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Perception of the Family 500+ programme and its beneficiaries among Poles in the light of the deservingness theory: a Q methodological study²

Abstract

The concept of deservingness relates to judgements about whether a person or group deserves support. The deservingness criteria that underlie people's opinions play a crucial role in this process. This study examines the perception of deservingness among Polish people in relation to the Family 500+ programme and its beneficiaries. The aim was to determine which deservingness criteria are applied to evaluate the deservingness of families with children and to distinguish groups of people who share similar views. Q methodology was employed as a research method that exemplifies a mixed approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data to explore viewpoints, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. The purpose of Q methodological studies is to identify factors that distinguish groups of people who share similar opinions about the analysed

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² Article prepared as part of the project titled *Solidarność społeczna, postawy wobec państwa opiekuńczego oraz wzorce zasługiwaności w społeczeństwie polskim po wprowadzeniu programu “Rodzina 500+”*; grant number: 2018/31/B/HS5/01707, funded by Narodowe Centrum Nauki.

topic. Three factors were identified as a result of the study. The first is linked to the equality criterion the second to the criteria of control, reciprocity, need, and adequacy, and the third to the criteria of reciprocity and social investment. The results show that people's opinions of the same social programme vary considerably, which is the result of attaching importance to different aspects. The results also revealed a certain degree of ambiguity that seems to be an intrinsic part of the research focused on the deservingness of families with children – whose deservingness is really being judged: the children's or the parents'? This study has shown that people's views on this issue also vary.

Keywords: family policy, Q methodology, deservingness, deservingness criteria, Family 500+

Introduction

The Family 500+ programme (currently 800+) was introduced to Polish family policy in April 2016 as a fulfilment of a promise made during a political campaign by one of the parties. In its initial phase, it was partially means-tested, with an income threshold of 800 PLN per person in the household for the first or only child (1200 PLN if there was a child with a disability in the household). For subsequent children, the family was entitled to support regardless of its financial situation. A substantial change took place in July 2019 when the income threshold was abolished, making the benefit fully universal for all children under the age of 18. The benefit was 500 PLN per month per eligible child. From 2024, the benefit was increased to 800 PLN, motivated by the inflation process that had lowered its purchasing power, and the fact that the benefit had not been indexed since its introduction. The aim of the benefit was to increase fertility, limit child poverty, and invest in families. The aim of increasing fertility was not achieved. Despite an initial rise in the total fertility rate (TFR), it is currently at its lowest level in post-war Poland's history: 1.099 in 2024 (Statistics Poland, 2025). In terms of reducing poverty, the programme has been successful (Szarfenberg, 2019; Paradowski et al., 2020). However, it was also suggested that the effect could be achieved at a lower cost (Magda et al., 2019).

The introduction of this programme sparked debate not only within the political and scientific communities but also among ordinary people in Polish society, with many arguments for and against its implementation, particularly with regard to its potential negative impact on women's participation in the labour market. This benefit represents a significant shift in Polish family policy, which, prior to its introduction, was modest and focused on multi-child families. The proportion of GDP spent on family issues rose from 1.78% in 2015 to 3.23% in 2021 (Bień, 2022), reaching one of the highest levels in Europe. This illustrates the significant change that the programme has brought about. In 2023, the programme cost 41.6 billion PLN and supported nearly 6.9 million children (Statistics Poland, 2025). After the amount was increased to 800 PLN, the cost of the benefit rose to over 60 billion PLN per year. Furthermore, it should be noted that, at the time of its introduction, the benefit equalled 37% of

Poland's net minimum wage. Currently, in 2025, this figure stands at around 23%. Taking all these factors into account, it is not surprising that the introduction of the programme was met with such a strong social reaction.

In this context, it is interesting to study who is perceived as deserving of this family benefit in relation to the deservingness theory. The aim of the present study is to answer the question: which deservingness criteria are applied to evaluate the deservingness of families with children in Poland with regard to the Family 500+ programme? Furthermore, the study aimed to distinguish groups of people who share similar opinions. To achieve these goals, Q methodology was employed as the research method. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is a novel approach in the field of deservingness studies. It should be noted that the study was conducted in 2022, so the article focuses on the programme's previous version, before benefit's amount was increased. Therefore, the author will refer to this benefit as "500+" in the text, bearing in mind the change that took place in 2024. Nevertheless, it is assumed that the change in the amount of the benefit has not significantly affected the issues considered in this article taking into account the inflation that Polish society experienced in recent years.

Deservingness theory

In the case of social policy, concept of deservingness expresses making judgements about whether person or group deserved help. Evaluation of that takes place on the basis of deservingness criteria that can be defined as premises underling people's opinions about the deservingness and play a role some benchmarks used by respondents in evaluation process. Scoring on criteria allows making decisions how much deserving person or group is. van Oorschot (2000; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017), on the basis of prior research, developed CARIN framework that consists from five deservingness criteria: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, and need. It poses a well-established core for research in the field of deservingness. The control criterion is linked to perception of responsibility or fault for current situation that can be attributed to needy person where deservingness decreases with increasing responsibility. The attitude criterion refers to people's behaviour evaluated through the prism of commonly accepted standards and rules. Compliance with these standards, and being docile and grateful make people considered more deserving of help. The reciprocity criterion is related to contributions (understood for example as paying taxes) made by needy person in the past or possibilities to do it in the future. In this context, the higher the contributions (or potential) to society, the higher the perceived deservingness. The identity criterion refers to interpersonal relation between needy people and those who support them where closer relation or similarities (e.g., kinship bound, being part of the same social group) makes people more deserving in the eyes of evaluators. The need criterion is related to the level of need with greater need determining higher perceived deservingness to be supported.

The deservingness criteria formulated by van Oorschot (2000) are not the only ones described in the literature. Michoń (2021), based on a qualitative study focusing

on the deservingness of 500+ beneficiaries, proposed to extend the CARIN framework by adding a new element, namely, the adequacy criterion (CARINA framework). It expresses the level of belief that the benefit is used appropriately by the beneficiaries – a stronger belief influences their perception as more deserving. Laenen et al. (2019) distinguished three additional deservingness criteria: equality, cost awareness, and social investment. They are not strictly connected to the characteristics of welfare recipients but are linked to the welfare system. The equality criterion expresses the desirability of universal, unconditional, and equal access to welfare services and benefits. The cost awareness criterion refers to the level of financial feasibility, scarce public resources, and concern about fiscal sustainability. The social investment criterion reflects the need for an appropriate allocation of resources that will enable the creation of a “better society”: current beneficiaries will be able to support society in the future.

The role of family policy and support for children

Family policy is an important element of social policy, taking into account the crucial role of families in the development of societies. As Kamerman (2010, 432) stated, “There is no country that does not recognize the centrality of the family in both short and long term societal developments – and as part of economic as well as social development. Families fulfil an essential societal role in reproduction, in socialization, in early education, in the promotion of good health, in preparing the next generation for adulthood”. In this context, it is interesting to consider how we perceive children and their role in society, including the economic viewpoint. This can influence how family policy is framed. According to Folbre (1994, 86), “children tumble out of every category economists try to put them in. They have been described as consumer durables providing a flow of utility to their parents, investment goods providing income, and public goods with both positive and negative externalities. Children are also people, with certain rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. Taking this into account, categorising children as a public good and viewing the role of parents as a public service can influence the perception of responsibilities that should be shared by the whole society, justifying income distribution towards families with children. Esping-Andersen also postulated the perception of children as a “collective asset” and a form of social investment. He stated that a child-centred welfare strategy “represents also a unique combination of individual private gains and positive social externalities” (2005, 28), which is referred to as the “double bonus” (2005, 15). Along these lines, investments in health and proper education are essential for building a strong society for the future.

There has been discussion as to whether family benefits should be granted universally, or based on means testing or even other conditions. This issue has become particularly apparent in the discourse surrounding Polish family policy since the introduction of the Family 500+ benefit. Bastagli et al. (2020) indicated the advantages of universal child benefits, such as a higher coverage rate, lower exclusion errors, less scope for abuse, the minimisation of stigmatisation, greater transparency, no incentive

to reduce incomes, and stimulation of demand during recessions. They also pointed out that universal child benefits had non-monetary outcomes for children, e.g., improvements in health and education, and received broader public support than narrowly-targeted programmes. However, the issue of greater support for universal benefits is debatable. Laenen and Gugushvili emphasised that the social legitimacy of universal and selective welfare provision varies across countries, over time, and within different policy areas. They indicated that “this suggests that a universally valid answer simply does not exist: it is not the case that one policy design option is more popular than the other, always and everywhere. Instead, the task for future research is to scrutinize under which circumstances – when, where and why – one policy design option is more popular than the other” (2021, 1142). In turn, arguments for means testing can relate to issues such as redistributive justice, reducing inequality and the effective management and allocation of scarce public resources (Devereux, 2016). Nevertheless, means-tested benefits generate more administrative costs (van Oorschot, 2002).

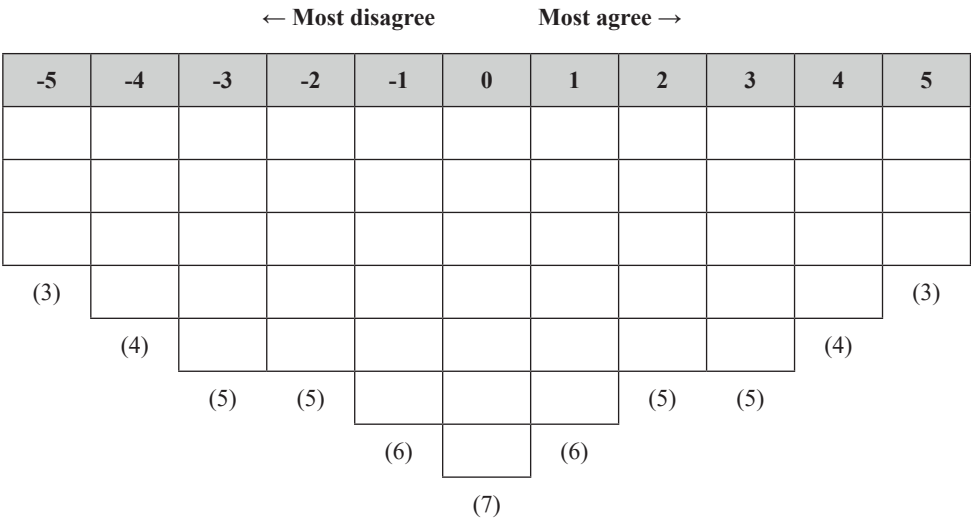
An increase in fertility is often indicated as one of the reasons for introducing family benefits, as was the case with the 500+ benefit. However, Kalwij (2010), using data from 16 Western European countries, showed that increases in family allowances had no significant impact on the timing of births or completed fertility. This was explained by the fact that subsidies only cover direct costs, not the opportunity cost of raising children, which seems to be crucial in the context of changing gender roles.

Method and study organisation

Q methodology was used as a research method to achieve the planned objectives. It is used to explore a person’s opinions, beliefs, viewpoints, and attitudes, and “Q can be very helpful in exploring tastes, preferences, sentiments, motives and goals, the part of personality that is of great influence on behaviour but that often remains largely unexplored” (van Exel & De Graaf, 2005, 2). The application of Q methodology allows for differentiating factors that identify a group of people who share a similar perspective on a given topic (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

In studies using this method, participants are presented with a sample of statements (called Q set) about a topic. Their task is to rank these statements according to their individual opinions on a specially prepared Q grid, usually with a scale from “disagree” (on the left) to “agree” (on the right) in the form of a quasi-normal distribution. The Q grid used in the study is shown in Figure 1. The participants’ rankings are the subject of statistical calculations. It should be noted that a Q study requires a limited number of respondents, and empirical studies have confirmed that it is possible to obtain meaningful results even with very small numbers of participants (Sandbrook et al., 2013).

Figure 1. The Q grid used in the study



Q methodology is a form of reversal of classical factor analysis, where people are treated as variables and traits or other items are treated as a sample or population of cases (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In this context, as noted by Risdon et al. (2003, 377), “the results [of Q methodology] are used to describe a population of ideas and not a population of people: the participants should be thought of as collaborators in an analysis of a shared culture rather than subjects under investigation”. It is a mixed approach that uses quantitative and qualitative data (Herrington & Coogan, 2011; Ramlo, 2016), which provides a combination of richness of qualitative data and statistical rigour (Dziopa & Ahern, 2009; McKeown & Thomas, 1988), which can also be referred to as “quantifying qualitative data” (Shemmings, 2006, 147). Q methodology is an appropriate tool for dealing with the complexity and multidimensionality of deservingness research, as it allows for the exploration of how people understand and apply deservingness criteria in relation to real existing family benefit.

The study was conducted between June 2022 and November 2022. The sample of 28 respondents was selected in a purposive manner. Participants varied in characteristics such as gender, age, educational level, and whether or not they had children, in order to ensure heterogeneity. It was assumed that these characteristics might influence perceptions of the analysed problem. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 66, with an average age of 39. The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. The Q set consisted of 53 statements (presented in Table 2) reflecting the opinions of Polish society in relation to the Family 500+ programme. The statements were prepared taking into account public and political debates about the programme, discussions with members of the public and a review of literature on the perception of deservingness. The study conducted by Michoń (2021), in which the author analysed the views of internet users in relation to 500+ and its beneficiaries, played a particularly important role in this process.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics		Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Sex	Woman	18	64
	Man	10	36
Age	<25	3	11
	26–35	10	36
	36–45	6	21
	46–55	6	21
	56–65	2	7
	>65	1	4
Education level	Vocational education	2	7
	Secondary education	8	29
	Higher education	18	64
Having children	Yes	17	61
	No	11	39
Number of children	1	6	35
	2	9	53
	3	2	12
Having children below 18	Yes	12	71
	No	5	29

The Q grid used in the study ranged from -5 to +5, which is the appropriate range for a Q set of 40-60 items (Brown, 1980, 200), and was flatter due to the fact that the benefit being analysed is widely known and discussed in society, so people tend to have specific opinions on the subject. Participants in the study were asked to rank statements on the Q grid according to whether the views expressed in the statements were most dissimilar (most disagree) or most similar (most agree) to their personal opinions about Family 500+ programme and its recipients. The gathered data was analysed using qmethod R package developed by Zabala (2014).

Table 2. Statements used in the study and factor arrays

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
1.	It is the parents who have decided to have a child, so the burden of supporting the child is their responsibility.	2	1	-4
2.	The 500+ benefit is targeted at children, so their parents' socio-economic status (their wage level or jobs they do) should not be relevant.	4	-5	2
3.	Imposing additional eligibility criteria in the 500+ programme would be equivalent to segregating children.	2	-4	0
4.	The state should support parents only in exceptional situations, when they are not able to cope on their own.	-1	1	-3

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
5.	All children equally deserve to receive money from the Family 500+ programme.	5	-3	3
6.	A person who has left their job after receiving the 500+ benefit does not deserve to get it.	0	4	-3
7.	The 500+ benefit is spent on children's needs.	3	-2	2
8.	The fact of receiving the 500+ benefit makes parents feel entitled.	1	2	-4
9.	Families with children should be supported by obtaining an income tax relief, in this way, working parents would be supported.	4	3	-2
10.	Families with multiple children particularly deserve to receive the 500+ benefit because by giving birth to more children and bringing them up, they significantly contribute to society.	-3	0	4
11.	Families deserve to be supported because they bear the cost of bringing up children who will be contributing to society in the future.	2	0	5
12.	By receiving the 500+ benefit, children will feel a stronger bond with their country in the future.	-4	-5	-3
13.	Since Polish people can receive family benefits in other countries, foreigners should also be eligible for the 500+ benefit.	3	0	5
14.	Poland should keep the 500+ benefit since other European countries provide similar benefits.	3	-1	2
15.	Eligibility for the 500+ benefit should depend on the family's economic situation.	-3	2	0
16.	The amount of the 500+ benefit paid to support each subsequent child should progressively increase.	-4	-4	1
17.	If someone is able to save money from the 500+ benefit, it means that they should not be eligible for this benefit since they obviously do not need it at the moment.	-5	-3	-3
18.	Children are the country's future, so public money should first be spent to foster their upbringing and development.	1	-2	4
19.	Children older than 18 should also be eligible for the 500+ benefit if they are students.	3	-2	1
20.	Rather than give people cash benefits, it would be better if the government reduced prices of products for children.	1	4	-2
21.	The state should be able to check how the 500+ benefit is spent.	-2	5	-1
22.	The 500+ benefit contributes to the exacerbation of social pathologies.	0	1	-5
23.	Most families spend the 500+ benefit properly, so it has a positive effect on the current and future situation of their children.	0	-1	3
24.	Eligibility for and the amount of the 500+ benefit should depend on the country's current economic situation.	1	2	2
25.	The fact that one parent decides to stop working in order to take care of children full-time once the family has become eligible for the 500+ benefit is a form of investment in the children's future.	-2	-4	0
26.	Lone mothers deserve higher benefits than families with both parents.	0	1	1
27.	People should decide to have children only if they can afford to bring them up without counting on state support.	4	3	-4

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
28.	The main reason why many parents decide to have a child is the prospect of receiving the 500+ benefit.	-5	0	-4
29.	For the sake of the children, parents who behave improperly should not completely lose the right to receive state support.	-3	-1	5
30.	The 500+ benefit contributes to women's professional inactivity.	-1	0	-1
31.	Supporting families should be the primary obligation of the state.	1	0	3
32.	The 500+ benefit should be indexed annually in order to mitigate the effects of inflation.	-1	-1	3
33.	Parents who are unwilling to take up work should lose the right to receive the 500+ benefit.	2	5	-3
34.	When children who have received the 500+ benefit become adults, they will feel entitled to receive support from the state.	-2	-1	-5
35.	The state should develop social programmes that encourage parents to have children rather than support families who already have children.	0	-2	-2
36.	The 500+ benefit helps to ensure that the Polish pension system can function properly (more future employees paying contributions to finance pension payments).	-4	-2	1
37.	The 500+ benefit encourages parents to have children, which has a positive effect on Poland's demographic situation.	-5	-4	1
38.	It is unfair to offer the 500+ benefit without means-testing, when many pensioners receive low pensions.	-2	3	-1
39.	Immigrant parents deserve to receive the 500+ benefit, just like Polish parents, since they work and pay taxes in Poland.	4	1	3
40.	Depriving rich people of the right to receive the 500+ benefit would be a form of penalising them for being successful.	5	-3	-1
41.	The amount of the 500+ benefit should depend on the family's income.	-3	4	0
42.	The 500+ benefit has increased the sense of security among Polish families.	-1	-1	4
43.	The 500+ benefit should be paid only in the first years of a child's life when it is more difficult for the parents to work.	-3	1	-2
44.	The 500+ benefit should be higher.	-1	-5	1
45.	Lone mothers deserve the 500+ benefit more than families with both parents.	-2	2	2
46.	The 500+ benefit should be provided in the form of vouchers for basic products and services for children.	3	5	-1
47.	Most of the 500+ benefit is spent on basic goods.	0	-3	0
48.	There are a number of problems in Poland that need to be solved urgently and that's what public money should be spent on first of all.	1	3	-2
49.	Some people in Poland need financial support more than families with children.	0	2	0
50.	The quality of human capital of the new generation will increase thanks to the 500+ benefit because parents can afford to pay for additional activities that develop children's skills.	-1	-3	4

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
51.	It is unfair that people without children have to contribute to the cost of raising other people's children through their taxes, which are spent to finance the 500+ programme.	2	3	-5
52.	Eligibility for the 500+ benefit should depend on the number of children in the family.	-4	0	0
53.	The state should first provide access to nurseries and kindergartens and only later offer financial support to parents.	5	4	-1

Results of analysis

The correlation matrix of Q sorts showed that respondents' opinions about the 500+ benefit and its beneficiaries varied considerably. The strongest positive correlation was 0.77, while the strongest negative correlation was 0.60. Factor analysis was carried out using principal component analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation. The calculation of factor loadings, which indicate the extent to which the Q sort is typical for the extracted factors, allowed the selection of respondents representing the identified factors (Table 3). Subsequently, the determination of Z-scores was crucial for the construction of factor arrays, which represent an average Q sort for particular factors, i.e. they indicate how a hypothetical respondent with a 100% loading on a particular factor would place statements on the Q grid. Factor arrays are presented in Table 2. Finally, the identified factors were named and described, also taking into account information obtained during brief post-sorting interviews with study participants.

Table 3. Factor loadings (N=28)

Respondent	Loading F1	Loading F2	Loading F3
R1	0.08	0.83	-0.16
R2	0.12	-0.34	0.69
R3	-0.22	0.08	0.78
R4	-0.20	0.59	-0.06
R5	0.23	-0.41	0.79
R6	0.32	0.68	-0.37
R7	0.29	0.16	0.47
R8	0.63	0.24	0.19
R9	0.66	-0.01	0.13
R10	0.46	0.32	0.30
R11	0.51	0.45	-0.57
R12	0.35	0.55	0.21
R13	0.72	0.11	-0.25

Respondent	Loading F1	Loading F2	Loading F3
R14	0.50	0.10	0.40
R15	0.59	0.25	0.35
R16	0.70	-0.35	-0.30
R17	0.65	-0.19	0.17
R18	0.30	-0.33	0.26
R19	0.08	0.62	0.02
R20	0.03	0.69	0.20
R21	0.66	0.22	-0.01
R22	0.47	-0.13	0.38
R23	0.42	0.00	-0.16
R24	-0.20	-0.13	0.80
R25	0.09	0.01	0.46
R26	-0.03	0.79	-0.30
R27	0.79	0.03	-0.14
R28	0.29	0.63	-0.51

Note: Grey cells indicate assignment to a particular factor

The analysis allowed the extraction of three factors represented by 12, 8 and 6 respondents, two respondents did not qualify for any factor (Table 4). Combined, these three factors explained 53% of the total variance, which is an acceptable level in social research (Rahma et al., 2020). The composite reliability of the individual factors ranged from 0.96 to 0.98. An alternative approach using a scree plot helped to distinguish four factors, but the presence of the additional, fourth factor did not enrich the analysis and left six respondents without assignment to an identified factors. It should be noted that the resulting gain in cumulative explained variance would be relatively small: 58% compared to 53% in the case of extraction of three factors.

Table 4. Extracted factors

Factor	Number of participants	Percentage of explained variance
Factor 1	12	19.6
Factor 2	8	17.1
Factor 3	6	16.3

Factor 1: “There are no better and worse children”

According to participants sharing this perspective, all children equally deserve to be supported by the Family 500+ programme (#5, +5) and as they noted *A child is a child* (R9, R22); *If the government decides to introduce this benefit, it should be available to all children* (R16); *There are no better or worse children* (R17) or *Don’t segregate children, if it’s for every child, then it should be every child* (R13). In their view, young people over 18 should also receive 500+ on condition that they are students (#19,

+3), bearing in mind that further education is also expensive. Following this line of thinking, they disagreed that 500+ should only be paid in the first stage of a child's life, when parents' work is significantly reduced (#43, -3). In addition, wealthy people should also be entitled to this benefit, as aspects such as economic and social status should not be taken into account (#2, +4; #15, -4; #41, -4): *It doesn't matter if it's a child of poor or rich and economically successful parents* (R16); *All children deserve to be treated in the same way, does the fact that I exceeded the threshold by 30 groszy mean that my child is worse?* (R22). Respondents agreed that depriving rich people of this support could be seen as a punishment for success (#40, +5). They also thought that 500+ was spent according to the needs of the children (#7, +3). There was also opposition to making the number of children in the family a criterion for eligibility and determining the amount of the benefit (#16, -4; #52, -4; #10, -3): *What's the difference between the first and a third child?* (R10); *The first child is not worse than a second or a third* (R22); *There should be no discrimination between families, no one should be favoured, everyone decides on their own how many children to have* (R13). Similarly, there was strong disagreement with the view that people who are able to save money from 500+ should not be given support because there is no real need for it (#17, -5): *If someone is able to save this money, it means that they are good at managing [their] money* (R21). The issue of foreigners' eligibility for the 500+ benefit also seemed important to those who shared this point of view. They agreed that foreigners should be entitled to the benefit due to the fact that they pay taxes in Poland and taking into account that Poles can receive family benefits in other countries (#13, +4; #39, +4): *Children of foreigners are not different from our children* (R21).

However, there was also agreement that the state should first provide access to nurseries and kindergartens and only later provide financial support to parents (#53, +5), bearing in mind that the lack of places in such institutions is an acute problem for many: *The biggest problem is not the money but access to kindergartens and no benefits will solve this problem* (R21); *There is a problem with nurseries, women tend to leave their jobs or reduce their working time because they can't organise childcare, their commute is too long, there are far too few places in kindergartens* (R8); *I wouldn't need this money if there was a nursery that my child could get to* (R14). Respondents thought that the benefit could take the form of tax relief or vouchers for children's necessities (#9, +4; #46, +3). They also admitted that Poland should keep the 500+ benefit as other European countries provide similar forms of family support (#14, +3). However, despite their rather positive and inclusive attitudes towards 500+, those who shared the view expressed in this factor were convinced that people should only decide to have children if they can afford to bring them up without relying on state support (#27, +4).

Furthermore, they felt that the desire to receive the benefit is not a motive for deciding to have a child and does not encourage to have children (#28, -5; #37, -5) because the amount of the benefit is simply too low: *The benefit is a drop in the ocean of needs and it is impossible to live on it, so it has not motivating effect* (R9); *For people who think reasonably, it is not enough to influence their decisions* (R9). Participants did not expect this family support to have a positive impact on the demographic situation in Poland (#36, -4). Nevertheless, there was no agreement that the benefit should be

higher (#44, -1). According to the respondents, receiving the 500+ benefit will not make children feel more connected to their country in the future (#12, -4).

Factor 2: “The benefit is justified but not in this form”

The second group of respondents were those who felt that the benefit should be provided in the form of vouchers for basic products and services for children (#46, +5), or by reducing the price of products for children (#20, +4): *It should be something other than money to make sure it is not used to pay for expenses unrelated to children* (R19), or *It would help to lower the cost of raising children* (R28). In the opinion of respondents, this change could have a positive impact on the public's perception of benefits: *This benefit is justified but not in this form* (R20); *the public evaluates it negatively* (R12); *If it was in the form of vouchers, people's views might change, it would be perceived differently* (R12). An important issue was also related to the state's monitoring of the use of the 500+ benefit (#21, +5): *The money should be spent on the child's needs but currently there is no supervision in this regard* (R4), especially that there were opinion that in some cases the money is not used to pay for basic goods (#47, -3): *Supervision would prevent misuse* (R19); *The state should not have unlimited trust in citizens and it should have the right to check if the money is spent on children's needs* (R20).

The willingness of parents to work was very important to respondents. According to people who share this point of view, it should be taken into account in the process of granting benefits as an eligibility criterion (#33, +5): *It should be for people who work, even part-time; if they can't work, they should not have so many children* (R6); *If someone doesn't want to work, why help them?* (R26). On the other hand, this solution could play a role of as a motivator to work: *Parents should be systematically encouraged to take up work, even just look for work* (R20), in turn, being active on the labour market would be a good example of behaviour for their children: *Parents should set an the example for the children by having a job* (R6).

The importance of being employed was also expressed by participants who thought that the benefit should take the form of an income tax relief (#9, +3): *Tax relief would be somewhat fairer, it would be a recognition of the value of employment, it would motivate [parents] to work* (R19). People should decide to have children only if they can afford to bring them up without counting on state support (#27, +3): *The state is offering the benefit now, but it may be eliminated one day; the ability to raise a child cannot depend on state support, parents should be financially independent* (R28) or *If they can afford to raise a child, it shows that take care of their life on their own* (R28). In line with this view, parents who refuse to work should lose their entitlement to 500+ (#6, +4). There was also disagreement with the statement that a parent's decision to stop working once the family is entitled to the 500+ benefit can be seen as a form of investment in the child's future (#25, -4).

Similarly to the people who shared the perspective expressed in Factor 1, respondents agreed that the state should first provide access to nurseries and kindergartens and only then provide financial support to parents (#53, +4): *Access to nurseries would be a form of support for parents, mainly to mothers; It would help them return to work; now, even if a mother wanted to go back to work, she cannot if she has no one to leave her child with*

(R28), or *An accessible nursery is a greater motivator to have children than this benefit, because women want to work, and the lack of nurseries may have a negative impact on their procreative decisions. PLN 500 cannot replace a salary* (R28).

Furthermore, they were also in favour of treating the family's income as a factor in determining how much support the family receives from the programme (#41, +4; #40, -3): *The state is supposed to help those in need, not everyone* (R26); *The richer you are, the lower the amount of benefit should be* (R20); *More for the poorest* (R19) and therefore did not see the introduction of additional eligibility criteria in the Family 500+ programme as equivalent to segregating children (#3, -4). For people who share this view, it is right to see parents' socio-economic status as an important criterion for eligibility (#2, -5; #5, -3): *Parents' financial should matter, because children don't earn a living* (R26). Nevertheless, there was disagreement that people who are able to save money from the programme should not be eligible for the benefit because they do not need it so much (#17, -3), emphasising the possible future needs of children: *It is OK that someone is able to save money from the 500+ benefit; it can be used for the children's future, e.g. their studies or to buy a flat* (R19). Respondents were against a progressive increase in support for each subsequent child in the family but also did not think that the benefit should be higher (#16, -4; #44, -5).

There was also a strong belief that the benefit would not make children feel more connected to the country in the future (#12, -5): *I don't think that the child will be grateful for this support, they will think that this form of support was available and they were entitled to it, so they will not treat it as a goodwill of the state* (R28) and that the benefit does not encourage parents to have children, which means that it would not have a positive impact on Poland's demographic situation (#37, -4). Moreover, respondents did not see the introduction of the 500+ benefit as a chance to improve the quality of human capital of the new generation in the future (#50, -3). They felt that there is a number of problems in Poland that need to be solved urgently (#48, +3), such as difficulties in accessing public health care or very low pensions (#38, +3). Taking these aspects into account, they felt that this is where public money should be spent first: *There are cases where huge sums of money are raised to treat sick children because parents are not able to pay the costs on their own, and there is no state support in such situations; I would prefer to know that the state will help me in such situations rather than get the 500+ benefit* (R28). There was also some agreement that the obligation on people without children to contribute to the cost of bringing up other people's children through paying taxes that are spent on the Family 500+ programme evokes feelings of unfairness (#51, +3).

Factor 3: "We are members of one society, so we should take care of each other"

From the point of view of people who share the perspective identified in Factor 3, families deserve to be supported because they bear the cost of bringing up children who will contribute to society in the future (#11, +5) and 500+ could improve the quality of human capital of the new generation (#50, +4): *The quality of capital is increasing, all countries implement such measures* (R24), what finally will affect positively not only their future, but also future of the country: *With this benefit, we appreciate children's contribution to the country's future; they will go to universities, we will have*

more professors and doctors (R7); *Thanks to education, they will have better chances of getting a job in the future and consequently paying taxes* (R5). In line with this, children are the future, so public money should be spent first on their education and development (#18, +4): *Europe is getting old, we need to take care of children's development* (R24). They see the support of families as a primary duty of the state (#31, +3): *The state should take care of all members of society, procreation is an important social function* (R5). In their opinion, it is no improper, when parents count on state's help when they are planning to have a child (#27, -4) and the cost connecting with having children should not be borne solely by the parents (#1, -4). In their view, it is not inappropriate for parents to count on the help of the state when they plan to have a child (#27, -4) and the costs associated with having children should not be borne by the parents alone (#1, -4). They perceived this benefit as a support that made it possible to increase the feeling of security among Polish families (#42, +4), who in their opinion spend this benefit most properly (#23, +3): *Contrary to popular belief, research shows that this money is spent on basic goods and the children's needs* (R5). They also expressed the need for an annual indexation of the benefit, which would reduce the impact of inflation (#32, +3).

Multi-child families were seen by respondents as particularly deserving of support, given their significant contribution to society (#10, +4): *In my opinion, parents make a big contribution to society* (R5). Nevertheless, they were convinced that all children deserve support (#5, +3), including the children of foreigners (#13, +5), which was motivated by the lack of right to exclude someone from this support: *It's absurd to exclude someone from this support only based on their nationality* (R5), especially considering that they contribute to the common good by paying taxes in Poland (#39, +3).

According to the representatives of this Factor, parents who behave improperly should not lose all their right to state support for the sake of their children (#29, +5), but it should be provided in a different form or under special supervision. Furthermore, they agreed that childless people should contribute to the cost of raising children through taxation (#51, -5). This was explained by treating family support as a task carried out by the state, in the same way as providing infrastructure and other public facilities: *We are one society, so we should take care of each other and our needs, roads are also built with taxes, and yet I may not have a car and not use this road* (R5). The respondents believed that receiving the benefit did not foster a sense of entitlement in children or parents (#34, -5; #8, -4): *There will always be those who feel they are entitled to it, this benefit has nothing to do with it* (R24). Similarly, they disagreed that the benefit exacerbates social pathologies (#22, -5). However, they did not believe that receiving the 500+ benefit would make children feel a stronger bond with their country in the future (#12, -3). Participants also disagreed with the statement that many parents decide to have a child mainly because of the prospect of receiving the 500+ benefit (#28, -4), and with the statement that eligibility for this benefit should depend on parents' employment (#6, -3; #33, -3): *Everyone should be able to decide whether or not to stop working to raise a child* (R5), which is linked to the perception of parenthood as a valuable task. Finally, they thought that parents should be the only ones to decide whether to spend money from the benefit immediately or save it for the future, and therefore that it should not affect eligibility (#17, -3).

Identified factors in the context of deservingness theory

The analysis of the identified factors revealed that people apply different criteria of deservingness when considering the Family 500+ programme and its beneficiaries. Factor 1 is primarily associated with the equality criterion described by Laenen et al. (2019). Those who shared this point of view perceived all children as equally deserving of support and believed that children should be treated equally by the state. Consequently, they opposed the introduction of additional eligibility criteria, such as an income threshold, the number of children in a family, or the country of origin.

The representatives of Factor 2 applied the control, reciprocity, need and adequacy criteria that form part of the CARIN(A) framework (Michoń, 2021; van Oorschot, 2000). They favoured the existence of additional eligibility criteria to determine entitlement or benefit amount, particularly in relation to parents' behaviour. The provision of a decent standard of living for their children was perceived as the obligation of parents. Furthermore, they found that people should only decide to have children if they can afford to raise them without relying on state support. This line of thinking is an example of applying the control criterion. The issue of having a job also received much attention. According to people who shared this perspective, being employed or demonstrating an honest willingness to work should play an important role in setting eligibility criteria, which is related to the reciprocity criterion. They also agreed that stopping work should result in the loss of the right to benefit, which can also be attributed to the control criterion. The concern about the proper spending of money from the 500+ benefit by some parents, and support for granting the benefit in a form other than direct payment, was an expression of the application of the adequacy criterion. Finally, agreement that the 500+ benefit should be means-tested and that the state should mainly support those in real need is an implication of the need criterion.

Factor 3 relates to the reciprocity criterion that forms part of the CARIN framework (van Oorschot, 2000) and the social investment criterion identified by Laenen et al. (2019) and Heuer and Zimmerman (2020). From this perspective, there is a strong reciprocal relationship not only between parents and the state but also between members of society who should support each other as an expression of social solidarity. Accordingly, families make a significant contribution to society by raising new citizens, which is particularly important in an ageing society. Therefore, the state should support them. Current children will be future taxpayers and will perform jobs that are important for the functioning and development of society. In other words, they will contribute to the common good in different ways. Furthermore, the Family 500+ programme can be considered a form of social investment, improving the quality of future society by investing in children's needs. Taking all this into account, the cost of having and raising children should not be borne solely by parents, as society as a whole will benefit from having new citizens. The social investment criterion was applied strictly in relation to children, whereas the reciprocity criterion was applied more often in relation to the actions of parents and their role in society.

Discussion

Research in the field of deservingness has shown that people use different criteria to evaluate the deservingness of social programme beneficiaries. As Laenen (2020) stated, deservingness depends on how the group is evaluated in terms of specific deservingness criteria (deservingness perceptions), as well as the importance attached to these criteria (deservingness valuations). The basis for this is the CARIN framework developed by van Oorschot (2000), however, studies conducted by other authors have indicated that the list of possible deservingness criteria is not limited to those described by van Oorschot (Heuer & Zimmerman, 2020; Laenen et al., 2000; Michoń, 2021), and that it can be related to the form of support analysed. This means that the application of deservingness criteria and the focus attached to them are determined by the type of programme being judged, the differences between beneficiaries (secondary targeting; see: Meuleman et al., 2020), prevailing conditions in the country, and even the individual characteristics of those making judgements. In this context, the application of a qualitative research method seems to be a promising tool for better understanding not only the background to the evaluation but also how people grasp deservingness criteria (see: Michoń, 2021; Osipović, 2015; Theiss, 2023), and how different criteria interact to form hybrid criteria. The Q methodology applied in this research combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research. The former allows very detailed material to be gathered on the topic at hand, and enables respondents to explain how they make judgements. The latter provides the “scientific basis of Q”, as van Excel and de Graaf (2005, 8) refer to it, thanks to the use of statistical tools.

The results of the present study show that people’s opinions of the same social programme vary considerably, which is the result of attaching importance to different aspects. This study is particularly relevant because the 500+ benefit is universal, whereas most studies in the field of deservingness concern benefits with limited eligibility, which are intended for people in difficult financial situations. Furthermore, the analysed benefit is specific, currently functioning with well-known eligibility rules, which makes the results more reliable. In turn, the fact that it is also available to better-off families can influence opinions and spark more heated discussions, including considerations about how the needs of families can be understood.

The obtained results indicated a certain degree of ambiguity in relation to the perception of 500+ benefit and their beneficiaries, which seems to be an intrinsic part of research focused on deservingness of families with children. The question is whose deservingness is really being judged: the children’s or their parents’? This is often unclear but it is crucial because the answer seems to determine the application of particular deservingness criteria. This study has shown that people differ in their interpretations of which of these two groups – parents or children – are being evaluated. In line with this, people who represented the perspectives expressed by Factors 1 and 3 tended to focus on children (especially with regard to Factor 1). In turn, respondents who subscribed to the views identified by Factor 2 paid attention to the parents’ situation (especially with regard to material circumstances) and their behaviour (particularly with regard to labour market activities).

Conclusion

The results of the study clearly indicate that the perception of the 500+ benefit and its beneficiaries varies considerably due to use of different criteria for evaluating deservingness. The three identified factors represent different points of view. The first factor expresses the view that all children equally deserves to be supported regardless of their parents' socio-economic status, the number of children in the family, or the country of origin, which is associated with the application of an equality criterion. The second factor focuses on parents' behaviour, such as being employed or willing to take up a job, the obligation to provide children with decent living conditions, and the proper spending of money. Furthermore, there was a conviction that benefit should be paid mainly to families who really need it. All of these issues indicate the use of control, reciprocity, adequacy, and need criteria. The third factor is linked to the awareness of a strong reciprocal relationship not only between the state and families, but also between all members of society, and the perception of the 500+ benefit as a form of social investment that will pay dividends in the future.

The study has its limitations. It should be noted that the results of a study using Q methodology cannot be generalised to the population, nor can they inform us of the percentage of people who share the views associated with each factor. Furthermore, they do not allow us to assume that no other points of view (factors) exist in society. However, despite these limitations, the study seems to be a valuable source of information about the different perceptions of 500+ benefit and its beneficiaries, especially when considering the multidimensionality that is an indispensable part of deservingness research and difficult to capture in purely quantitative research.

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