

## **‘Effortful’, ‘needy’ and ‘freeloader’: Constructions of unemployed people’s deservingness in Finnish parliamentary discussions**

### **Introduction**

In this article, I analyse constructions of unemployed people’s deservingness by focussing on the discourse of Finnish members of parliament (henceforth, MPs) related to unemployment. The parliamentary discussions analysed here were part of the political debates concerning the ‘Activation Model for Unemployment Security’, which took effect on 1 January 2018. The centre-right Sipilä government’s<sup>1</sup> rationale and the official aim of the Activation Model are to encourage unemployed jobseekers to take short-term, temporary jobs or fixed-term work to prevent long-term unemployment and increase the employment rate (HE 124/2017). To achieve this, full unemployment benefits were made available only to those unemployed jobseekers who have 1) been employed for at least 18 hours of paid work; 2) been self-employed individuals with earnings of at least €241.04; or 3) participated in five days<sup>2</sup> of services promoting

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the debate, Sipilä’s government consisted of a coalition formed by the Centre Party, Blue Reform and the National Coalition Party.

<sup>2</sup> These include services that promote employment, such as labour market training, self-motivated study, trial work placements, training in vocational and career choice options, practical work training,

employment within the 65-day review period for receiving unemployment benefits. If the unemployed jobseeker has not met at least one criterion demonstrating their activity, the unemployment benefit is reduced by 4.65 per cent. The Social Insurance Institution of Finland and unemployment funds monitor whether requirements of the activation model have been fulfilled<sup>3</sup>.

Reactions to the Activation Model have been highly mixed, and so far, there is no solid evidence of the consequences of the model (see Kangas and Kallioma-Puha 2019). The benefit cuts and obligations of the Activation Model, however, are planned to be dismantled under Rinne's centre-left government, which was elected in April 2019 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2019). The scrapping of the benefit cuts and obligations of the Finnish Activation Model support the argument made by Jensen (2014) that government ideology matters in terms of the protection of labour market-related risks.

Here, I consider these parliamentary debates on the Activation Model as important subjects for analysis, since they include argumentative deliberation on an issue of public

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recruitment trials or recruitment training during which the jobseeker has the right to an unemployment benefit.

<sup>3</sup> The activation model does not apply if an individual claimed a disability pension and has not received a decision on their claim; if the individual is an informal or family caregiver; if the individual receives a social benefit on account of a disability or injury; or if the individual is paid an unemployment benefit due to a temporary layoff or a reduction in working hours for less than 54 days.

concern by aiming to accomplish political goals, opinion building and discursive framing of values and identities that lie at the basis of collective decision making (Ilie 2016; Ilie 2010a; van Dijk 2000). In addition, the lack of previous research on political discourse related to the Activation Model makes these debates a particularly timely subject for analysis.

The rationale for parliamentary discussions lies in the confrontation of often opposed representations of reality (Ilie 2010b, 61). Hence, I approach the parliamentary discussions as an arena of the contemporary Nordic welfare state, where unemployed citizens' rights and duties are re-organised, and deservingness is negotiated by decision makers. The Activation Model for Unemployment Security can be linked to a larger policy shift in recent decades that expects and requires activity and obligates reciprocity from unemployed people. Workfare rhetoric became part of the Finnish political discourse during the mid-1990s when partisan constructions shifted towards contractual descriptions and a narrower interpretation of the social rights for unemployed people (Nygård 2007).

In my analysis, I elucidate how unemployed people are discursively portrayed and talked into being both undeserving and deserving as a means to legitimise and oppose the Activation Model. I approach deservingness as locally and socio-culturally contextualised, as well as mediated discursively through ideology, culturally available

resources and everyday moralities (Seu 2016, 750; Willen 2012, 814). Within the deservingness literature, I contribute to an emerging body of literature that primarily regards deservingness as a rhetorically accomplished phenomenon.

In what follows, I focus first on the previous literature on deservingness, after which I introduce the data and methodology applied here. Then, I turn to the empirical findings of the analysis — that is, three primary constructions. In all constructions, the analysis focuses on the question of how deservingness and undeservingness are rhetorically made factual. Finally, I reflect on the results and discuss them in relation to the existing literature on deservingness.

### **Previous literature on unemployed people's deservingness**

The literature on deservingness focuses on the question of which groups of needy people are worthy of help, assistance and investment and under what conditions. As such, deservingness is often approached as a continuum, constructing 'hierarchies of deservingness' amongst social groupings (see van Oorschot 2006). Different groupings have fallen in and out of the deserving category over time, relying on varying safety nets (Katz 2013). Within that continuum, unemployed individuals do not score highly when compared to other groups such as children and the elderly (van Oorschot 2006).

To explain the ranking of different groups, van Oorschot (2000) identified five criteria to assess when analysing deservingness:

- 1) control (the less in control of one's situation, the more deserving);
- 2) attitude (the more grateful, the more deserving);
- 3) reciprocity (the greater the previous or future 'payback', the more deserving);
- 4) identity (the closer proximity to 'us', the more deserving); and
- 5) need (the more in 'genuine' need, the more deserving).

Based on these criteria, social policies are often supported if beneficiaries are viewed as deserving — that is, having a good moral character and being genuinely needy through no fault of their own (Meanwell and Swando 2013; Katz 2013). Consequently, public support for welfare programmes depends on the degree to which welfare recipients are perceived as deserving of the help they receive (van Oorschot 2000; Slothuus 2007; Larsen 2008b; Buss 2019). Some scholarly work has examined the impact of perceptions of deservingness on policy (see Appelbaum 2001). Examples include focusing on how rhetorical trends on deservingness help to legitimise changes in policy (see Battle 2018) and how questions of 'who deserves what' shape the discourse of policymakers and politicians (Guetschow 2010; Yoo 2008; Kissová 2018). For instance, Yoo (2008) demonstrated how politicians actively construct notions of deservingness

during policy hearings by framing some recipients as undeserving of social security — such as by portraying them as greedy, non-contributing, fraudulent, burdensome or bad for the nation — and by framing some as deserving by relying on arguments about fairness, compassion and similarity.

Schneider and Ingram (1993) identified varying social constructions of public policy target populations that convey messages about who matters, who is served by the government and who is punished or ignored as well as the actual policy outcomes. These constructions consist of ‘advantaged’, ‘contenders’, ‘dependants’ and ‘deviants’, for all of whom deservedness is viewed differently. Advantaged target populations possess significant political power resources and enjoy positive social constructions as deserving people (e.g., science, business, the military, white people and the middle class). Contenders have ample political power resources generally comparable to those enjoyed by advantaged groups, although they are not viewed as deserving due to their greediness and moral bankruptcy (e.g., the rich, Wall Street bankers and the gun lobby). Dependents consist of groups with little political power and those who are socially and morally constructed as deserving, although helpless and usually in need of discipline. Lastly, deviants consist of individuals with little, if any, legitimate political power and who are constructed as undeserving since they are viewed as having no value to society or as dangerous (e.g., criminals, terrorists and gang members).

Based on an analysis of frames used by Danish politicians and the media, Esmark and Schoop (2017) argued that political reforms reducing social benefits follow increasing positions framing recipients as undeserving. As such, Esmark and Schoop (2017, 420) identified five deservingness frames in relation to the reduction of social benefits that combine economic, social and moral arguments. The first two frames of undeservingness rely on descriptions of individuals as ‘lacking incentives to work and education’ and ‘amoral behaviour’. These frames justify reducing benefits as an economically necessary act in order to increase incentives and individual responsibility for unemployment accompanied by a moral judgement (such as a lack of morals, a degradation of values and a breakdown of norms). The last three deservingness frames consist of a ‘lack of jobs’, a ‘lack of qualifications’ and ‘marginalisation’, all of which call for the collective responsibility for unemployment and support a high level of benefits as temporary compensation, thereby upgrading qualifications or diminishing marginalisation. These frames take into account the insufficient demand for labour and job creation, development as a cause for an unmatched skill set, as well as poverty, and social, psychological and physical challenges. In addition, Monforte, Bassel and Khan (2019) empirically identified forms of deservingness distinctions based on 1) values of trust and respect (e.g., good will, respect, law abidingness, trustworthiness and motivation), 2) specific forms of social and cultural capital (e.g., social status,

normality, education and linguistic knowledge) and 3) values of honesty and commitment (e.g., effort making, responsabilisation and a demonstration of self-improvement).

European active labour market policy illustrates a shifting political consensus about the kinds of people who deserve social assistance (see Møller and Stone 2013).

Contemporary trends in welfare-to-work policies construct the unemployed as a 'problematic' population whose behaviour needs to be changed. For instance, Marston (2008, 361) argues that modern discussions of unemployment and 'welfare dependency' are linked to discursive moves to portray unemployment as a possible threat to the economy and ethical order and, therefore, require a personal transformation of the unemployed subject, such as committing to the work ethic and acquiring skills.

Therefore, notions of deservingness pervade the discursive practices of various activation programmes signalling values such as entrepreneurialism, personal responsibility and self-sufficiency (Gordon 2013). In recent decades, different welfare-related measures and ideologies have been introduced in Finland related to the idea of welfare recipients as undeserving (Blomberg et al. 2017, 211). This may also indicate a shift from the Nordic-type welfare system in which an attitude of gratefulness is unexpected from unemployed individuals and those living in poverty, since the institutional logic of 'Nordic universalism' suppresses discussions of need, control,



identity, reciprocity and attitude, as everyone is deemed entitled to help and support (Larsen 2008a).

### **Data and methods**

The data analysed here consists of transcripts of Finnish MPs from three plenary sessions during the parliamentary discussions on the ‘Activation Model for Unemployment Security’, which took place in December of 2017. The data contain 311 speeches of varying lengths from members of all parliamentary parties (n = 9). Amongst these speeches, 226 were made by opposition party representatives and 85 by representatives of the government’s parties. In total, the debates lasted 14 hours and 49 minutes, resulting in 175 pages of transcribed data. The transcripts were taken from the home page of the Finnish parliament and data extracts were translated from Finnish into English. Some semantic differences exist between the original and translated data extracts.

For this study, I adhered methodological principles of rhetorical discourse analysis (Potter 1996), focussing on political actors’ rhetoric, language use and factual accounting that constructs social understandings and representations of unemployed people’s deservingness. Previous studies focussing on parliamentary discussions have relied on a methodology of discursive psychology to focus on the analysis of rhetorical

choices as well as factual status of interpretation for reality and events (see for example, Every and Augustinos 2007; Íñigo-Mora 2010). The advantage of this approach is that it can examine both broader patterns and themes within talk and resources through which facts are formulated and made credible (Every and Augustinos 2007, 416). As a limitation, this focus overlooks numerous other intriguing aspects of parliamentary discourse, such as analyses of humour, insults, interruptions and/or forms of address.

In my analysis, I focused on rhetorical work regarding the conditions under which some unemployed individuals deserve help and material goods and others do not (see Seu 2016). Therefore, I did not analyse the textual material from a realist stance where the focus of analysis would lie on what is actually factual or what kinds of ‘inner representations’ MPs might have. Rather, I focused on the fact-enhancing strategies MPs used in their talk. During the debates, the term ‘to deserve’ was explicitly mentioned 17 times, referring both to being worthy of something and having earned something.

Parliamentary discourse has its own unique speech acts, which are performed under institution-specific sets of rules, conventions and norm-regulated interactional patterns through which multiple self- and other-representations are enacted and reproduced (Ilie 2010a; van Dijk 2000). Speeches in Finnish plenary sessions primarily address the

public, media and voters as way to explain and legitimise a chosen policy put forth by government parties, and to criticise that chosen policy when delivered by parliamentarians from the opposition (Pekonen 2008, 213).

Thus, I perceive parliamentary discussions as serving as arenas for self- and other-representation, which I treat as not only material for analysis but also as the object of the talk. In addition, I consider that the definition of a policy problem attributes cause, blame and responsibility which MPs need to address (Stone 1989). In particular, retrenchment reforms – such as the Activation Model – are marked by a pressure to spread the blame and responsibility for widely unpopular changes in benefit-eligibility rules (Pierson 1996).

### **Data analysis**

The analysis of the textual material proceeded in three distinct stages. In the first stage of the analysis, I carefully read the textual material multiple times and coded it inductively in order to identify the prevailing patterns in data corpus. The emphasis was placed on identifying all exchanges that referred to unemployment in order to gain insights into how unemployment was construed in MP's talk. In the majority of the MPs' accounts, unemployment was portrayed as a tragedy or as a potential threat to safety, the economy and/or morality. High unemployment was constructed as causing a

financial burden and, then, to represent a fatal threat to the welfare state (see also Nygård 2007, 36). Thus, MPs represented themselves as responsible actors for whom the unemployment issue should be a top priority. However, several interpretations, discursive responses and alternative descriptions emerged regarding solutions to the ‘problem’ of unemployment. Overall, MPs’ talk involved distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, often placing the group of unemployed people into the category of ‘the other’. However, opposing arguments also claimed that unemployed people should not be looked upon as a homogenous group and that unemployed individuals are ‘like any of us’. Different groups from amongst unemployed individuals were identified, distinguishing between the ‘ageing’, the ‘hard-to-employ’ and ‘jobseekers in rural areas’.

After multiple in-depth readings and inductive coding, the second stage of analysis was formulated by choosing all text fragments related to deservingness for further systematic analysis. As a result of indexing of text fragments, I identified the three most-dominant discursive constructions, which I labelled the ‘effortful citizen lacking control’, the ‘needy citizen deserving the welfare state's reciprocal acts’ and the ‘undeserving freeloader in need of an attitude adjustment’. All three discursive constructions overlapped — that is, they were simultaneously maintained, resisted and co-constructed. During the parliamentary debates, MPs took turns, and providing

examples of blame and justifying accounts vis-à-vis the accusations of others and, therefore, were involved in joint constructions. Through defensive accounts, members of parliament responded to statements that made them accountable during the debate. Hence, deservingness constructions were part of the parliamentary co-performance (see Ilie 2010b).

Finally, for the third stage of analysis, I explored in detail what kinds of factuality-enhancement strategies MPs used as means to rhetorically accomplish versions of unemployed people's deservingness as factual. Here, my analysis focussed on how MPs built factuality through the management of categorisation that make them 'knowledgeable', as well maximisation and minimisation strategies, extreme case formulations and 'truth talk' (Potter 1996; Pomeranz 1986). Nine translated data extracts were selected as the most well rounded and illustrative of the constructions and rhetorical devices. I begin the analysis with those constructions most frequently maintained, that is, 'the effortful' and 'needy' constructions. The construction of a 'freeloader', employed less frequently, then, follows.

### **The 'effortful' citizen lacking control**

I designated the first discursive construction of unemployed people's deservingness as an 'effortful citizen lacking control', primarily constructed by MPs representing the

opposition parties. However, two representatives of the government used this construction as a means to object to the Activation Model.

Within this construction, Finns are portrayed as hard-working individuals with a solid work ethic and ability and the will to take the initiative in the labour market. This construction is assumed to apply to the vast majority of unemployed people, as Finns who do their best as unemployed jobseekers to find a job. Effortful citizens' actions are described as constrained by various actors and circumstances, such as Public Employment Services' frontline staff, employers and the local availability of public transport, services and job opportunities. Therefore, within this discursive construction, unemployment is not merely due to an individual's lack of effort since structural factors restrict individuals' actions. That is, lacking control, one does not deserve discouraging accusations, since being effortful does not always lead to success in the labour market. Furthermore, an effortful citizen is portrayed as deserving respectful treatment since they possess little if any control over their undesirable situation as an unemployed person:

*“We think it is unreasonable that despite being active, you do your **absolute best**, you really have the strength to stand up from the deep rift of unemployment and you go and look for a job. And you look, but don't find*

*one. And, despite all this, you are punished. You are punished, even though you have no control over it [getting a job] ... This year, as Finland turns 100 years old, especially, people deserve warmth and leniency, not humiliation, not bullying, not being told that they are lazy. That is the worst thing for an unemployed person, to send even hidden messages — silent messages — that you are actually lazy because you cannot find a job. Because **we all know** that it is a tragedy, a deep tragedy, it is sad.”* (11

December 2017, Arja Juvonen, Finns Party, opposition)

Member of the opposition Arja Juvonen starts by describing the Activation Model with an extreme case formulation, depicting unemployed citizens' efforts as an 'absolute best' performance (see Pomerantz 1986). Juvonen then describes unemployment as 'a deep rift', from whence effortful citizens aim to lift themselves up; however, they have no full control over their sad and tragic situations. In the extract, the tragedy interpretation of unemployment is provided as a fact that 'we all know'.

When constructing the deservingness of an effortful citizen, members of the opposition often used a variety of 'truth talk', employing phrases such as 'it's a cold fact'. These 'facts' often characterised unemployed Finns as deserving individuals. In the extract

below, over 90 per cent of unemployed Finnish people are constructed as effortful citizens with the use of the maximisation strategy:

*“The question here surrounds **a fact** that has been proven **several times** — representative [MP] Kiljunen has brought it up here **many times** — more than **90 per cent and over would like to have a job immediately**. A Finnish unemployed individual does not want to be unemployed, they want to have a job. S/he wants to be a part of this society and enjoy the fruits of it. So they can afford to buy shoes for their children or go to the cinema perhaps once a month, even though one would be in the field of low-paid jobs. I would have wished from this government — particularly from **those ministers who say here that they have experienced unemployment** — to undertake actions that could break unemployment and its associated barriers.”* (11 December 2017, Jari Myllykoski, Left Alliance, opposition)

Here, member of the opposition Jari Myllykoski characterised an effortful citizen as willing to participate in consumption, recreational activities and supporting their family. Yet, due to a variety of activity constraints – such as a lack of financial resources – they are unable to do so. Myllykoski here introduces category memberships of ministers who have experienced unemployment and who should ‘know’ better which actions to



perform to impact unemployment and the various barriers associated with them. In particular, the Minister of Employment, Jari Lindström, has publicly shared his own experiences related to unemployment.

However, within this construction, activity and effortfulness are both implicitly or explicitly portrayed as civic duties and necessities. Welfare systems are deemed as responsible for holding unemployed individuals accountable for ‘making an effort’. It is taken for granted that unemployed individuals demonstrate their activities in order to fit within a deserving category. Therefore, implicitly, this discursive construction establishes the notion that those in control and not demonstrating their effortfulness are deemed undeserving. This placement also relies on less subtle justifications, as seen here:

*“It is clear that we all want labourers to be active and willing to look for a job. That is something that we cannot disagree on.... Actions and conditions need to be created, and it falls to society to do its own part, not to cut funding. Then, it is possible to push a little, if there are services and education available. Then, people have to attend services and education. This is the good side of the active labour market policy.”* (8 December 2017, Lauri Ihalainen, Social Democrats, opposition)

Here, Lauri Ihalainen, as a member of the opposition, begins with a liaison and consensus of governmental policy whereby unemployed people self-evidently need to demonstrate their activities in the form of attending services or educational training in return for receiving unemployment benefits. I interpret the use of the first person plural pronoun here to refer to in-group parliamentarians. The use of the category of 'parliamentarian' can be a strategy to construct a common reality as regards to deservingness, based on a set of beliefs and experiences shared by the speaker and addressees (see Íñigo-Mora 2010, 353).

In addition, Ihalainen's statement indicates an ideological difference that blurred between leftist and rightist parties during the 1990s when Social Democrats adopted a stricter and more reciprocal interpretation of unemployment benefits (Nygård 2007). Thus, if an unemployed person is perceived as controlling their own situation and makes no effort to improve their situation by actively seeking a job, blaming an individual may then be well justified. Therefore, those unemployed individuals who do not demonstrate that they made any effort are held accountable, which can be regarded as an ideal example of an individualistic explanation of unemployment (see Gibson 2009).

In general, when referring to the 'effortful citizen', the Activation Model was deemed as leading to unreasonable benefit cuts that treat an effortful citizen unequally. The factuality of the deservingness of effortfulness is maximised through the use of descriptions involving repetitions, such as an 'unemployed person who tries, tries and tries' and phrases such as 'seeks and seeks for employment from dusk till dawn'. In particular, the deservingness of effortful citizens becomes visible by maximising the number of unemployed individuals in relation to job openings (i.e., 'seven times more'), which links perceptions of deservingness to the degree of job opportunities (Larsen 2008a). Furthermore, facts are also constructed through analogies to parliamentary work and the sick role, cultural references to stories of injustice and narrating stories of individuals who have approached members of parliament and who feel that they lose face and are discriminated against due to this Activation Model despite their best efforts. In addition, frequent quotations of 'effortful' citizens are produced to establish the credibility of the construction.

### **A needy citizen deserving the welfare state's reciprocal acts**

The second discursive construction of unemployed people's deservingness was designated as the 'needy citizen deserving the welfare state's reciprocal acts'. This construction specifically emerged when members of the opposition described the diversity and heterogeneity of unemployed individuals. Typically, this construction

refers to a group of unemployed people deemed unable to work and/or chronically ill (see Gibson 2009, 403). Thus, the construction describes unemployed individuals who cannot meet the activity requirements and should not be obliged to take responsibility due to the variety of activity constraints they face. In this light, according to members of the opposition, not all individuals are able nor can they easily access the labour market given their prolonged unemployment, disabilities, long-term illnesses and limited work ability.

In general, when employing the needy person construction, members of the opposition described the Activation Model through extreme case formulations (see Pomerantz 1986), employing wordings such as ‘extremely brutal’, ‘most horrifying’, ‘historically unjust’ and ‘record-breakingly arrogant’, thereby maximising the deservingness of the needy and the illegitimacy of the government’s acts. Through extreme case formulations, the extreme ‘wrongness’ of the Activation Model is illustrated, as it punishes and humiliates those in the weakest position in the labour market, positioning them as undeserving.

Within this construction, the welfare state is responsible for caring for the needy, who deserve and most urgently need services, support, guidance and benefits in order to achieve job-readiness or stability in their everyday lives. Often, the needy were

described in relation to their counterparts — that is, the ‘easy to employ’ whose unemployment resulted from a lack of job opportunities — or then invited to resist the freeloader construction. The factuality of the construction of the needy is quantified and maximised, relying on percentages and absolute figures (see Kissová 2018), as seen below:

*“And, then, when we take into account that **many** unemployed people have difficulties managing their lives, misusing substances and different health-related restrictions, the situation is poor. According to a doctoral thesis, last year, **27 per cent** of the municipality’s long-term unemployed were unable to work. In addition, **20 per cent** needed treatment and rehabilitation. We should remember that within the group of unemployed there are many kinds of people. In addition, this cut will hit worst amongst this group whose situation has already been weakened in other ways.”* (8 December 2017, Heli Järvinen, Green Party, opposition)

In the extract above, the factual neediness of the needy becomes visible when member of the opposition Heli Järvinen cites findings from a doctoral thesis along with specific percentages. Järvinen also refers to statistical evidence to construct deservingness by reminding that intragroup differences determine some individuals as deserving and

requiring protection (see Every and Augoustinos 2007, 420–421). In general, members of the opposition referred to research and various experts and statistics when constructing the needy. The deservingness of the needy was made factual by minimising the number of individuals benefiting from the Activation Model as opposed to the exact number of people likely to ‘suffer’ from it. Introducing exact figures of unemployed people in the weakest position and unable to meet the activity criteria substantiated such arguments. This contrasts to the ‘few’ who could gain employment, as seen in the extract below:

*“We have over **40,000** [people], sick and disabled unemployed people in the unemployment statistics and dependent on unemployment benefits. We have **45,000** long-term unemployed people. These are the people who will suffer from this law. There are **a few** who might succeed in gaining employment, but the government’s own estimates on [success of] employment are also **very low**. Instead, estimates of the increase in costs related to income support are **unreasonably high**. We both **know** that from there [income support], it is even more difficult to gain employment.”* (8 December 2017, Tarja Filatov, Social Democrats, opposition)

In this extract, Tarja Filatov, as a member of the opposition, views the Activation Model as leading to passivity instead of activity since an increasing and ‘unreasonably high’ number of unemployed individuals will drift into poverty, require food aid and last-resort social assistance. Therefore, the needy are also constructed so as to provide a warning of individuals who may fall into ‘no-exit poverty’ hampering the employability of an individual and proving costly to taxpayers. Individuals on welfare assistance are specifically represented as ‘trapped in welfare’ with little hope of getting off benefits. Furthermore, the needy are also portrayed as a potential inner safety threat due to their hopelessness, anxiety and exclusion. Young men should be a particular worry since they may easily fall into this category.

Rhetorically, deservingness is made factual by appealing to a speaker’s close personal experience. Members of the opposition present themselves as individuals who regularly meet and encounter people experiencing prolonged unemployment and limited work abilities. This becomes evident by introducing and building up category entitlements that imply knowledge, such as having personal experience working with employment services, serving on project steering groups aimed at unemployed people and, therefore, knowing ‘the real circumstances and everyday life of unemployed people’. Moreover, members of the opposition recount operating as the personal helpers of unemployed people with worrisome situations and narrating their stories. By introducing category

entitlements, speakers establish their factual accounts by situating themselves as ‘knowledgeable’ (Potter 1996, 115). That is, individuals who know what unemployment really is by possessing some epistemological rights and responsibilities tied to category membership and, therefore, positioning themselves as possessing first-hand ‘factual’ information.

When constructing the deservingness of the needy, the undeservingness of the privileged rich and ‘contenders’ also appeared in opposition members’ talk (see Rowlingson and Connor 2011; Schneider and Ingram 1993). The elite and tax evaders are portrayed as undeserving by creating deservingness distinctions between the ‘needy poor’ and the upper classes, as seen in the extract below:

*“The activity model is a classic example of the elite’s historical prejudice towards the poor. This became **very clear** during the first [plenary] session. The poor are seen as lazy, impulsive and immoral, and the assumed difference in demeanour justifies the control. Control that targets the middle or upper classes would be scandalous. This law is technically unfair and inappropriate in practice. But, in addition, it will cut from people who are already on the border of the minimum income. From people whose income*



*is one-tenth the salary of a member of parliament.*” (18 December 2017, Anna Kontula, Left Alliance, opposition)

Anna Kontula, as a member of the opposition, constructs two opposing groups that are contrasted by presenting differential treatments of the other (see Every and Augoustinos 2007, 422–423). Here, Kontula contrasts the income of MPs with those who fall ‘on the border of the minimum income’, stating that individuals living in poverty are treated and talked about in a prejudicial manner. This is represented as the centre-right government’s preference towards supporting the people in affluent positions over of those living in poverty.

### **The ‘freeloader’ in need of an attitude adjustment**

The third discursive construction of unemployed people’s deservingness was designated as ‘the freeloader in need of an attitude adjustment’, which was used to describe an unemployed person who is able to work, but unwilling to do so. This construction served to defend the urgency and necessity of the Activation Model by members of the government.

Within this construction, work represents the duty of responsible citizens by instilling the responsibility to work and introducing the rhetorical category of the ‘irresponsible’

welfare dependent (see Patrick 2012). This construction is mainly used to argue that unemployment security should be conditional based upon an unemployed person's motivation to seek work and the status of an independent individual. This could be achieved by accepting short-term, temporary jobs, tightening the eligibility rules for unemployment security, requiring higher levels of obligating reciprocity and changing one's morality as a means of re-evaluating the relationship between the state and the individual (see Nygård 2007).

Within the construction of the freeloader, the unemployed individual needs to shift their attitude towards enhancing their own employability, as well as have lower expectations and quality requirements towards labour market participation and salary expectations. Through this construction, the Activation Model is framed by members of the government as an effective means of decreasing dependency and welfare spending, avoiding moral 'wrongdoing' and securing economic growth. The factuality of the freeloader's undeservingness is maximised based on the number of individuals who support the Activation Model because of the morally questionable behaviour and slothfulness of unemployed people, as seen in the extract below:

*“Also, I want to remind you that **most Finnish people** want this. They want stricter conditions for unemployment benefits. That is to say — we*

*have read this year **several** newspaper articles on people who have voluntarily chosen the path of unemployment. I, myself, the last time I read a tabloid regarding how a young man, unemployed, stated that rather than going to work he drinks, reads and bowls. **We cannot be indifferent to this either in this room.**” (11 December 2017, Mikko Kärnä, Centre Party, government)*

Here, member of the government Mikko Kärnä refers to Finnish newspaper and tabloid articles published in October of 2017 in which seemingly able-bodied welfare recipients appear unwilling to accept job opportunities by ‘choosing’ unemployment benefit.

These several portrayals resulted from an interview with author Ossi Nyman, who was represented in Finland’s leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* as a person who has never worked and has no intention of finding work, and hence is ‘ideologically unemployed’. With this example, Kärnä provides some category of entitlement as a tabloid reader; yet, the speaker is not accountable for issues related in the story – it is simply what he read (Potter 1996, 135) and what causes concern. In the extract, Kärnä uses the first person plural to refer to his fellow parliamentarians who should be responsive to these stories by providing an amoral behavioural framework (see Esmark and Schoop 2017, 425). Furthermore, Kärnä links this media image created in several

newspaper articles to what ‘most’ of the public views as proper conduct for the ‘active’ labour market policy (see Larsen 2008b).

The freeloader construction emphasises mutual responsibility towards finding a solution to the moral hazard that unemployment causes. The freeloader is portrayed as benefiting from both gaining access to jobs and services and creating stricter activity requirements. Young men specifically were identified and categorised as acting in a morally questionable manner and whose situations may lead to severe exclusion. Furthermore, members of the government portray themselves as worrisome political figures whose top priority ‘work shyness’ is and should be.

Morality stems from rewarding preferable behaviour amongst unemployed people, such as adjusting their attitude vis-à-vis their willingness to move their place of residence and lower their job expectations. As such:

*“The actual way to avoid it [a sanction] is **of course** to find work. And that will succeed **more and more** in this growing economy. It will also succeed during an economic recession, if an individual is ready to lower the bar for what kind of job they are ready to accept. This is what these kinds of activation systems — those coming to Finland 20 years later than other*

*Nordic countries — are aimed at. It has been noted that in all Nordic countries they [similar activation systems] increase the likelihood of people seeking a job for themselves.”* (8 December 2017, Juhana Vartiainen, National Coalition Party, government)

When constructing the freeloader category, member of the government Juhana Vartiainen situates Finland in the category of an old-fashioned nation far behind the ideal development of activation policies that exist across Europe and in other Nordic countries, particularly falling behind ‘the success of Denmark’. Members of the government argue that the generous Finnish welfare system needs improvement to better approximate the Nordic model and solve ‘the freeloading problem’. This construction creates a competing representation of Nordic deservingness perceptions and the Nordic welfare model employed by the opposition during these plenary sessions.

The freeloader construction also becomes factual via truth talk through statements such as ‘it is true’ and ‘it is a fact not worth denying’. In addition, the factuality of arguments is maximised by emphasising the government’s previous success associated with the ‘thousands of people who have found work’ and minimising the benefit cuts stating that ‘a 5 per cent cut does not mean anything horrible’. The reality of such a construction

also makes categorical entitlements visible, such as ‘I have experienced unemployment’, ‘I have family members who are unemployed’ and ‘I have interviewed many hundreds of unemployed people’.

Facts related to undeservingness are constructed specifically in relation to the effortful construction, such as ‘jobs can be found everywhere in Finland’. In addition, facts are made by narrating stories heard from employers, entrepreneurs and individual citizens, such as in the extract that follows:

*“But it also **a fact** that we here in Finland have a **real problem** of having **too many** of that type of unemployed who are passive and who **we** need to encourage into activity, to look for jobs themselves. It is not so that our officials in public employment services could bring those jobs home. That kind of feedback has also come from **many** entrepreneurs, who during **too many** job interviews employees state that they came here only because they were asked to. I do not think that is a proper attitude. Instead, we must act in such a way that jobs are accepted and that there is motivation to work.”*

(11 December 2017, Markus Lohi, Centre Party, government)

Here, factuality stems from member of the government Markus Lohi's use of the passive voice, which positions him as neutral and objective in terms of stating a 'real problem' with which Finland must deal. Here, Lohi also maximises the number of individuals not genuinely looking for jobs, stating that 'many entrepreneurs' provide feedback on the 'many unmotivated employees'. By adopting the 'we' position, the government should be held accountable since it fails to hold such citizens accountable for their lack of effortfulness (Gibson 2009, 404). Interestingly, however, in these accounts, governments are often portrayed as passive actors in relation to economic forces, whilst the unemployed represent active participants in the labour market (see Marston 2008, 364).

## **Conclusions**

The analysis here revealed that Finnish MPs co-created alternative constructions of unemployed people's deservingness during parliamentary discussions concerning the 'Activation Model for Unemployment Security'. These constructions were identified as 'effortful citizen lacking control', a 'needy citizen deserving the welfare state's reciprocal acts' and an 'undeserving freeloader in need of an attitude adjustment'. With these constructions, the factuality of the deservingness and undeservingness of unemployed people was primarily accomplished through MPs' 'truth talk', use of

‘knowledgeable’ categories, extreme case formulations and maximisation and minimisation strategies.

All of these constructions and rhetorical devices are part of an interplay between political ideology and power relations. The effortful and needy constructions were mostly maintained by members of the opposition as a means of framing unemployed individuals as deserving people whilst criticising and opposing the Activation Model. Vice versa, the freeloader construction was employed mostly by members of the government as a means of justifying the necessity of the model and framing unemployed individuals as undeserving. However, both the members of the opposition and government participated in the construction of undeserving and deserving unemployed subjects.

Firstly, effortful construction represents unemployed individuals as deserving people making an effort, yet who are in tragic situations beyond their immediate control (see also Yoo 2008; Monforte, Bassel and Khan 2019; Gibson 2009). In order to situate the effortful as deserving amongst the unemployed, members of the opposition often participated in the creation of an undeserving and freeloading counterpart (Yoo 2008; Kissová 2018; Monforte, Bassel and Khan 2019). I interpret this persistent use of the effortful construction by members of all opposition parties as attempts to frame the



centre-right government's Activation Model as causing a heightened risk exposure to the majority of middle-income voters (see Jensen 2014, 21).

Secondly, the needy construction portrayed the unemployed as 'trapped' victims lacking hope and requiring compassion and particular protections of their social rights from the welfare state (cf. Nygård 2007). The deservingness of the needy was also accomplished visibly in relation to the undeservingness of the 'rich', 'advantaged' and 'contenders' (see Scheider and Ingram 1993; Rowlingson and Connor 2011). Furthermore, awareness of irresponsible behaviour and the undeservingness of the richest may succeed in undermining the distinction between the supposedly underserving unemployed and the deserving 'hard-working majority' (Patrick 2012). The needy construction indicates that there is a strong political resistance from the left towards the centre-right government's attempts at portraying unemployed people as undeserving in Finland.

Lastly, the freeloader construction was used to describe an able-bodied, work-shy and undeserving unemployed subject with an undesirable attitude. This construction was pursued in a rather proactive manner by members of the government to justify the Activation Model as a necessary means of securing economic and moral safety. This may indicate an attempt at turning blame of retrenchment into credit, or at least an

attempt at reducing the exposure to potential blame and balancing the electoral consequences of the Activation Model (see Sloothus 2007; cf. Pierson 1996). Interestingly the freeloader construction frames Finland as an outdated Nordic country, especially as compared to Denmark, which has witnessed a more drastic tightening of unemployment benefits (Jensen 2014, 110; Sloothus 2007). Hence, future empirical research could focus on a comparative study of Nordic policy discourse related to unemployed people's deservingness in order to determine how the contemporary Nordic deservingness perceptions are constructed and negotiated across Nordic countries.

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