

Shadows of Transparency.
An Experiment on Information and Need-based
Justice

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An Experiment on Information and Need-based Justice

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Abstract

The need principle, one of the core principles of distributive justice, suggests distributing resources according to individual needs that are recognized by society. Empirically, however, it is often difficult to apply the need principle, since individual needs may be heterogeneous. In a bargaining experiment we examine whether the satisfaction of needs depends on the available information about individual need levels. Players are grouped in triads and have to coordinate on the distribution of a collective endowment. A distribution is implemented if two players agree on a distribution. Need levels are either publicly available or private. When information is private, subjects can only assess the needs of others indirectly through the distributions proposed by the other players. The results suggest that players in the coalition can enforce their needs even when the information about needs is private, while the needs of subjects outside the coalition are more often satisfied when the information is public. At the same time the average payoff of subjects outside the coalition is higher when the available information is private. Therefore, our experiment reveals a potential downside of need-based justice: Need levels may be instrumentalized by decision-makers to justify lower and unequal allocation shares for minorities.

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