

## Focus group report – Denmark

### 1. Recruitment

We conducted five focus groups from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2016. One took place in the early hours of the afternoon, from 1.30 – 3.30 pm, and the remaining four took place from 5-7 pm. They were fully organized by the Danish research team and held at Aalborg University in Copenhagen. We video recorded all group sessions. For recruitment, we used a database with email-addresses for around 1900 Danish citizens who have agreed to answer survey questions from our department every once in a while. We sent out an email to all 1900 stating that we were looking for participants and asked them to fill out a short questionnaire if they were interested in helping us out. The questionnaire provided us the info we needed for the further recruitment process and we initially recruited between nine and 10 participants for the five focus groups, based on the criteria that we agreed upon at the Berlin Conference. In an attempt to attract participants, we stated that participation would be rewarded with vouchers for cinema tickets (two tickets per participant) and that transportation expenses would be refunded.

Unfortunately, we had to deal with **an unexpectedly large amount of cancellations and non-show ups**. Some cancelled their participation days before the focus group sessions, which was somehow expected, and we recruited new participants from a stand-by list. However, for each focus group we had three or four participants simply not showing up, leaving us with just five to seven participants for each group. For obvious reasons this is problematic - firstly because it left us with less participants than agreed upon and secondly because it disturbed the balance between different person characteristics in the groups (such as gender balance and the balance between political observations (we had too many leftwing voters)).

Despite the recruitment problems we conducted all five focus groups. They all worked out really well as group discussions between the participants.

Focus groups in Denmark	
Old-age pensioners	7 participants
Young adults	5 participants
Women with care responsibilities	5 participants
Working class	5 participants
Middle class	5 participants

### 2. Organization – slides, thought box, vignettes, timetable

The focus groups took place in meeting rooms with room for 12 to 16 people where participants were seated at a rectangular table and asked to fill out name-tags. We provided fruit, cake, tea, coffee and water. From the research team, Christian Albrekt Larsen (CAL) and Mathias Herup Nielsen (MHN) were present during all sessions, alternately functioning as respectively moderator and referent. The role of the moderator was very downplayed and mostly that of the curious listener: Welcoming the participants and initiating the discussions with brief introductions to the vignettes, keeping the discussions somewhat on track (“what about services?”/“what about benefits?”) and asking “why?” and “how come?” numerous times during each session

to invite participants to further develop their justifications. This left a lot of open space for the participants. However, when we from time to time were asked directly by the participants about the state of certain benefits and services, we provided the answer if we had it.

We chose to run a slide-show during the focus groups with just a few slides to frame the discussions: One slide welcoming the participants; one slide with a European map and five red arrows pointing to the countries that are a part of the project; two slides providing some overall information about benefits and services in the Danish welfare state as agreed upon; one slide for each of the six vignettes presenting the vignette text and shown to the participants during the discussion of that particular vignette. The idea was, in a subtle but constant way, to remind the participants of the current topic of debate.

When translating the English vignettes into Danish we carefully chose our wording to provide comparability. Thus, all five groups were given exactly the following formulations of the six vignettes – neither more or less:

- (1) *Think of... an unemployed person of working age in good health. What services and benefits should he/her have – and why?*  
[Tænk på... en arbejdsløs person i den arbejdsdygtige alder med et godt helbred. Hvilke services og hvilke ydelser bør vedkommende have adgang til – og hvorfor?]
- (2) *Think of... a person aged 70 in good health. What services and benefits should he/her have – and why?*  
[Tænk på... en 70-årig med et godt helbred. Hvilken service og hvilke ydelser bør vedkommende have adgang til – og hvorfor?]
- (3) *Think of... a family in good health with average wages with children under three years. What services and benefits should they have – and why?*  
[Tænk på... en familie ved godt helbred med en gennemsnitlig indkomst og med børn under tre år. Hvilken service og hvilke ydelser bør de have adgang til – og hvorfor?]
- (4) *Think of... a person in a low-paid job. Earning 23.000 kr. per month or less. What services and benefits should he/her have – and why? (NB: Here, participants were additionally asked to picture a person who was 25 years or older)*
- (5) *Think of a comfortably-off worker. What services and benefits should he/her have – and why? (NB: For this vignette, we specified that 'comfortably-off' means earning around 55.000 kr. per month.)*  
[Tænk på... en vellønnet person. Hvilken service og hvilke ydelser bør vedkommende have adgang til.]
- (6) *Think of... an immigrant. What services and benefits should he/her have – and why?*  
[Tænk på... en indvandrer. Hvilken service og hvilke ydelser bør de have adgang til – og hvorfor?]

We printed A3-posters with the six vignettes and as each vignette was introduced the moderator held up the piece of paper for everyone to see and placed it on the table between the participants. The piece of paper featured the text of the vignette in front of a rorschach inkblot (see picture). The combination of printed paper and the ppt.-slides seemed to keep the discussions quite well on track.

We also placed our Thought box [Tankeboks] (see picture) on the table and asked participants to write down their thoughts – for instance if something was of especial importance to them or if they didn't get to say something that they wanted to say. The box was rarely used as only three participants made use of it.

We tried to keep time and tended to follow the timetable quite strictly. Therefore, each session lasted for exactly two hours, except for one group that lasted a bit longer. In three of the five groups we had a short 3 - 5 minutes break after a little more than an hour – for instance because a participant had to use the toilet.

Tænk på...  
EN ARBEJDSLØS  
PERSON I DEN  
ARBEJDS-  
DYGTIGE ALDER  
MED ET GODT  
HELBRED

Hvilken service og hvilke  
ydelser bør vedkommende  
have adgang til – og hvorfor?



*To the left: Unemployed vignette as printed and as shown on a ppt.-slide. To the right: The box of thoughts*

### 3. The five sessions – a quick summary

At the beginning of each session we very briefly introduced ourselves, the topic to be discussed and the agenda of the session and we clarified some practicalities. All in all, this took around five minutes. Thus, we explained to the participants that this was about the future of the welfare state; that researchers were doing the exact same thing right now in four other countries; that they would be presented to six “citizens” during the session; that the session was video recorded; and that we would like them to behave nicely, listen to each other and not to talk all at once.

Following from this we did the warm-up exercise and asked participants to just very briefly introduce themselves (“name and age”) and in a few words describe what they associate with “the welfare state”. Quite often, participants described the welfare state as a kind of ‘safety net’ that can catch you if you fall and/or mentioned specific universal services such as health care or the school system.

The moderator hereafter used two slides to provide a rough overview of the benefits (slide 1) and services (slide 2) of the Danish welfare state.

At this point we introduced the first of the six vignettes. We carefully refrained from giving more info on the vignette cases than what is described above. Initially, when the first vignette was presented, members of all groups were struck by the fact that we provided so little information of the vignette case-persons. Strikingly, the first comment in one of the groups was that “the question is poorly formulated, we need much more information about this unemployed person.”

When asked concrete questions about the case - e.g. ‘is the unemployed person receiving UB (for insured) or social assistance (for uninsured)?’ - the moderator answered the question with a counterquestion: “Why do

you think it is important”? This specific technique led participants to concretize their thoughts and to differentiate between different groups of citizens who, according to them, deserved different forms of benefits and services. No participants in any of the groups thought that gender was an important aspect for the discussion of any of the vignettes.

***For “the unemployed” vignette, important issues were:***

- The insured versus the uninsured unemployed: a frequent argument was that people who are insured against unemployment should be better off than the uninsured (just as it is today).
- Conditionality: Many participants thought that the unemployed should actively look for a job in return for the benefits. However, in some of the groups participants mentioned (without too much opposition) that there should be some basic social security, even if the individual didn’t actively look for a job.
- Age issues: Some of the groups agreed that you should put more pressure on young unemployed people since they don’t yet have big expenses and are mostly able-bodied. In the group of ‘Young adults’, the opposite system was suggested by one participant: That you should have a bigger benefit when you’re young and unemployed since you need means to establish yourself in life.
- Services: In most groups participants mentioned the importance of having a system, that actively assisted the unemployed in moving towards employment. Participants with actual experiences of the system mostly described its current way of working as highly problematic and a waste of time.

***For the “person aged 70” vignette, important issues were:***

- The universal old age pension system (in Denmark all (non-working) old-age pensioners are entitled to a benefit of minimum of 6.000 kr. per month – no matter income from other sources): This led to lively discussions in most groups. In the group of “old-age-pensioners” one participant immediately said “Universal old-age pension!” when we asked what benefits the 70-year-old should have. All other participants seemed to agree at first. Eventually, when discussing if the very richest should have this benefit (Mærsk McKinny Møller, founder of A.P Møller Mærsk came up several times), one of the other participants said that it actually would be fairer and better if the richest weren’t entitled to the benefit – but claimed that since it would be more expensive to deny them the right (due to more money spent on administration) they should just keep it. Others around the table argued that the universal benefit, given to everyone, is important.

In the “Working class group” as well as in the “Young adults group ” participants argued for making the pension a purely means (income-)tested benefit and thereby redistributing wealth and having greater financial equality.

***For the “family” vignette, important issues were:***

- The flat rate universal child benefit assistance (a fixed amount of money payed four times a year per child): Discussions here were quite intense and ran along somewhat the same lines as the discussion of old-age pension. Most participants agreed that you should have child benefit no matter the number of children. Quite a lot of leftwing-voting participants would apparently give up universal benefits for having (bigger) means-tested benefits for the needy and less for the well-off.
- Daycare (most Danish parents pay around 3.500 kr for having their child in daycare whereas the actual cost is around 10.000): One argument was that it should be completely free for all parents to have their children in daycare institutions, since it is free for the child to go to school from the age of six (“why this difference”).

This was, however, opposed by arguments stating the importance of personal responsibility for upbringing your child. Another argument was to make well-off people pay a larger amount of the actual costs thereby allowing for the median waged family to pay less.

***For the “low-income worker” important issues were:***

- Education: Quite a lot participants associated “low income work” with having no or only a few years of higher education. Therefore, an important element in these discussions were of the possibility for the low-paid worker to ‘return to school’. One line of argument was, that more education is not always the right answer and that it is important that we as a society don’t just blindly educate people who might end up unemployed. In this view, the person should have a higher education if he or she really wanted it – but it should be a personal investment, and therefore only limited support from the state should be given. Opposing this view was another line of arguing, focusing on education as personal emancipation and a good investment for society. Some participants pointed out that it would make sense to provide some extra financial support for such “adults students” since a ‘pay cut’ from a real salary to the SU (‘state education grant’) can be rough.

***For the “well-off worker” important issues were:***

- None of the participants questioned what a participant termed the “basic universal rights” of the middle-class: E.g the right to “free” health care, the right for their children to go to tax-financed schools, the right for their parents to receive elderly care. One group even suggested that the dentist should be financed through taxes instead of user payments (as it is today) for all citizens no matter income.

- However, during this discussion many participants stated that the progressive tax system is important and must be preserved (again: we had a majority of center-leftwing-voters). In this discussion, some of the well-known credos from Danish public debate were mentioned to justify the existing system (e.g “The broadest shoulders should carry the heaviest burdens”). Another line of argument, supporting the progressive tax system, was that the comfortably-off are themselves products of the welfare community – with publicly paid schooling, tax-financed higher education and so on – meaning that it is fair that they now give something back to the community that have supported them.

***For the “immigrant” important issues were:***

- Frustration with the question: Some groups initially found it meaningless to discuss the immigrant without knowing if he or she was a fugitive or a worker, employed or looking for a job, from within or outside of the EU. However, all groups eventually had meaningful conversations on the topic.

- Lowered benefits: The groups widely opposed the newly implemented ‘integration benefit’ (a heavily reduced benefit for unemployed people that haven’t been living in Denmark for at least seven out of the previous eight years). However, some argued that the mere principle of a lower benefit for immigrants was meaningful, since immigrants have not yet earned their right for full support (‘You need to contribute, before you can receive’). This was opposed – e.g by arguments stating that we need solidarity within the EU or that immigrants who are unemployed need money for establishing themselves.

- Education: Whereas education generally were seen as a good thing among participants, some were afraid that immigrants would exploit the Danish education system by reclaiming free education and education grants and moving directly to another country afterwards.

#### 4. The vignette sorting exercise.

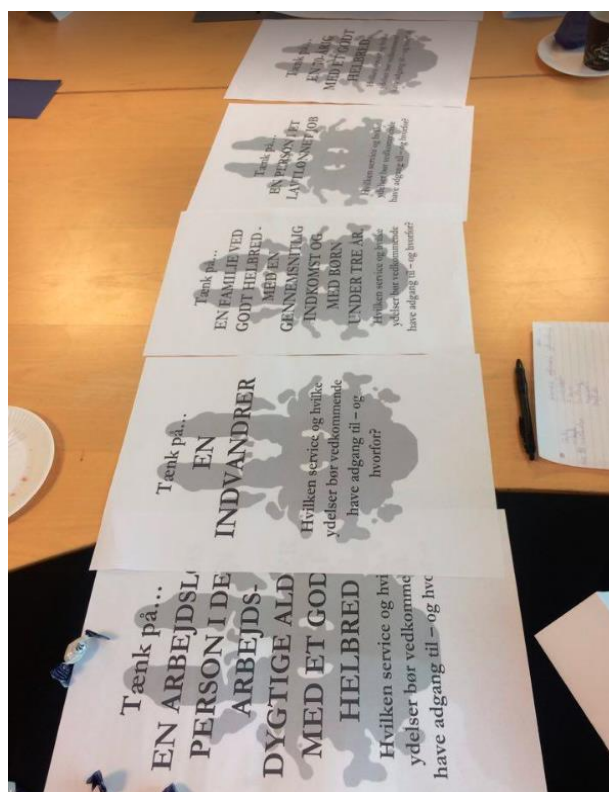
For the final card sorting exercise, we cleared the table and placed a huge + in the one end and a huge ÷ in the other end. Participants were asked to rank the six (physical) posters from one end to the other (see picture).

Most participants found it challenging, because the info on the different vignette cases was so limited. Especially, 'the immigrant' was difficult for groups to deal with. One group initially refused to place the immigrant, stating that they at least needed to define him or her as 'an unemployed immigrant', 'a comfortably-off immigrant' or a 'low-paid immigrant' before being able to rank him/her.

However, what most participants found challenging about the ranking exercise was the mere concept of "deservingness". The Danish word for "deserving" ("*fortjeneste*") connotes intuitively to "having earned" ("*har tjent*") and therefore many participants felt that they should in some way think of reciprocity. In all groups, two very different interpretations of "deservingness" were discussed: One based on "need" (who needs help the most?) and one based on reciprocity (who have earned help the most?). Some participants noticed that these two definitions would lead them to do very different rankings. Three groups ("the middle class", "the female caregivers" and "the young adults") touched upon a third interpretation of the concept: A sociotropic perspective based on the needs of society (who do we need to invest in?).

This is important when interpreting the results of the card sorting exercises in Denmark. For instance, the results may have been different, had we asked instead "Who *should* have most help from the state?". Thus, in all groups participants asked us if we meant "who needs help the most" since it was hard for them to define the concept of deserving. The moderator refrained from answering questions about how "deservingness" should be interpreted ("we want to hear what you think"). One group was so confused about the concept that they found it impossible to rank the six vignettes based on deservingness – instead they ranked the six cases according to their need.

All other groups eventually agreed on a certain ordering of the vignettes, but several participants expressed that the order could just as well have been different, had they taken other issues into consideration. One participant even suggested that



they should just leave the six vignettes in a pile in the middle of the table, since ordering was impossible.

However, these *discussions* of the mere concept of deservingness were really interesting, since they brought to the forefront different ideas of what it means to be deserving and made explicit opposing views regarding who deserves help the most. These discussions are, in our view, more interesting empirical data than the naked results of the sorting exercises.

### ***Ranking the vignettes. Discussions and results:***

#### **Old-age-pensioners group**

This group came to understand “deserve” as akin to need. Resulting from this, they quickly agreed to place the comfortably-off closest to the minus. There was some debate about how to place the remaining five vignettes. The focus of the discussion was who needs a helping hand the most – and the unemployed, the immigrant and the children (the family) were chosen as the most needy. 1. The unemployed. 2. The immigrant. 3. The family. 4. The low-paid worker. 5. 70 year-old. 6. A comfortably-off.

#### **Working-class group**

This group – like most of the others – had a lot of focus on the concept of “deserve”. They agreed on defining it as “having earned” something – thus, quite far away from defining it as “need”. As a participant stated it: “I am thinking a lot about the term “deserve”. When you’ve done some garden work, you deserve a beer. When you arrived to the garden just now, you don’t deserve a beer.” Consequently, the order was the following;

1. The 70 years old. 2. The low income worker. 3. The comfortably-off. 4. The family. 5. The unemployed. 6. The immigrant.

#### **Female caregivers**

This group had an interesting discussion of the concept of “deserve”. Different definitions and ways of perceiving it were discussed: Is it about (1) who has contributed the most?, (2) who has the broadest shoulders?, (3) who needs help the most? or (4) who is likely to contribute the most in the future – with our help? They eventually agreed on ranking the vignettes according to need and ended up like this:

1. The family (due to the children). 2. The immigrant. 3. The unemployed. 4. The 70-year old. 5. The low income worker. 6. The comfortably off.

#### **Middle-class**

This group agreed about a ranking order after just a few minutes. However, they were very reflected and explicit about ranking the six cards from a specific perspective akin to a social invest perspective (without using those exact words). Thus, the able-bodied unemployed is first priority, because we need to invest in him/her getting a job (not because he/she ought to be entitled to a lot of money). The family comes in second,

because children is our future. The immigrant is third choice, because we need to have him or her integrated in Danish society. And so forth.

1. The unemployed. 2. The family. 3. The immigrant. 4. The low income worker. 5. The 70 year-old. 6. The comfortably off.

### **Young adults**

The group of young adults decided, after some discussion, that they were unable to rank the six cases based on deservingness. First and foremost, this was due to the fact that they couldn't agree on the definition of "deserve": Is it about need or is it really about having earned? Eventually, the group decided to do a ranking based on 'need'. This also fueled a little debate – especially on the needs of an immigrant versus the needs of an unemployed and an elderly person - but after a while they agreed on the following order:

1. The unemployed. 2. The 70 **year** old. 3. The immigrant. 4. Low income. 5. The family. 6. The comfortably-off.