Foreword

Although organized around principles of solidarity and equality, all present-day welfare states treat different groups of needy people differently. For some groups in society, social protection is more accessible, more generous, longer lasting and/or less subject to reciprocal obligations than for other groups. Such differential targeting of social rights and obligations may reflect various considerations of policymakers, for example, economic factors when more productive groups have better social protection, or political ones when protection is advantageous if targeted at groups with greater political influence. However, policymakers are in any case concerned about the wider social legitimacy of policies; that is, about the degree to which the general public consents with and supports social benefits and services, and the differences in welfare provision they entail for various groups of citizens.

The social legitimacy of social policies has been a subject of academic study for many decades, with a central focus being the question of which factors make some social benefits and services, for some social groups, more supported by the general public than others. There are various basic research approaches to this question, situated in two specific groupings. The first group of studies involves research looking for the source of differential support in the institutional characteristics of social policies. For example, in the degree of universality of a programme, where more universal programmes generally have greater popularity among the general public because their nature implies a broader population covered by and profiting from the provision. The second group of studies focuses on differences regarding the perceptions of the target groups for benefits. Within this stream of research, one subset of studies examines the effects of the public image of target groups in terms of stereotyping and stigma. For example, when it is found that programmes are less popular to the degree that they are (perceived to be mainly) targeted at negatively stereotyped groups, such as 'the lazy unemployed', 'welfare queens' or 'undeserving migrants'. A second branch of research investigates differences in social support in relation to the popular deservingness of target groups; that is, public perceptions of how different target groups score on a series of specific deservingness criteria. This 'deservingness' approach in particular

has developed relatively strongly in the past decade. There is a growing consensus that there are five important criteria that people may apply when considering their support for social benefits and services, with greater perceived deservingness of the target group leading to a higher level of support. These criteria are: the degree of control the target group is believed to have over their needy situation (the less control or blame, the more deserving); the perceived attitude of the target group (the more compliant and less demanding, the more deserving); the degree to which the target group can (be expected to) reciprocate for the help given (the greater the reciprocity, the more deserving); the identity of the target group (the closer to 'us', the more deserving); and the perceived degree of neediness of the target group (the more needy, the more deserving). These so-called CARIN criteria (Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity and Need), and how they are applied by the general public, now also tend to be seen as pivotal to understanding the role of public image (most stereotypes refer to specific criteria) and institutional characteristics (deservingness norms being at the historical foundations of social policies and their initial designs).

This book contributes significantly to the developing deservingness approach in terms of understanding differential social support for different target groups and social programmes. It critically discusses central concepts and theories in the field, offering further conceptual clarification and theoretical extension. It also explores new empirical pathways, thereby extending the scope of knowledge concerning popular deservingness. For example, cross-national analyses offer new insights into the national contextual embeddedness of popular deservingness thinking, and deservingness thinking is explored with regard to applying social obligations to different groups of benefit claimants. Further, it contributes to methodological advances in the field by reporting on a cross-national qualitative study into perceptions concerning popular deservingness.

The book also comes at a very fitting time, since welfare states are nowadays subject to a series of economic, social, cultural, technological and ecological challenges that put the age-old welfare question of 'who should get what, and why' back at the forefront of the social debate. Understanding popular support for specific policy reforms is absolutely essential, given the political and social importance of having and creating a social legitimacy base for challenging future rationing and targeting decisions. In this regard, a further understanding of popular deservingness opinions is pivotal.

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