Group Project Report

TOPIC: DESERVINGNESS
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Background

From time to time, a window of opportunity opens, when new social reforms have a chance of coming up to public discussions and possibly being implemented. For the reforms to become a reality there are three things needed: 1. Right timing 2. Political power and 3. Public support that can be reached through successful framing of the issue. (Kangas. et al. 2014, 76). In this document, relating to the last requirement, we will be focusing the question of deservingness and earned entitlements. To be precise the questions we ask are: 1. how people see other's moral and the impact of universal income on other's actions and 2. how someone's own situation affects their views on basic income and if basic income, as a universal income within a country, is as something that is deserved by everyone. However, before diving down to those questions, we start with the concept of framing, contextualisation and importance of them.

Framing

When people are asked their opinion, framing of the question matters (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Any question, especially one related to social reforms, has many sides to look at it from. When you ask a question and present it through a specific chosen frame, you will affect the answers. Opinions change easily based on how the question is asked and contextualisation is important especially when people don't already have information or opinions about the area (Kangas et al. 2014, 78). When framing a question, context matters more than information (van Gorp, 2007). Abstract frames appealing to moral sentiment, the question of wrong and right, are more effective than adding information. Added information can even lead to more uncertainty and caution in answers. Therefore Kangas et al. suggest that if politicians with their views on a subject want to appeal to people, they should try to simplify the frame and appeal to moral questions of right and wrong. (Kangas et al. 2014, 76, 78). It is to be noted, that while framing can be used to introduce a new point of view, it is not something that would work only for the benefit of the person who wants to appeal to people. People have also their existing frames and beliefs that they have learned before. These can be difficult or impossible to completely override. At best, it is possible to introduce competing or supporting frames.
Deservingness

Deservingness is an important frame that comes up in discussions about basic income. What makes this an interesting question is that people often presume others' actions and their own actions and reactions might differ. This question is also something that isn't dependant only on framing given by the one asking questions, but also by the situation in a person's own life. An example can be found from the research done by van Oorschot (2000) in the Netherlands in 1995 in which the so called better-off people were more in favor of a universal than a selective welfare state. These educated better-off people don't see themselves as gaining much from very selective and conditional welfare systems as they themselves aren't likely to meet these criteria. Then again previous research brings up that many poor actually see other poor as direct competitors for their benefits, suggesting that some of the most poor would also be in favor more of a universal than selective model. (van Oorschot 2000, 40).

Fear of laziness

Wim van Oorschot (2000, 34) writes about the changing role of welfare states and the social protection of citizens in many European countries, as they have become more conditional and selective. Universal has changed into something different and the poor are being categorized as deserving and undeserving among the public. The public seems to approve the more conditional and selective role of social protection as strong resistance hasn't been found, nevertheless in contrary the European public still emphasizes their desire for a collective and solidaristic welfare state (van Oorschot 2000, 34). The question arises whether social rights have to be earned? The market liberal policy thinks that they do. So far most of the people do so as well. It is always better to subsidize productive activity than idleness (Offe 2005, 77). But the moral values differ by the individuals’ work status. Moral values are not constant but they vary when preconditions of life change. We'll come back to that later.

Deserving and undeserving poor
As the question of deserving and undeserving poor has been raised up it is necessary to look closer into deservingness criteria to better understand the publics opinions on who is seen as deserving or undeserving when it comes to all sorts of social support. According to previous research the public in Western welfare states sees the elderly most deserving to get social support and in contrary people on social assistance to deserve least support (van Oorschot 2000, 35). Van Ooschot (2000) brings up three criteria, which De Swaan has acknowledged first in 1988, describing deserving and undeserving poor:

1. Disability, deserving are those who lack ability to make a living on their own.
2. Proximity, deserving are those who belong to "us" and belong to same identity- groups.

Other factors are also raised into conversation such as control, need, identity, attitude and reciprocity. The publics opinion has a lot to do with thoughts such as "how needy are you", "can you do much to change your own situation", "are you one of us", "how do you respond to the help given" and "how pleasant you are". (van Oorschot 2000, 36). As it can be seen, many factors affect how people see each other as deserving or not. Nevertheless is it justified to rather give social security support to a pleasant humble person than a demanding not so pleasant who is as poor as the previous? Looking at previous research it is easier to understand why people are more eager to help a widow than a divorced person for example, as the widow can be seen as more incapable to change the situation. Fair or not?

**Deteriorating moral?**

People have lots of moral prejudices against universal basic income. The biggest problem seems to be that people get "lazy" (Offe, 2001, 560). The idea of basic income is based mostly on freedom. Freedom arouses good associations but also fear. One significant fear is fear of moral decay. (ibid.) When people have free choice they can choose weather work or not to work. A long hegemony of capitalism and work centered system is in danger. The moral connected to that is also facing challenges. People are afraid that the normality though work doesn’t stand as before and individuals’ moral will be deteriorated. (Offe, 2001, 561.)
Levine (2013:105-112) approaches this subject from another, intentionally divergent point of view. He sees that in order to insure real freedom the state has to insure that everyone has equal opportunity to pursue what is good. When it comes to concept of "good" and person's freedom to pursue it, it should be accepted that idleness (as freedom not to work) is an acceptable way of living. This view is certainly on a crash course with the dominant public opinion.

The study of Andersson and Kangas (2005: 122) shows surprisingly that many of the Finns are in favor of using "sticks" to activate unemployed person. When asked if "the unemployed should be encouraged to get jobs by tightening the qualifying conditions to get unemployment benefits if the unemployed refuse to take offered jobs" 74% answered yes. When the question was slightly reframed by adding a situation where the offered job would not correspond to the skills of the unemployed, 61% were still in favor of "punishing" the unemployed by for example cutting the benefits.

The people with high prejudices against universal basic income are those who have a strong belief that social security support affects people's morality in a negative way. These people see social security support leading to less responsible, more egoistic and lazy individuals. Also people who lack the belief of a fair functioning in the system are in favor of a more conditional compared to a universal welfare state. (van Oorschot 2000, 42). It is reasonable to see people not support a universal basic income who lack trust in others. If you don't trust your neighbors to be reasonable with their money, why would you allow them be given any free money?

**Attitudes towards deservingness change**

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness” claimed Marx more than hundred years ago (Marx 1904). In other words the circumstances one have influences ones thinking. Individual working status is an important role of social being. Marx is still actual, one can see.

In market-driven societies it’s commonly considered that one deserves his or her earned entitlements. A recent empirical study of moral consequences of unemployment shows that attitudes towards deservingness change. (Barra et al. 2015). After becoming unemployed
people don’t acknowledge earned entitlements as strongly as before. It means that when people are at work they don’t want to pay high taxes and think they have the right to use every penny for their own good. They have the right to keep and consume the money which they have gained through their own effort. After becoming unemployed their views change to opposite. Now being relatively poor they favor taxation and redistribution. (Barra et al. 2015, 1.)

Individual employment status effects individuals moral. It’s also generally recognized that being unemployed has many negative consequences to ones’ mental health and self esteem. It increases anxiety, stress, rate of alcoholism and suicide. The unemployed have a lower trust in the future. With those effects and the change in ones moral might explain why people stay disengaged from the labor market. (ibid.)

As said before, participation from labor market has devastating effects on peoples’ circumstances. (ibid.) When letting go previous values of earned entitlements one is less motivated to find a new job. (Barra et al. 2015, 5) The virtue of hard work loses its meaning.

Redefinition of work

It is evitable that unemployment and the contemporary workfare ideology are in a collision course. The problem is substantial because the amount of jobs and the ones who need a job doesn’t meet anymore. Unemployment is on high level in all the developed counties. If the society can’t offer jobs for everyone, there shouldn’t be a claimed for that people actually work. The claim that one reaches the full citizenship and social recognition only through work isn’t fair.

Another unjust question can be raised as to who is entitled to determine what work is "good enough" to be paid money for? Our system clearly divides earned work and so called invisible work, such as taking care of your elderly parents, children or doing charity for example. If there aren't enough paid jobs available could it be time to start acknowledging the traditionally unpaid jobs too?
Discussion

Is it possible to change the system? Can people change their preferences? Offe (2001, 561-562) claims that this could happen through gradualism and learning. In contemporary capitalist societies there are many groups already who are entitled to benefits. Many “normal” and respectful people receive contributions, for example families, students and farmers. To make basic income more acceptable, the idea of the people who receive basic income should be made normal and common. Through that basic income could possibly become gradually implemented. Framing basic income with normality is one answer which help to implement it to become reality. (ibid.) The answer to the question can people change, is yes. The reality of contemporary society with diminished work available is changing gradually peoples’ attitudes towards work and earned entitlements. People without work are not seen lazy anymore, but victims of the system. There is a need for social reform. Basic income is finally getting its opportunity.

A single question, like the one about basic income's deservingness, can't usually by itself be the only deciding factor on a social reform. Reforms require right timing that of the current equilibrium being punctuated by something, often a crisis, and also political will that isn't always dependant on public vote. Framing is still one of the most important parts when bringing a question to public discussion and it can even be used by political actors to socially construct a need for a reform. (Kangas et al. 2014, 76–77). Deservingness is a question that comes up almost guaranteed when talking about basic income and therefore it's important for the parties involved in the discussion to have a good view of how people see the question and how, and based on what, their opinions change.

One part of the problem with basic income implementation is the public opinion of the status of work as a primary source of living. It is seen as unfair if able-bodied adult persons live off the labor of others. With the concept of "work ethic", Robert van der Veen (2013:134) describes a situation where every competent adult should be under economic compulsion to perform paid work. Concepts of "good" work and "right" way to support oneself are culturally and socially constructed which means that they can be altered and they can naturally transform over time. One way to change these dominant mindsets is public discussion on the matter. People would start pondering issues like free riding and how would
basic income affect their working desires. Another way is through experiment. Instead of endlessly discussing about what might happen people could see if their predictions would come true.
References:


