



# The grasshopper and the ants: popular opinions of just distribution in Australia and Finland<sup>☆</sup>

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Æsopian prologue:

“One fine day in winter some ants were busy drying their store of corn, which had got rather damp during a long spell of rain. Presently up came a grasshopper and begged them to spare her a few grains. “For,” she said, “I’m simply starving.” The ants stopped work for a moment, though this was against their principles. “May we ask,” said they, “what you were doing with yourself all last summer? Why didn’t you collect a store of food for the winter?” “The fact is,” replied the grasshopper, “I was so busy singing that I hadn’t the time.” “If you spend the summer singing,” replied the ants, “you can’t do better than spend the winter dancing.” And they chuckled and went on with their work.”

## 1. The ants and the grasshopper in theories of just distribution

Fables are fables, but they are usually founded on common sense and through the use animals as protagonists, they try to teach elementary truths about (human) life. In fables, these truths and moral teachings are presented like abstractions in algebra. In the story about the grasshopper and the ants, the morality or concept of justice revolves around desert and lack of desert. In principle, the story presents two different concepts of just distribution. According

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to the ants, the end result—the miserable situation of the grasshopper—is perfectly fair. The grasshopper is entirely responsible for her actions “*What you were doing with yourself all last summer? Why didn’t you collect a store of food for the winter?*” Because of this responsibility, the end state is a result of the grasshopper’s own conduct alone. The miserable situation of the grasshopper is more or less a matter of free choice and, therefore, the fable teaches us that “*If you spend the summer singing, you can’t do better than spend the winter dancing.*” And *vice versa*, the prosperity of the ants is due only to their sacrifices, cleverness and hard work. They do not have any obligations towards the poor grasshopper. Thus, according to the ants, a just distribution is a matter of giving people what they deserve (cf. Campbell, 1990, 150). The “antian” morality is a pure expression of the meritocratic view of justice: to everybody according to her/his desert (see also Macintyre, 1996 and Miller, 1976).

At a common sense level the “antian” concept of justice based on merit is very compelling and it is indeed embedded in the basic mental structures of humanity. For instance, all the major religions rely very heavily on the idea of merit as a basis of salvation and on moral book-keeping attached to this idea. People will be divided into sheep and goats according to their previous deeds. It is therefore no wonder that meritocratic ideas are manifested not only in our everyday evaluations of just distribution, but many social policy systems also embody meritocratic views. For example, all entitlements and rewards related to previous income and employment or work history are expressions of the “to everybody according to his/her merits” thinking.

Meritocratic theories have also played a central role in the social philosophy of thinkers such as Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick (Campbell, 1990, 150). Probably the best known contemporary desert theorist is Sadurski (1985) who, in his impressive book “Giving Desert its Due: Social Justice and Legal Theory” (1985), analyses the connections between justice and desert. Sadurski’s so-called equilibrium theory seeks to establish a proper balance of burdens and benefits and develops a concept of justice that is based on desert: justice requires that people will get precisely what they deserve. The basic idea in meritocratic theories is, as was stated above, that people should be treated as responsible agents and that what people deserve always depends on their own past actions (Rachels, 1991, 136). Thus, according to the meritocratic view, desert and justice always have a historical reference.

In his defence of laissez-faire capitalism, Nozick (1974) comes close to the historical view of just distribution expressed in the meritocratic approach. According to Nozick’s so-called entitlement theory, everybody is entitled to his/her holdings if these holdings are acquired “in accordance with the principle of justice in acquisition.” Thus, if we rely on either Sadurski and other meriticians or on Nozick, the ants are entitled to their store of corn: they have acquired the corn in a historical process through their hard work, which is fully in accordance with the principles of just acquisition. Thus, the ants have no responsibilities towards the grasshopper. Therefore, in a wider sense, there are no justified grounds for example for governments to tax or to take away by other means our legitimate holdings and to distribute them to somebody else who is regarded as needy. The state, it is assumed, does not do anything positive for us (Arthur and Shaw, 1991, 62).

This strong belief in human agency and purposive action is a central theme in rational choice theories, too. Theories emphasising rationality assume that people are able to make accurate cost–benefit analyses to determine how well their choices will serve their preferences

in future and what consequences their actions will have (see e.g., [Elster, 1985](#); [Coleman and Fararo, 1992](#)). However, this rational choice view of purposive action can be easily challenged. People may wish to behave rationally but in everyday life they often lack the mental power to carry through rational actions, or the information available or people's ability to process information may be insufficient for judicious decision-making (e.g., [Kangas, 1997](#)). Rationality is therefore bound by various individual or collective constraints ([Simon, 1955](#); [Marini, 1992](#); [Etzioni, 1988](#)).

These constraints that either limit the decision-making capacity or choices of individuals are crucial when debating the meritocratic concept of just distribution. In the *Æsopian* case both the grasshopper and the ants are supposed to have been acting purposively. During the summer, everybody knew that the winter would soon come and that they would need some stores to survive it. Nevertheless, the choices made by the grasshopper and the ants were completely different: the grasshopper chose a merry summer singing and playing, while the ants prudentially invested for the coming winter. The final distribution described by *Æsop* can be regarded as justified if the outcome really was based on actions committed by informed individuals choosing among equal choice sets. Quite simply, the poor grasshopper is to be blamed for her bad choices. However, the moral interpretation of the situation will be totally different if the choices of the animals were not based on their free choice but were dictated by the nature of their species. In this case, the grasshopper was—by her nature—ordered to sing and play, whereas the ants—also by their nature—could do nothing but gather corn. Thus, the choices were constrained by factors beyond the control of the actors, and therefore, the unequal distribution of corn that disadvantaged the grasshopper can be regarded as inequitable and unjust. The poor grasshopper had no choice and her appeal for getting some basic necessities was justified. Consequently, we can question the distribution based on the desert principle and replace it with the need principle. According to [LeGrand \(1991, 88\)](#) distribution according to need can be viewed as justified as it compensates people for lacking elements critical to survival that are beyond their control.

As said above, meritocratic elements are present in all major religions. But interestingly, in most cases there are also loopholes in the strict religious demands for good conduct. In many cases, mercy is stronger than law. Consequently, mercifulness has motivated always human behaviour and the grasshopper tried to plea for that.

## **2. The ants and the grasshopper in social policy discourse**

The central issue in theories of just distribution is closely related to the capacity of individuals to make choices. This is also reflected in political debates on the proper degree of public involvement in the distribution of resources through various welfare state programmes. By and large, this is a question of how rightful the need is perceived to be, or how inescapable the social risks from which the need emerged are. If the need is seen as unavoidable, such that the sufferer cannot remove it through his or her own actions, the rendering of help is generally supported (the grasshopper had no choice). The old and the disabled are seen as “good” underprivileged (“the deserving poor”), deserving of support and security. The polar opposite to them are those users of welfare benefits whose difficulties can be perceived as caused by their own choices

(the grasshopper deliberately chose singing instead of working). These “bad” underprivileged (“the undeserving poor”) have brought their misfortunes on themselves—why should others have to help them (“*What you were doing with yourself all last summer?*”) Similarly, in his study of opinions on selectivity and universality in The Netherlands, van Oorschot (1997) concluded that the first question the Dutch public is likely to ask before giving benefits is: “why are you needy?” The fact that alcoholics and the social benefits intended for their aid do not enjoy wide public support is an example of this kind of thinking. It is also among the reasons why social assistance compared with pensions and child allowances, for instance, is not supported by the public opinion (Kangas, 1995; Forma, 1999).

To oversimplify somewhat, we can distinguish between the leftist and rightist views of (income) distribution and the role of social policy in intervening in and altering this primary distribution (LeGrand, 1991, 100). What is generally considered the so-called leftist approach puts greater emphasis on the unequal structure of society and on factors that are beyond the control of individuals (Taylor-Gooby, 1991, 43–45). The need for statutory welfare benefits is linked to such structural factors as class divisions, unevenly distributed educational opportunities, and the labour market, which create and sustain inequality and poverty. In the United States, for example, race and connected phenomena have contributed to the emergence of the so-called new underclass (e.g., Wilson, 1987, 1993). In Europe more recently, fundamental changes in the labour market and the consequent large-scale unemployment are structural features that appear to have created a marginalised lower class living on social assistance (e.g., Marshall, 1997). According to this leftist view the grasshopper is a victim of desperate circumstances and should be helped.

The rightist view of distribution fosters a strong belief in equal opportunities and free choice and therefore argues that unequal primary distribution on the basis of labour is fair and that there are no reasons to distribute from the ants to the grasshopper. Instead of structural factors beyond the individual’s control, the rightist view emphasises the characteristics of the individual: the need for welfare is not seen as a consequence of unequal structural properties of society that produce indigence, except perhaps to the extent that society has developed support systems that allow people to throw themselves at the mercy of others, that is to say, the very welfare state becomes an incentive for the grasshopper to live off the ants’ efforts. In short, in the rightist view, social policy is a disincentive to work. If social benefits provide a higher standard of living than honest work and education do, then the welfare state is faulted, for it actually tempts people into idleness by its over-abundant support.

On the level of sociological theory, discussion of incentives provides a valid angle from which social benefits can be examined. It can be assumed that people react personally and directly to societal incentives. Internationally, perhaps the most eloquent arguments about incentives have been made by Murray (1984) in his influential work *Losing Ground* (see also Murray and Herrnstein, 1994). Murray claims that social policies are a societal construct that produces an “incentive to fail.” Welfare benefits tempt people to become unsuccessful and to jump on the welfare wagon. In Murray’s model, welfare reciprocity is explained as a combined effect of two negative influences. First, the welfare state offers a vast array of perverse encouragements, “incentives to fail,” that seduce people into being lazy and abandoning personal initiative. Second, there are individuals, weak grasshoppers, who react more readily than others to these incentives. On the whole, then, social assistance reciprocity is explained as the

result of individuals' rational and voluntary choices. Need for welfare is ultimately seen as a personal problem. From this vantage point the tax–benefit system works totally perversely: it takes from the hard-working, deserving citizens and gives to the undeserving that through their own misconduct are in trouble (for a fuller discussion, see Goodin, 1988, 278–309).

The aim of this paper is to study the extent to which the deservingness/undeservingness criteria affects the opinions of general publics. To what extent do wished-for benefits to the deserving poor and the underserving poor differ? Our data is collected in two welfare states that are usually (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi and Palme, 1998) regarded as representatives of completely different welfare types; Australia belonging to the regime relying on means-tested welfare programmes and Finland representing the Nordic universalistic model combining universal basic security with income-related benefits. When it comes to the actual and perceived income differences and the willingness to reduce differences countries are polar cases (see Fig. 1). Thus, the comparison of these two cases is warranted from several points of view.

It is argued that universal policies which benefit large numbers of people are more popular than selective ones targeted solely at the underprivileged. Universal systems to which all citizens contribute, and which in turn benefit all, are endorsed by large sections of the population (Korpi, 1980). As long as contributions are counterbalanced with future benefits, the potential for backlash and opposition to social policies remain small. Conversely, a policy that involves need assessment leads to problems. In such a system, the great majority of the populace is required to finance programmes through taxation, but means-testing locks most of them out of benefits. Selectivism strikes a wedge between those who contribute (the well-off middle classes) and those who benefit (the worse-off) from the system. Therefore, selective social policy programmes produce a strong likelihood of welfare backlash and protests against

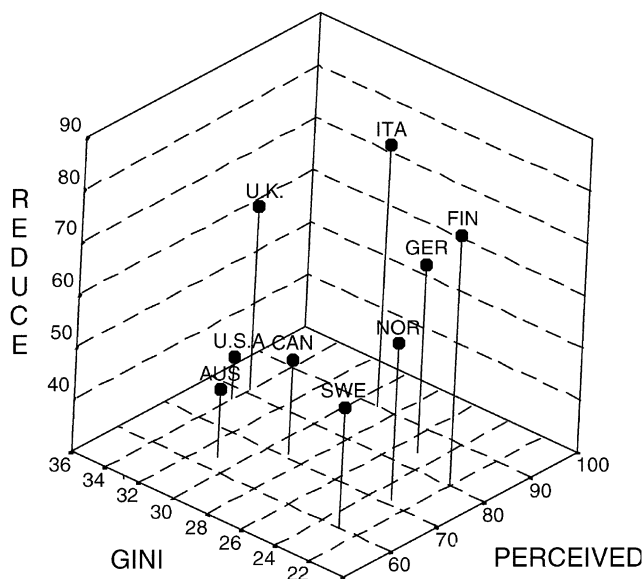


Fig. 1. Real income differences (GINI coefficient  $\times$  100), perceived income differences and the willingness to reduce differences in some OECD countries by 1990.

the biased balance between benefits and burdens. Thus, the selective model lags behind the universal model when it comes to the popular support of the schemes.

The rationale in this kind of reasoning has its roots in an idea that all institutions, including social policy, do have important feedback effects on people's opinion and behaviour—as exemplified by Murray above. In seeking answer to the question: “what should the state do?” Rothstein (1998) advocates this kind of institutionalist approach where bi-directional causal links work between norms prevailing in society and social institutions. On one hand, social norms affect the ways social institutions are shaped. On the other hand, social norms are partially explained by the institutional set-ups of policy-making arenas, i.e., causal loops run first from political decision-making to social institutions that in turn affect citizens' opinions on just social policy, distribution of the benefits and burdens. Rothstein concludes that just political institutions create a citizenry that is interested in justice. Thus, we would expect to find a correlation between people's attitudes and welfare regimes, i.e., the regime type has some bearing on our opinion of just social policy measures.

There are some studies that have assessed the issue, but the results of these studies are a bit inconclusive, e.g., Papadakis and Bean (1993) found no connection between attitudes and the welfare regime, whereas Svallfors (1997, 295) concluded that “there is indeed reason to speak of four distinct regime types in attitudes to (re) distribution.” Studies carried out within a single country have produced more unanimous results: means-tested programmes are supported to a lesser extent than universal social policy measures (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Kangas, 1995; Forma, 1999; Svallfors, 1999). However, the problem in these studies is that it is hard to disentangle whether it is the characteristics of the program or whether it is the characteristics of the clientele that is decisive. Usually universal programmes are paid to the “deserving poor,” whereas the means-tested last resort benefits are usually targeted to the “undeserving” grasshoppers, which may contaminate the interpretation of the popularity of the system. If the hypothesis of the impact of the characteristics of the clientele is true, we would expect to find large differences in opinion of the wished-for benefits for the undeserving and the deserving. If the institutionalistic approach described above has some importance, we can suppose that thinking in terms of selectivity is more pronounced in Australia with an emphasis on targeted benefits than in Finland, with a longer tradition of universal, unconditional income transfers.

We shall also examine the data to detect the effects on the responses of such background factors as socio-economic status, education, gender, labour market position, age, income level and political affiliations.

We first go through the data and methods used in the subsequent chapters. Thereafter we place the two nations in a wider international perspective through the studying of opinions on the present income distribution and on “secondary distribution,” pertaining to the governments' measures (taxes and income transfers) aimed at redistributing national wealth from the rich to the poor. The aim of this sketchy international comparison is to motivate the selection of the two countries for further analysis. As will be evident in this comparison, Australia and Finland display rather opposing opinion patterns. Thereafter, the analyses focus more deeply on the Australian and Finnish cases. First, we examine how the legitimacy of the present income distribution is attached to demands for government to intervene and reduce differences between the poor and rich in these two countries. Then the rest of the article will concentrate on the extent to which the desert principle works in these two countries.



## 2.1. Data and methods

The subsequent analyses of public opinions on income distribution and the proper level of benefits in Australia and Finland are based on the International Survey of Economic Attitudes (ISEA) that provides ample data on the role of government in welfare provision and other policy areas. The ISEA surveys were conducted in late-1994 and early-1995. In Australia, the survey was conducted by the National Social Science Survey at the Research School of Social Sciences, the Australian National University, Canberra. The sample was compiled from the Electorate Statistics by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Since the ISEA was a part of constantly rotating opinion surveys, it is hard to define the exact response rate for the ISEA wave. Analyses presented in this study are based on those 1,378 valid responses received by the end of 1994 (for a closer description, see [Zagorski and Carne, 1995](#)). Middle-aged respondents and males are slightly over-represented in the Australian data, while data on the sector of employment and political variables is close to the distributions among the total population (see [Appendix A](#)).

The Finnish survey was also conducted as a postal survey by the Department of Social Policy, University of Turku. The Finnish sample ( $n = 3,100$ ), derived from the Central Population Register, represents the total population aged from 18 to 70 years. The effective response rate was 56%, which amounted to 1,737 questionnaires returned (for a closer description, see [Ervasti, 1995](#); [Forma and Kangas, 1999](#)). As in the Australian case, males are over-represented in the Finnish data. The same goes for the Social Democrats and Conservatives, whereas the age and socio-economic compositions of the database are more or less identical with the population data ([Appendix A](#)).

In most previous opinion surveys, explanatory background factors such as class position, educational attainment, age, income, gender, labour force status, and political affiliation have been utilised to explain variation in opinion. Therefore, these factors are also included in our analyses in order to see how much, if anything, they can explain in differences of opinions of just distribution.

However, in international comparisons there are always problems in making some of these variables comparable between nations: class position, educational attainment and political affiliation are examples of such “difficult” variables. When it comes to the respondents’ class position we used a subjective scale where the respondents could choose their class positions on a continuum consisting of ten grades.<sup>1</sup> In regression equations, the full range of the variable was used, whereas in multiple classification analyses (MCA) these 10 grades were collapsed into four classes so that class 1 is the lowest and class 4 pertains to the highest. Also income, originally a continuous variable, was collapsed into a categorical variable containing four groups based on income quartiles. This collapsed variable is used both in regression and MCA runs.

Each country has its own specific educational system. Therefore, it is hard to compound cross-nationally homogeneous variables of the level of education. In this paper, the variable called education is compiled on the basis of a question concerning the respondent’s highest grade of school (*What is the highest grade of school you have completed?*). Although the grades of school are differently named and the grades require a different number of years to complete, it is possible to construct an indicator that is not fully comparable but satisfactory for

our purposes. The school grades vary from “no further education,” that is to say the person in question has completed only the compulsory schooling (or in some cases less), to “university degree” (bachelors, masters and doctors). Vocational education and various college diplomas are placed between these extremes. Thus, we operate with a four-degree scale of education: *no further education (grade I, in MCA models shown later)*, *vocational education (grade II)*, *college (grade III)*, and *university degree (grade IV)*.

The classification of political parties into one continuum is a difficult task even within a single country. The problem is more serious in international comparisons. In the Australian context, we used the scale of three categories: Liberal Party, “others” and the Labour Party. The Finnish party system was reduced into four major groupings: National Coalition (conservatives), the Centre Party, “others” (mainly referring to the Greens) and Socialists (including the Social Democratic party and the Left Alliance). In both countries, this classification to some extent represents the political spectrum from right to left (perhaps with the slight exception of the “others”). However, one should remember that the parties classified as the “most rightist” parties in their countries are not necessarily equivalent to similarly classified parties in other countries. The same goes for the other political groups, too. Therefore, we must be careful not to directly compare parties across nations without having regard to their differences.

When analysing the interaction between opinions and various background variables, two basic methods—path analysis and MCA—are utilised in the subsequent analyses to control for effects of other intervening variables. To pick up national differences there are two strategies available. First, we could use separate datasets for individual countries and then compare results over countries. Second, we could pool the national datasets into one large database and use countries as additional variables. We will apply both methods. In regression analyses, mainly for space considerations, we follow the first option. Instead of merging the country datasets together, we try to find general patterns and to unravel how different categories of people contrast with each other in the two countries. When analysing determinants for the deserving and undeserving poor we merge the two national datasets together and perform additional analyses on that larger dataset.

### **3. Opinions on the present distribution and the role of the government**

International comparisons of income differences show that inequality is low by international standards in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Redistributive taxes and income transfers are mainly responsible for that. Some analysts (Graubard, 1986) have suggested that in the Nordic countries there prevails a special “passion” for equality. At the other end of the inequality continuum we find that the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia display high levels of inequality for the Western hemisphere (see e.g., OECD, 1995; LIS, 1998). However, the factual income differences do not necessarily coincide with people’s perceptions of differences and their willingness to reduce these differences (see e.g., Forma, 1999; Saunders, 1999; Marshall et al., 1999). There may be countries with large income differences where these differences are regarded as a legitimate result of income formation processes and, therefore, there are no strong demands to reduce these differences.



Fig. 1 assesses the issue. In addition to the actual income differences (GINI), the figure also displays the perceived differences (percent of those respondent who agree with the statement “income differences in this country are too large”) and people’s willingness to reduce these differences through governmental actions (the percentage of the respondents that agreed with the statement “it is the task of the government to reduce income differences). Data on factual income distribution is derived from Luxembourg Income Study (LIS, 1998), and data for opinions is based on International Social Survey Program. The Finnish data comes from the ISEA.

A couple of stories can be told. First, the actual income distribution is not very strongly connected with perceived differences ( $r = 0.17$ ) or the demands for “secondary,” governmental redistribution. In fact the correlation between the actual distribution and the willingness to reduced differences is negative ( $r = -0.43$ ).

Second, countries behave very differently. In Sweden, and to some extend Norway follows the same pattern, income differences are small, people perceive them small and do not demand redistribution. Other group of countries behaving “correctly” consists of the U.K. and Italy, with their large differences that are also regarded as too large and, consequently, the demands to equalise income distribution are vociferous. Finland with her small differences and strong feelings—about 80% of the respondents think that income differences are too large and they must be reduced—deviates from the other countries. If there is such a Nordic thing as “passion for equality” it is very strong in Finland. At the other end of the continuum, we find that Australians are among those who are most satisfied with the large real differences and not willing to alter the situation. The American case is its own story. Real differences are larger than in any of the other countries and almost 80% of Americans also think that differences are too large. Interestingly enough, only 40% want the government to reduce differences—something that indicates the low legitimacy of public sector involvement to redistribute social goods in the United States. The American case, and perhaps also Australia, pertain to the “antian” vision of a just distribution of resources: the primary distribution based on individuals’ efforts or individual characteristics is just and therefore there is no need for governments to redistribute resources through “secondary distribution” from the well-off to the poor, or to put it in Nozickian terms, the ants have a moral right to their holdings. In the “leftist” or “grasshopperian” countries income differences are regarded as too large and reducing these differences is considered to be a central task of the government: the government should tax something away from the ants in favour of the poor grasshopper, as seems to be the case, e.g., in Finland and Italy.

A third lesson that can be read from Fig. 1 is that in the world of redistribution it is very important how the things seem to be, not necessarily how they actually are. The association between income differences and the willingness to reduce differences is weaker than the association between the perceived inequalities and demands for secondary distribution ( $r = 0.70^*$ ). Much seem to depend on the perception of inequality. This psychological factor makes it important to study in which way the perception of inequality is attached to the willingness to redistribute and how these two dimensions are linked to a number of background variables.

Fig. 1 hints that by international standards Australia and Finland indeed seem to be polar cases when it comes to the actual income distribution, the level of perceived income inequalities and the willingness to alter the situation by political measures. In the subsequent

analyses, we are particularly interested in the public opinion on the present distribution, that is to say, whether the overall income differences are regarded as legitimate or not (whether the ants are, in a Nozickian spirit, entitled to their holdings) and whether the general publics want to diminish differences in resources (whether the ants should give something to the grasshopper).

In our surveys, the opinion towards the present distribution of societal goods, in this case income, was measured by two separate questions. The first one argued that “Differences in income in Australia/Finland are too large.” The second one stated that “There is too much difference between rich and poor in this country.” The respondents could react on a scale consisting of five alternatives: (1) totally agree; (2) to some extent agree; (3) don’t know/no opinion; (4) to some extent disagree; (5) totally disagree. These two statements were merged into one variable that is supposed to reflect attitudes towards primary distribution.<sup>2</sup> The variable varies between 2—pertaining to a person according to whom income differences are too large—and 10—indicating that the respondent regards the distribution of national wealth as totally just. As could be expected on the basis of Fig. 1, there are some differences between the countries. In Australia, the mean value of the index is 4.62, indicating that Australians regard their income distribution as slightly unjust, whereas the Finnish mean (3.78) hints at a stronger experience of unjust distribution. The results are in accordance with the story told by Fig. 1.

We used the following three statements to measure respondents’ attitudes to governmental involvement in the distributional processes: (1) “it is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes”; (2) “one of the most important aims in this country over the next 10 years should be to reduce differences between the rich and the poor,” and (3) “income and wealth should be redistributed toward ordinary working people.” Following the procedure described above we then merged these variables into one indicator<sup>3</sup> where the minimum value 3 pertains to the most eager redistributors (strongly agree in each of the three arguments) and the maximum value 15 pertains to the hard-boiled ants who are strongly against redistribution. There are again statistically significant differences between the nations, the Finns being clearly more in favour of government actions (the mean value for the Finns is 5.7) to reduce income differentials than the Australians (the mean value for the Australian respondents is 8.2).

As became evident in Fig. 1, at least at an aggregate international level there is a connection between the legitimacy of the present distribution and the wished-for governmental actions. Those who regard the present distribution of rewards as unjust, either because of unequal possibilities to obtain those rewards or because the very acquisition process is held as unjust, are more likely to insist on governmental involvement in secondary distribution. In order to see to what extent this macro-level finding is supported by results from micro-level data and to see which background factors explain differences in the feelings of justice or injustice in income distribution, a path analysis was performed. The results from this exercise are displayed in Fig. 2. Only statistically significant associations are marked with arrows and the significance is indicated by stars ((\*) significant at 5% level; (\*\*) significant at 1% level; (\*\*\*) significant at 0.1% level).

When it comes to the present income distribution, the main story told is that in both countries class and political affiliation are strongly connected with the opinion on whether the distribution

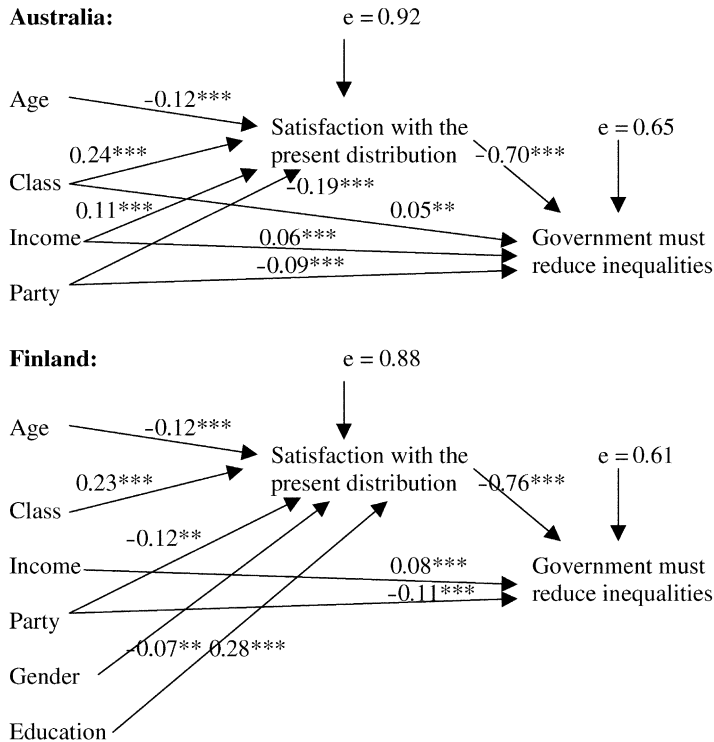


Fig. 2. A path diagram of the opinions of the present distribution and the demands for government to intervene in distributional processes in Australia and Finland.

is regarded as just or unjust. The young, the rich and those sympathising the political right are the most satisfied with the *status quo*. In Australia, income is also an important explanatory variable: the high income earners being the most satisfied. In Finland there is a statistically significant difference between genders (women being more critical) and educational levels (those with highest educational attainments being the most positive).

As can be seen in graph 2 the attitude on the present situation is the most important factor when explaining the opinions on the governmental involvement. If this attitudinal variable were omitted from the equations, the adjusted *R*-squares in our equations would be much lower. Further, if the attitude on primary distribution were omitted, the class position, income and party preferences would be important background factors in both countries, and in Australia gender (men being more hostile to redistribution) and age (the oldest being the most eager redistributors) would also become significant. Coefficients produced by models including attitudes on the present distribution are significant only for income and party affiliation in Finland, and Australia also class position is important. In Finland, respondents' political preferences and class position have their own impacts.<sup>4</sup>

To conclude our short review of attitudes towards present distribution and the wishes for stronger governmental intervention, Australians seem to be more inclined towards the “antian” attitude, while Finns seem to have more understanding for the “grasshopperian” plea for

redistribution. However, in both countries opinions of the perceived justness of the present situation is a very important determinant of opinions of the proper role for the government in redistributing societal good.

#### 4. Benefits for the deserving and the undeserving poor

In principle, the analysis above dealt with the issue of whether the ants have the right to their acquisitions or not. The subsequent sections will more closely inspect the legitimacy of the grasshopperian plea. Our moral judgement of the fate of the grasshopper depends to a great degree on whether the grasshopper had acted deliberately stupidly and according to her free will during the summer. This concept of an individual who makes free choices probably plays an important role when we make decisions on whether we should help somebody or not. As stated above, previous opinion studies indicate that those programs that are intended to cover unavoidable risks, that is to say risks that are beyond the control of the individual, are regarded as more legitimate than programmes designed to help people with problems that can be argued as being under the claimant's control.

We can also approach the question from a different point of view. The meritocratic theories of justice are backward-looking in the sense that it is the individual's past conduct that forms the basis for the moral evaluation of his/her deservingness. We can consider the foolish conduct of the grasshopper to be undeserving and therefore deny her plea for help: she is demanding unearned benefits. From the meritocratic perspective, the situation would be different if the ants, who worked busily all summer, lost all their stores in a great flood that totally destroyed the ant hill. The ants who had behaved prudentially had through bad luck lost everything and, therefore, they would have a right to some, if not a full, compensation for their losses. This is how major social insurance programmes work. They try to compensate for losses that are beyond individuals' own control. Therefore, the legitimacy of social insurance guaranteeing compensation is usually stronger than the legitimacy of social assistance that gives help of last resort to the poor, regardless of the reason for their need. Thus, compensation is often regarded as more legitimate than assistance (for a fuller discussion, see e.g., [Goodin, 1988: 278–305, 1993](#)).

We tried to assess the deserving versus undeserving issue, or the grasshopper and the ant dilemma, through a number of questions giving some background information about the reasons why the person in question is in need. In the first frame, the claimant's need was beyond his/her control, whereas the second frame displayed the need for help as volitional. In the former case we asked two questions about the wished-for levels of benefits paid to persons who (q1) have lost their job through no fault of their own and (q2) to persons who are physically handicapped and, therefore, are unable to work. In the latter "grasshopper" frame, we wanted to find out wished-for benefit levels (q3) to persons who quit their job because they did not like it and (q4) to a healthy person who has never had a steady job. The respondents were offered six alternatives: (1) they should be paid nothing; (2) they should be paid a sum corresponding to 12.5% of the average industrial wage (APW); (3) a sum corresponding to 25% of the APW; (4) a sum corresponding to 50% of the APW; (5) a sum corresponding to 75% of the APW; (6) a sum corresponding to the APW.

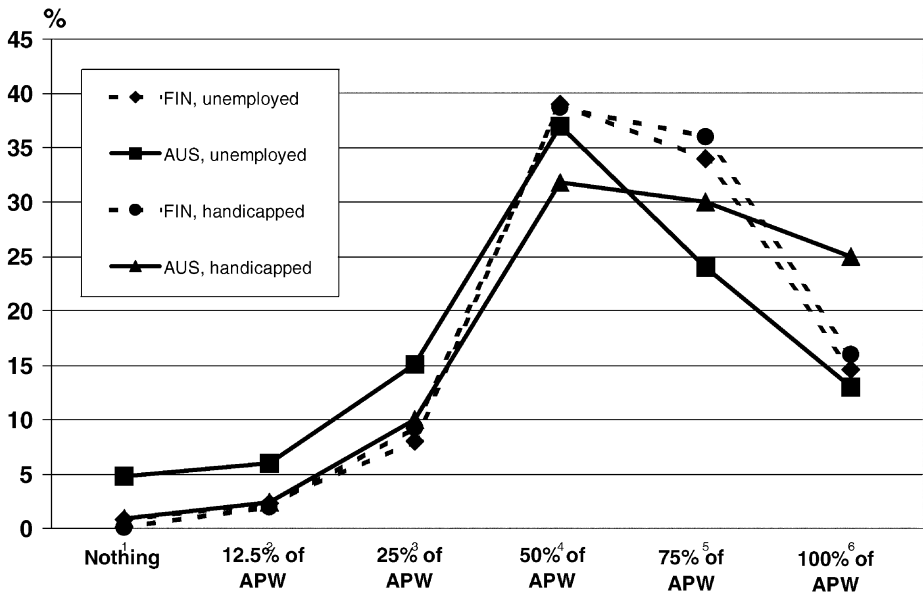


Fig. 3. The wished-for benefits to the deserving poor.

The opinions on proper compensation for those people whose needy situation is beyond their own control are displayed in Fig. 3. The distribution of opinions is fairly similar across the claimants, involuntarily unemployed and physically handicapped, and across the countries. In both countries, the most legitimate level of benefits corresponds to half of the average wage. In Finland the curves for the unemployed and the handicapped are practically the same ( $r = 0.81^{**}$ ), whereas in Australia the curves are more divergent ( $r = 0.54^{**}$ ). Australians seem to be willing to offer more lavish compensations to handicapped people: a quarter of the respondents accept compensations that are as high as the average wage. However, the shape and the generosity of the wished-for benefits for the deserving poor are fairly similar in these two countries.

The international consensus of opinion is broken when it comes to the fate of the undeserving poor; those whose fate can be regarded as volitional (Fig. 4). Those unemployed persons who quit work because they did not like it or those healthy people who never had a steady job, are at the level of public opinion, treated more harshly in Australia than in Finland. As many as 45% of the Australians are not willing to pay anything to the grasshoppers while the figure for Finland is about 15%. In both countries the overall pattern is the same: while the deserving poor were guaranteed benefits at the level of 50–75% of the average wage, the benefits allowed to the undeserving poor are at the 25–50% level. Within the countries, the distribution of opinions on the two types of undeserving poor is almost identical. Thus, the primary impression gained through comparing graphs 3 and 4 is that the crucial meritocratic question people like to ask the needy is: “Why are you needy?” (cf. van Oorschot, 1997, 30). “What you were doing with yourself all last summer?”

We also performed an exploratory factor analysis separately for each of the country samples in order to see to what extent opinions follow the same structural patterns. Factor loadings

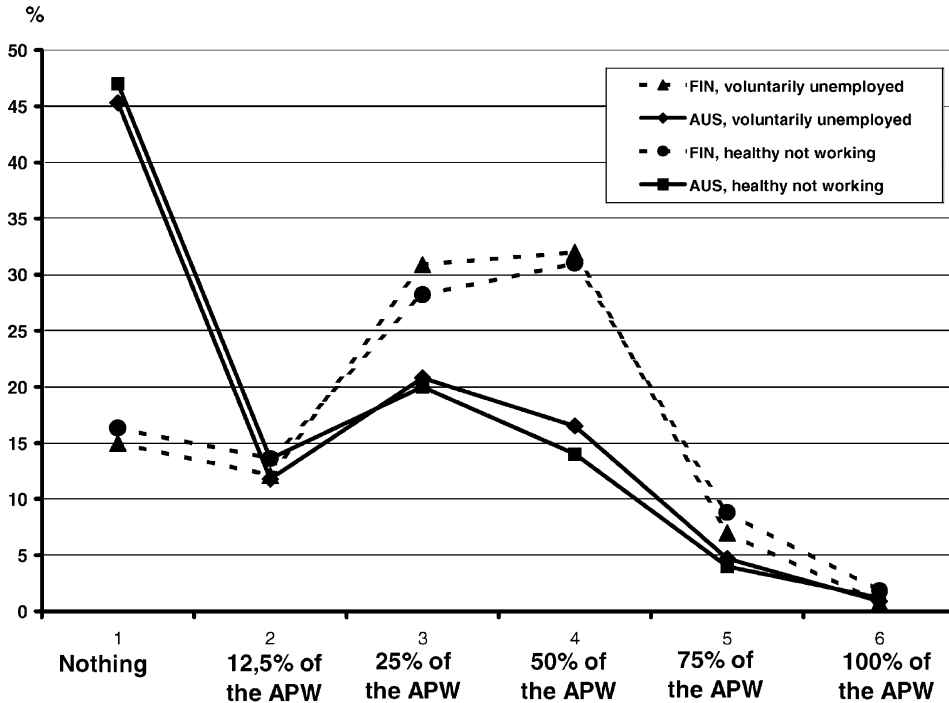


Fig. 4. The wished-for benefits to the undeserving poor.

(varimax rotation) hint at interesting differences between the two countries. In Australia, there are two clearly distinct factors. The two first questions got high loadings (0.80 and 0.91, respectively), and the two latter questions got lower values (0.19 and 0.11, respectively) in the first, “deservingness” factor, while the loadings were almost the reverse in the second “underservingness” factor (0.34 for question 1; 0.02 for question 2; 0.89 for question 3; and 0.90 for question 4). In the Finnish sample, we could detach only one factor yielding pretty homogenous loadings for each question (0.90 for q1; 0.88 for q2; 0.86 for q3; and 0.86 for q4). A tentative interpretation is that the Australians tend to think more in terms of deservingness versus undeservingness when deciding on the proper level of social benefits, while the Finns seem to be more one-dimensional in this respect. The result gives qualified support to “institutions matter” thesis.

Following the Australian opinion structure and neglecting the Finnish factor loadings, the four separate questions were merged together into two indices labelled as deserving (questions 1 and 2) and undeserving dimensions (questions 3 and 4). In both countries the indices vary from a minimum value of 2 (the claimant in question should get nothing) to the maximum value of 12 indicating that the claimant in question should get social benefits that equal the average wage (APW).<sup>5</sup>

The visual inspection of Fig. 4. already indicated that the differences between the Australian and Finnish opinions are small. The result is further supported by our MCA analyses displayed in Tables 1–3. The country variable in the pooled dataset is not significant. The opinions of the



Table 1

Determinants of primary and secondary distribution in Australia and Finland (MCA, adjusted coefficients)

	Primary distribution			Secondary distribution		
	Total	Australia	Finland	Total	Australia	Finland
Age		***				
0–24	–	4.89	–	–	–	–
25–34	–	4.74	–	–	–	–
34–44	–	4.88	–	–	–	–
45–54	–	4.62	–	–	–	–
55–64	–	4.38	–	–	–	–
65+	–	3.95	–	–	–	–
Primary distribution				***	***	***
1 Unjust	–	–	–	4.71	3.83	3.88
2	–	–	–	7.14	6.34	6.01
3	–	–	–	9.58	8.08	8.34
Just	–	–	–	11.60	10.74	11.03
Gender						
Male	–	–	–	–	–	–
Female	–	–	–	–	–	–
Class	***	***	**			***
1 Low	3.70	4.13	3.48	–	–	5.65
2	4.06	4.33	3.73	–	–	6.06
3	4.60	4.85	4.04	–	–	6.02
4 High	5.07	5.62	4.45	–	–	6.49
Income (quartiles)	***	***	**	***	***	
1 Low	4.42	4.54	4.21	7.12	5.88	–
2	4.22	4.52	3.81	7.27	6.37	–
3	4.14	4.48	3.67	7.54	6.38	–
4 High	4.91	5.35	4.30	8.02	7.05	–
Education	***	**	***			
Grade I (no further)	4.15	4.53	3.39	–	–	–
Grade II	4.12	4.52	3.56	–	–	–
Grade III	4.53	4.84	4.05	–	–	–
Grade IV (university)	4.79	4.86	5.12	–	–	–
Labour force status	**		*	***		
Full employment	4.40	–	3.93	7.41	–	–
Part-timer	4.22	–	3.25	7.64	–	–
Unemployed	4.10	–	3.83	7.02	–	–
Retired	3.82	–	3.39	7.47	–	–
Other	4.68	–	4.41	7.49	–	–
Party		***	***		***	***
Liberals/national coalition	–	5.03	4.77	–	6.95	6.79
Labour/centre	–	4.19	3.59	–	6.03	5.95
Other/other	–	5.25	3.49	–	6.10	5.66
Other/left	–	–	3.93	–	–	5.88
Country	***			***		
Australia	4.61	–	–	7.96	–	–
Finland	3.79	–	–	6.42	–	–
$R^2$	15.2	19.0	27.5	60.3	60.5	65.4
$R^2$ total (full model)	15.6	19.1	28.0	65.1	63.9	66.1

\* Significant at 5% level.

\*\* Significant at 1% level.

\*\*\* Significant at 0.1% level.

Table 2  
 Determinants of social benefits for the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor in Australia and Finland (MCA, adjusted coefficients)

	Deserving			Undeserving		
	Total	Australia	Finland	Total	Australia	Finland
Age	—***	—***	—***	—***		—***
0–24	8.37	8.25	8.72	4.91	—	5.67
25–34	8.84	8.67	8.88	4.95	—	5.98
35–44	9.07	9.11	8.71	5.27	—	6.01
45–54	8.91	9.14	8.56	5.00	—	5.69
55–64	8.73	8.71	7.86	4.84	—	5.17
65+	7.60	7.83	6.24	4.31	—	4.05
Gender				—**		—**
Women	—	—	—	5.13	—	5.80
Men	—	—	—	4.75	—	5.34
Class						
1 Low	—	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	—	—	—	—	—
3	—	—	—	—	—	—
4 High	—	—	—	—	—	—
Income (quartiles)	***			—*	—***	
1 Low	8.57	—	—	4.79	4.22	—
2	8.63	—	—	4.98	4.31	—
3	8.87	—	—	5.16	4.92	—
4 High	8.88	—	—	4.72	4.36	—
Education			—**	—***	—***	—**
Grade I (no further)	—	—	8.32	4.65	4.11	5.32
Grade II	—	—	8.53	5.00	4.51	5.68
Grade III	—	—	8.37	4.96	4.60	5.70
Grade IV (university)	—	—	7.89	5.34	4.96	5.65
Labour force status						*
Full employment	—	—	—	—	—	5.46
Part-timer	—	—	—	—	—	6.18
Unemployed	—	—	—	—	—	6.01
Retired	—	—	—	—	—	5.77
Other	—	—	—	—	—	5.32
Party					—***	
Liberals/national coalition	—	—	—	—	3.87	—
Labour/centre	—	—	—	—	4.95	—
Other/other	—	—	—	—	4.53	—
Other/left	—	—	—	—	—	—
Country				—***		
Australia	—	—	—	4.52	—	—
Finland	—	—	—	5.84	—	—
R <sup>2</sup>	4.5	5.0	6.7	8.8	8.4	5.0
R <sup>2</sup> total (full model)	4.8	6.4	9.5	9.5	11.0	8.6

\* Significant at 5% level.

\*\* Significant at 1% level.

\*\*\* Significant at 0.1% level.

Table 3  
Determinants of the framing of the beneficiaries in Australia and Finland (MCA, adjusted coefficients)

	Bonus for deservingness		
	Total sample	Australia	Finland
Age	—***		
0–24	110	—	—
25–34	130	—	—
35–44	124	—	—
45–54	133	—	—
55–64	139	—	—
65+	107	—	—
Gender	—***	—***	—***
Male	114	141	63
Female	140	171	82
Income (quartiles)	—**	—***	
1 Low	128	162	—
2	120	146	—
3	118	143	—
4 High	150	187	—
Education	—***	—***	
Grade I (no further)	143	173	—
Grade II	122	152	—
Grade III	129	161	—
Grade IV (university)	103	122	—
Labor force status			—**
Full employment	—	—	79
Part-timer	—	—	68
Unemployed	—	—	67
Retired	—	—	56
Other	—	—	74
Party			
Liberals/national coalition	—	183	—
Other/centre	—	150	—
Labor/other	—	130	—
Other/left	—	—	—
Country	—***		
Australia	150	—	—
Finland	78	—	—
$R^2$	10.9	7.0	1.9

\*\* Significant at 1% level.

\*\*\* Significant at 0.1% level.

proper benefit levels for the deserving poor appear to be rather constant: the variance explained is very low and just a few of our background variables get significant coefficients. In all three datasets, age is a significant factor, the younger people and the elderly being in favour of lower benefits, while the middle-aged would be more generous towards the deserving poor. In the pooled dataset, income in addition to age plays a certain role, the richer being more generous than those in lower income brackets.

Opinions of the proper level of benefits payable to the undeserving grasshoppers differ significantly between nations also when all other variables are controlled for. The mean for the Australian population is 4.5, while it is 5.8 for the Finnish respondents, and the corresponding figures for the deserving poor are as high as 8.7 and 8.1, respectively. In the total and in the Finnish dataset, age and gender have explanatory power. Again the young and the elderly are stingy compared to the middle-aged, and women would guarantee better benefits than men. In Australia, the respondent's income and political affiliation affect opinions so that the most generous people are those in the middle quartiles and those voting for the Labour Party. Education plays a similar role in all three datasets: the higher the level of education, the better the benefits that the respondent approves of. Thus, in Australia the grasshopper would most probably get help if she were to turn to somebody who had a university diploma, belonged to the second highest income quartile and voted labour. In Finland, the best choice for the grasshopper would be a woman aged between 35 and 44 with college-level education and working part-time.

The analysis above indicates that the frame in which the clientele of social policy are presented has an important impact upon the level of support the beneficiaries are enjoying among the general publics. In Australia, the shift of the frame has much greater impact than in Finland.

Wacquant (1999), like many others, has pointed out there is a clear swap in the political discourse of the welfare state. In the present-day rhetoric, social policy is portrayed as non-contributory assistance to the undeserving poor (Goodin, 1988, 279). Therefore, it is interesting to try to trace those people that are the most prone to change their opinions when the frame of the need of the needy is changed. In our exercise, we created a new variable, "the deservingness bonus," that is a percentile change from the preferred benefits for the deserving to the preferred benefits for the undeserving. The higher the indicator, the bigger the proportional changes when we swap our interpretative frame.

The first impression is that the Australians are more sensitive to the frame swap than the Finns. Benefits for the deserving recipients would be 150% higher in Australia, whereas the Finns would give "only" 78% more to the deserving needy. In Finland, only gender and labour force status play some role (males and the retired being more stubborn in their attitudes). In the total sample and in the Australian data, educational attainment is significantly associated with the bonus. Those with lower educational attainments are more eager to change their minds when the frame is changed. The same goes for women and high income earners. When it comes to Australian politics, the framing effect is strongest among the right-wing parties. However, an interesting and statistically significant three-way interaction between education, income and political affiliation reveals that impact may vary between different subcategories of respondents. The framing impact is strongest among those liberals who have lowest educational attainment but who have high incomes. Moreover, liberals who have university level education but who belong to the lowest income groups are eager to give substantial bonuses for deservingness. Among the labour voters, the relationship seems to work a bit differently. Those labour voters who have the lowest educational attainment and the lowest incomes are prone to give bonuses for deservingness. At the upper end of the educational ladder the attainment of a university diploma seems to lead to high bonuses. In Finland neither educational attainments, incomes nor political affiliations are important.

## 5. Discussion

Our results show that deservingness and undeservingness are deeply rooted in people's mental maps when they evaluate whether somebody should be given support or not and what the proper level of such support should be. The central criteria on which people seem to base their judgement of the justice and fairness of benefits and redistribution is the degree to which the claimants in need can control their need. If the need is perceived as volitional or self-acquired, the general opinion is uncharitable, whereas if the cause for the need is beyond the individual's control, general opinion is more generous. In this sense, both the Australians and the Finns seem to share a common moral code.

This moral code probably explains why the means-tested programmes enjoy less popular support than the universal ones. The clients of means-tested schemes tend more often be labelled as “grasshoppers” who have not behaved responsibly and are demanding unearned benefits and are living on the purse of other people.

Our results also give some support to the institutionalistic approach, emphasising causal loops between characteristics of a welfare regime and people's attitudes (and possibly behaviour, as well). The Australians and the Finns are pretty similar in their opinions of the wished-for benefits for the unlucky that are involuntarily unemployed or handicapped and cannot work. But the respondents differ to a substantial degree when it comes to benefits payable to those work-shy people who don't want to work. The Australians have much harsher attitudes towards such groups than the Finns do. A great number of the antipodeans do not want to give any grain to the starving grasshopper, while the Finns are in favour of some basic security, though at a considerably lower level than what was deemed appropriate for the deserving poor. Thus, our comparisons display some degree of variation between the countries.

But, perhaps more importantly, the study shows that the legitimacy of social benefits is highly dependent on the frame in which the need of the needy is presented. Therefore, political discourse labelling the needy either by the deserving or undeserving frames is of crucial importance. During the 1990s, the latter frame has become more and more common everywhere and in all political camps (Wacquant, 1999).

An eloquent example of this frame was offered by Abbott (2000), the Australian Federal Minister for Employment Services (Abbot could be whoever else in whatever else government in whatever else country): “Australians are a generous people who don't begrudge supporting an extensive welfare system. After all, active support for people in need is a sign of a civilised society. But passive welfare is a symptom of the kindness that kills—a misguided philanthropy that leaves the job-seekers dependent on the state... The Howard government believes that the right attitude is at least as important as new skills.”

Interestingly enough, in the time of globalisation of economies and huge structural economic restructuring, the political discourse everywhere is depicting unemployment and the needs the unemployed have more and more in individual terms. Unemployment is not a structural problem but an individual and volitional problem that can be solved with the right attitude, and rightly or wrongly, the question the needy more often meet is: “*What were you doing with yourself all last summer?*”

## Notes

1. The wording of the question was as follows: “In our society there are some social groups which are higher and some which are lower. Where do you think you are on this scale: 1. High. . . . 10. Low?” The scale was recorded into four classes. Class 1 (the lowest one) consisting of the original values 8–10; class 2 (the lower-middle class) consisting of the original values 6 and 7; class 3 (the upper-middle class) consisting of the original values 4 and 5; and class 4 (the upper class) consisting of the original grades 1–3.
2. Cronbach alpha between the two items was 0.83 in Australia and 0.88 in Finland.
3. The Cronbach alpha between the two items was 0.85 in Australia and 0.87 in Finland.
4. If we interpret the *Æsopian* moral teaching in educational terms we might think that those ants who, when young, are investing in their educational attainment should be rewarded in later days with better incomes compared with those who have not invested in further schooling. In most societies, this kind of educational bonus is probably one of the most legitimate bases for income differentials. In order to see to what extent these two countries differ in their perceptions of legitimate bonuses we related the wished-for salary of a person with a university degree to the average wage paid to a worker with no further education. Our analyses (not displayed here) showed that the educational bonus is somewhat higher in Australia than in Finland. The Australians wanted to give 2.1 times higher an income to a person with a university degree as compared with the worker. In Finland, the corresponding ratio was 1.9. The majority of our background variables had no explanatory power. The only exception was the respondent’s own class position that became statistically significant in both countries. The higher the class position, the higher the educational bonus. In Australia the educational bonus among those classified in the lowest socio-economic group was 1.8, whereas it was 2.3 among the highest class. In Finland the corresponding figures were 1.7 and 2.0.
5. In the case of deservingness questions, the alpha between the two questions was 0.70 in Australia and 0.82 in Finland. The figures for undeservingness were 0.78 and 0.84, respectively.

## Appendix A. Representativeness of the data bases

### ISEA data and the Australian population

	ISEA	Population
Gender		
Female	45.3	50.4
Male	54.7	49.6
	100.0	100.0
Age		
20–29	14.8	21.3
30–39	21.9	23.8



**Appendix A (Continued)**

	ISEA	Population
40–49	26.2	20.4
50–59	15.6	14.1
60–69	14.0	10.6
70–79	6.5	7.8
80–	1.0	3.6
	100.0	101.6
Sector of employment		
Private	72.8	72.4
Public	27.2	27.5
	100.0	99.9
Political parties		
Liberal	37.9	36.8
Labour	44.9	44.8
National	5.2	7.2
Democrats	3.1	3.6
Other	8.9	7.4
	100.0	99.8

Sources: [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(1996\)](#) (ABS): Australian Demographic Statistics 1996, 17, 34, 85, 134.

## ISEA data and the Finnish population

	ISEA	Population
Gender		
Female	47.7	51.5
Male	52.3	48.5
	100.0	100.0
Age		
18–24	11.9	12.1
25–34	19.5	20.7
35–44	20.8	22.4
45–54	21.8	19.3
55–64	14.7	14.1
65–74	11.2	11.4
	100.0	100.0
Socio-economical status		
Worker	36.5	37.0
Farmer	5.2	6.8

**Appendix A** (*Continued*)

	ISEA	Population
Other self-employed	3.8	7.4
Lower white collar worker	35.2	31.8
Upper white collar worker	19.3	17.0
	100.0	100.0
Political parties		
National coalition/conservative	26.5	20.0
Centre party	23.5	25.7
The green	8.3	7.1
Social democrats	29.8	22.9
Left alliance	6.3	10.4
Other	5.7	13.8
	100.0	100.0

Source: [Forma and Kangas \(1999\)](#).

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The grasshopper and the ants: popular opinions of just distribution in Australia and Finland. O Kangas. The Journal of Socio-Economics 31 (6), 721-743, 2003. 2007. Statism eroded? Labor-market benefits and challenges to the Scandinavian welfare states. O Kangas, J Palme. International Journal of Sociology 22 (4), 1-24, 1992. The ant spends the whole summer gathering its winter store, while the grasshopper sits on a blade of grass singing to the sun. Winter comes and the ant is comfortably provided for, but the grasshopper has an empty larder: he goes to the ant and begs for a little food. The ant asks what the grasshopper was doing all summer. They are the representation of ant and the grasshopper of La Fontaine's fable. Tom (the grasshopper) takes life easy while George (the ant) works hard, takes no joy and in turn gains very little happiness from life and at the end Tom, with all his faults, is the lucky one; while George with all his virtues ends dull and upset. He always looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. Though he was forty-six you would never have taken him for more than thirty-five. The grasshopper and the ants: popular opinions of just distribution in Australia and Finland. One fine day in winter some ants were busy drying their store of corn, which had got rather damp during a long spell of rain. Presently up came a grasshopper and begged them to spare her a few. (More). 2.