



Need, equity, and accountability

Evidence on third-party distribution decisions from a vignette study

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Abstract

We report the results of a vignette study with an online sample of the German adult population in which we analyze the interplay between need, equity, and accountability in third-party distribution decisions. We asked participants to divide firewood between two hypothetical persons who either differ in their need for heat or in their productivity in terms of their ability to chop wood. The study systematically varies the persons' accountability for their neediness as well as for their productivity. We find that participants distribute significantly fewer logs of wood to persons who are held accountable for their disadvantage. Independently of being held accountable or not, the needier person is partially compensated with a share of logs that exceeds her contribution, while the person who contributes less is given a share of logs smaller than her need share. Moreover, there is a domain effect in terms of participants being more sensitive to lower contributions than to greater need.

1 Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing empirical social choice literature which was initiated by the investigations of participants' individual and group distribution choices by Yaari and Bar-Hillel (1984) as well as Frohlich et al. (1987a) (for overviews see, for example, Konow 2003; Traub et al. 2005; Konow 2009, as well

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