

Winter is Coming

How Laypeople Think About Different Kinds of Needs

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Abstract: Needs play a key role in many fields of social sciences and humanities, ranging from normative theories of distributive justice to conceptions of the welfare state. Over time, different conceptions of what counts as a need (i. e., what is considered a normatively relevant need) have been proposed. Many of them include (in one way or the other) needs for survival, decency, belonging, and autonomy. Little work has been done on how these kinds of needs are evaluated in terms of their significance for distributive justice. To begin closing this gap, we investigate the role of the four aforementioned kinds of needs for impartial observers. We do so in two empirical studies. The first study asks participants to evaluate the importance of each of the four kinds of needs separately. We find that different levels of importance are attributed to the kinds of needs, which places them in a hierarchy. The second study asks participants to make distributive decisions. Results further support the hierarchy found in the first study and, additionally, reveal that participants tend to make coherent allocation decisions.

Keywords: Basic Needs, Coherence, Distributive Justice, Equality, Equity, Rationality

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