



Thinking about need

A vignette experiment on need-based distributive justice

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Abstract

We examine the role of need satisfaction in non-comparative justice ratings of endowments with goods. As normative approaches, we discuss utilitarianism, prioritarianism, and three versions of sufficientarianism. Using a vignette experiment with 109 participants, we elicit the participants' justice ratings of endowments with living space and estimate their justice evaluation functions. We show that a need context increases the prevalence of prioritarianistic and sufficientarianistic justice ratings. Moreover, a need threshold also changes the utilitarians' justice evaluation functions significantly.

Keywords Basic Needs · Justice Principles · Prioritarianism · Sufficientarianism · Utilitarianism · Vignette Experiment

1 Introduction

How do laypeople evaluate the justice of personal endowments with goods that satisfy basic needs? Miller (1999) emphasizes that needs are not to be confused with wants; needs rely on a socially shared notion. Need, then, refers to whether someone has *enough* (Frankfurt 2015) to live a *decent life* (Miller 1999). The question of whether someone has enough points to the *non-comparative* (Feinberg 1974) thrust of need as a criterion of justice: It is human suffering due to unfulfilled needs that causes injustice, not how one is treated relative to others. This raises the question of how justice is related to the satisfaction of need, to which the literature offers no precise answer.

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