in Table 1

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