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ARTICLE

Who deserves economic relief? Examining Twitter/X debates about Covid-19 economic relief for small businesses and the self-employed in Germany

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Abstract

The economic shock of the Covid-19 crisis has disproportionately impacted small businesses and the self-employed. Around the globe, their survival during the pandemic often relied heavily on government assistance. This article explores how economic relief to business is understood through the lens of deservingness in the public. It examines the case of Germany, where the government has responded to the pandemic by implementing an extensive support programme. Notably, in this context, the self-employed are typically outsiders to the state insurance system. Combining computational social science methods and a qualitative analysis, the article focuses on the debate about direct subsidies on the social media platform Twitter/X between March 2020 and June 2021. It traces variation in the patterns of claim making in what is a rich debate about pandemic state support, finding that this discourse is characterised by the concern that economic relief threatens to blur existing boundaries of worth in society. The reciprocity principle of deservingness theory is pivotal in asserting business identities in times of crisis, yet it also reveals a fundamentally ambiguous relationship with the principle of need. Additionally, the claim of justice-as-redress, as a novel dimension of reciprocity, surfaces as an important theme in this debate.

Keywords: deservingness; stimulus; self-employed; symbolic boundaries; text-as-data

Introduction

In response to the coronavirus shock, governments around the world mobilised enormous sums of economic and social policy assistance. In the spring of 2020, policymakers around the globe were united in their commitment to keep economies 'on life support' (Tooze, 2021), implementing fiscal and monetary rescue programmes that far superseded any comparable peacetime effort in history. Roughly a year into the pandemic, by early 2021, Covid-19 relief spending for households and firms had already amounted to around $14 trillion (Economist, 2021). While, in this early stage

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of the pandemic, resourceful welfare states like Germany mobilised up to 40 per cent of their GDP in subsidies and credit guarantees, many low-income countries also amassed considerable resources to mitigate the profound economic shock and the existential danger to people's livelihoods (Anderson et al., 2020; Tooze, 2021).

In this moment of crisis and contingency, fundamental parameters of existing material and symbolic relationships of welfare between state and society are challenged (Grasso et al., 2021). Against this background, this article asks: What moral ideas do people draw on in making claims about economic policies aimed at mitigating external shocks? I examine a case where economic policies have broad social repercussions: the pandemic relief measures targeting small businesses and the self-employed. These groups faced significant vulnerability to the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and relied on public assistance for their survival (Block et al., 2022; Fairlie, 2020). The pandemic downturn created a peculiar dilemma for them: in light of the comprehensive economic shock caused by the health emergency and subsequent business closures after March 2020, the state had to step in to ensure the economic survival of hundreds of thousands of small businesses and self-employed. More or less overnight, large swaths of the small business community found themselves in need of state assistance. This sudden dependence of small businesses on state support during the pandemic marks a significant rupture in their traditional self-perception as independent of government action (Langsæther & Evans, 2020).

In this article, I present empirical evidence of diverse patterns of claim-making in the rich social media discourse surrounding the meaning and legitimacy of economic policies. The analysis finds that a key point of moral contestation lies in how people perceive the shift in the relationship between various groups and the state due to these policies: *In this new crisis reality, who gets what, and why?* As a contribution to the literature on deservingness (Gniza & Wrede, 2022; Herke & Janky, 2023; Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot et al., 2017), it offers a novel perspective by focusing on small businesses and the self-employed as recipients of state assistance and using process-generated data. This approach reveals that the reciprocity principle is essential for asserting business identities during crises, and it uncovers a fundamentally ambiguous relationship with the principle of need. Additionally, the analysis outlines a new aspect of the reciprocity principle: redress claims, aimed at restoring status and worth based on the idea of a legitimate social order in the past.

The article explores the case of Germany. Berlin has implemented one of the most comprehensive pandemic relief programmes globally, fuelling debates on who qualifies to receive financial assistance. I draw on data gathered from the social media platform Twitter/X (Shugars et al., 2021) and employ a mixed-methods approach (Mohr et al., 2015; Nelson, 2020) that combines computational social science and qualitative analyses. Building on a corpus of 135,381 tweets, I propose a computationally driven, methodologically sound way to select a specific subset of this data for a qualitative, in-depth analysis. The findings add to a growing body of research that examines welfare orientations on social media and in digital environments (Gielens et al., 2022; Theiss, 2022), providing innovative additions to standardised instruments of social policy research.

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Approaching the meaning of pandemic state assistance

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous governments around the world implemented comprehensive economic relief packages to prevent their economies from collapsing (Tooze, 2021). Social scientists have begun to dissect the origins and the consequences of these programmes. A burgeoning political economy literature interrogates how governments aimed to stabilize markets and maintain employment such as through short-time work programmes (Ebbinghaus & Lehner, 2021), distribute stimulus payments to households and families (Aizenman et al., 2021), and save firms and businesses through credit guarantees and subsidies as well as the temporary suspension of insolvency rules (Anderson et al., 2021; Belitski et al., 2022). The extent and magnitude of Covid-19 fiscal assistance programmes were influenced by pre-existing institutional and cultural norms that form the basis of welfare regimes in various societies (Bariola & Collins, 2021; Cantillon et al., 2021). Despite the wide variation in the scope of these programmes across the globe and their temporary nature, they had a significant impact on expanding existing welfare arrangements. In many regions, following years of neoliberal austerity, the state took on an active role in safeguarding large segments of the population from the unrestrained and crisis-induced dynamics of the market.

Public narratives about pandemic economic relief

Economic relief programmes are not merely objectively existent; knowledge about them is disseminated across the public sphere. Accompanying this knowledge are processes of evaluation, which carry normative messages that either resonate with or diverge from prevailing moral understandings. Researching these processes matters because the legitimacy of economic and social policies relies on how they are perceived, interpreted, and assessed by the public.

A small but growing strand of scholarship examines how pandemic policies were communicated through cultural frames and narratives (Boin & 't Hart, 2022; Kuhlmann & Blum, 2021). Boin & 't Hart (2022) for instance examine different 'framing pathways' that link crisis interpretations and policy outcomes. The present article focuses on pandemic economic relief for small businesses and the self-employed, which, from this perspective, can be characterised as redistributive policies. In contrast to regulatory policies, which enforce particular types of behaviour such as a stay-at-home-orders, redistributive policies aim at distributing resources to particular target groups (Kuhlmann & Blum, 2021). In redistributive policies, there is typically a condition of scarcity involved, as limited resources are distributed. Welfare researchers have long argued that redistributive policies are, in principle, concerned with the problem of *who should get what, and why* (van Oorschot et al., 2017). In other words, these types of policies provide individuals with access to specific material resources; at the same time, they also establish a framework of rights that determine which groups are eligible to receive benefits from the state. Ingram and Schneider (2015), in their paradigmatic framework of meaning-centred policy analysis, posit that public policy making involves the normative construction of target groups. When formulating policy proposals, policymakers delineate and categorise particular groups in society and attribute

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positive or negative characteristics to them. Political decision-makers determine whether these target groups are considered deserving or undeserving of specific treatments provided by the state.

However, to gain a better understanding of how the material and symbolic effects of redistributive policies are understood in the public at large, it is necessary to move beyond the perspectives of a limited group of political stakeholders. This includes examining the narratives, images, and symbols about target groups in wider discourse and media (Barbehön, 2020).

The CARIN deservingness scheme and symbolic boundaries

People evaluate relief policies and their target groups through moral frameworks. The CARIN deservingness scheme (Herke & Janky, 2023; Laenen et al., 2019; Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot et al., 2017) provides one critical conceptual structure, derived from robust empirical findings, that allows for the exploration of this proposition. Scholars find that, in numerous European societies, the ways in which the eligibility of individuals for state support is construed – how individuals are assigned to specific groups in processes of symbolic classification and evaluation ('the elderly', 'immigrants', and so on) – has implications for determining who is considered as more or less deserving of state support in public opinion. The five dimensions of deservingness, according to which social groups, and the individuals who are matched to these groups, are considered worthy or unworthy of state assistance, are as follows: control (ability to resolve difficulties independently), attitude (expression of gratitude and compliance), reciprocity (past or present actions and commitments to contribute), identity (perceived group affiliation), and need (extent of damage). These categories are not mutually exclusive and their relative importance varies empirically, see Meuleman et al. (2020, pp. 2–3).

The CARIN scheme has been developed within a specific context, that of poverty attributions and social assistance (van Oorschot et al., 2017). The following analysis adds to the conversation about the model in two ways. First, I introduce a novel context: Echoing recent discourse that expands deservingness to entities like regions (Gniza & Wrede, 2022), I explore how it may apply to corporate actors as recipients of state assistance. The Covid-19 pandemic created a context of crisis-induced expansion of social need, making extensive assistance to business necessary. This situation also effectively blurs the boundaries between economic policy and social policy.

Second, while most of the evidence on deservingness relies on standardized social research methods, the present study contributes to the small but growing field of qualitative analysis in this field (Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Theiss, 2022). In this perspective, the aim is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of all five criteria or to measure higher or lower scores for each but rather to investigate 'how the criteria are used and how they co-function' (Nielsen et al., 2020). Such an approach aims to yield insights into the underlying structures of reasoning and the process through which people discern deservingness cues with qualitative depth (Theiss, 2022).

However, when working with process-generated data – data not created for analysis within a specific framework – we need an additional conceptual instrument that allows to identify the types of claims that may articulate ideas of deservingness. The symbolic boundary approach (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) is a useful addition in

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this regard. It explores how people depict others in specific ways, creating notions of 'us' versus 'them' and delineating social positions in a relational field. This approach is particularly relevant here because it focuses on the moral criteria used in these distinctions, especially concerning inequality, and because it focuses on how relationships of proximity or distance are construed in this way. This fits with deservingness theory which claims that by and large, moral evaluations primarily focus on the recipients of public provisions rather than the provisions themselves. Crucially, these moral evaluations are informed by a relational logic, by the ways in which the pattern of relationships between the relevant actors are perceived.

Case and context

The small business community and pandemic economic relief

In early 2020, as concerns about the novel coronavirus grew, people started altering their behaviour by reducing their shopping and travel activities. Governments implemented various social distancing measures and imposed restrictions on everyday economic interactions – soon, numerous businesses faced an immense challenge to their survival. Similar to other countries (Fairlie, 2020), small- and medium-sized businesses in Germany also experienced significant economic hardships, especially in sectors heavily dependent on direct customer interaction and interpersonal contact such as hospitality, tourism, travel, retail, education, entertainment, arts, and the event industry (Block et al., 2022; Dörr et al., 2022; Schürmann et al., 2022).

Germany stands out as a captivating case for this analysis because research indicates that its welfare model is predicated on a strong expectation of preserving work-based status (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2020) – yet the impact of the pandemic shock has led to a pronounced realignment of relationships between particular social groups and the state. The self-employed have long occupied an outsider position in the German welfare state. As the country's public insurance system is tied to employment status, they are typically ineligible for benefits like unemployment support (Schürmann et al., 2022; Stamm et al., 2022). However, when the pandemic struck, small businesses and the self-employed found themselves in desperate need of state assistance. At the beginning of the crisis, approximately 10 per cent of the German working population were self-employed, totalling around 4.2 million people.[1] This group was immediately and profoundly affected by the economic shock: during the initial months of the pandemic, about 60 per cent of the self-employed experienced sales or income losses, compared to only about 15 per cent of employees in dependent employment (Block et al., 2022, p. 2).

The German government initiated one of the largest and most comprehensive pandemic relief efforts in the global comparison (OECD, 2020; Tooze, 2021). In late March 2020, not long after the first restrictions to economic and private life were announced, Berlin decided on a range of measures such as direct subsidies, loan guarantees, reduced interest rates, as well as tax credits to support businesses and prevent their collapse (Federal Ministry of Finance BMF, 2020; Federal Ministry of the Economy and Climate BMWK, 2022). By June 2021, around €100 billion in subsidies, credits, and loans had been spent or guaranteed on various Covid-19 relief

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measures for businesses; by June 2022, this number stood at around €130 billion. Small businesses and the self-employed were granted access to direct subsidies – in the form of cash transfers – to cover immediate losses. For businesses with up to ten employees, more than €50 billion were initially granted in direct subsidies (applicants could receive up to €15,000); this programme was soon flanked by subsidies to operating costs. Overall, Berlin went to particularly great lengths in the effort to save businesses, deploying an immediate fiscal impulse of around 13,5 per cent of GDP by April 2020 alone, about three or four times higher than of most of European countries (OECD, 2020, p. 27).

However, as the crisis unfolded, questions arose about who could access the funds, who qualified to receive them, and who should rightfully be recipients. In fact, several obstacles emerged due to the longstanding institutional legacy of Germany's social security mechanisms. Because of their peculiar status in the German welfare system, the self-employed were not eligible to access short time work (a major cushioning instrument in times of crises that is, however, reserved for employees, see Cantillon et al. (2021)). Instead, in addition to cash transfers (which, however, did not cover living expenses but merely operating costs in the first instantiation), Berlin decided on granting self-employed individuals access to basic social assistance (*Grundsicherung*, also known as *Hartz 4*). In normal times, this instrument is reserved for individuals experiencing long-term bouts of unemployment. According to one estimate, by June 2021, approximately 132,000 self-employed individuals in Germany had already availed themselves of this programme (Business Insider, 2021). Stamm et al. (2022, p. 2) suggest that the peculiar space that the self-employed occupy in the German welfare system constitutes a 'no-man's land' between capital and labour. This social location shapes expectations about what small entrepreneurs owe to the state, and what the state owes to them. Moreover, individuals in these groups are typically critical of state activity in the economy. They tend to hold negative views of government redistribution and favour meritocratic, performance-based economic attitudes (Langsæther & Evans, 2020).

Data and method

For the subsequent analysis, I draw on a combination of a text-as-data and a qualitative approach. Broadly, text-as-data comprises to a set of tools that encompass 'automated content analysis methods' for 'the systematic analysis of large-scale text collections' (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013, p. 268). These kinds of analyses can complement the analysis of survey data. Consequently, they can broaden our understanding of how broader media, cultural, and social contexts influence the communication and interpretation of social and economic policies (Gielens et al., 2022; Laenen et al., 2019; Theiss, 2022).

Analysing Twitter/X Data

Methodologically, this analysis follows the principle that qualitative and context-specific methodologies are not merely a means to validate statistical methods: when conducted in a context-sensitive manner, mixed-methods approaches can yield new insights into how meanings are created and socially shared (Andreotta et al., 2019;

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Grigoropoulou & Small, 2022; Nelson, 2020) (for further details, see Appendix). An open approach is required, because social media data is process-generated, meaning it was not crafted or elicited for the purposes of the analysis (Baur et al., 2020). Instead, it is inherently rich – and necessarily also shaped – by the context of the social media platform where it originated.

I combine text-as-data and a qualitative content analysis of Twitter/X data (Shugars et al., 2021). There are some methodological constraints that come with the use of this type of data. Above all, while Twitter/X is a space of public debate, it is not a public sphere in traditional sense of the concept. The platform contains 'segments of numerous, overlapping, disconnected conversations' (ibid., p. 2). While shared topics (shared objects of talk) provide an indicator of conversations on this platform, we cannot assume there to be a 'unity of discourse' (ibid.) Twitter/X is a private, for-profit company; its algorithms of popularity are part of a broader, corporate attention economy. The company seeks to increase user engagement by encouraging attention-seeking behaviour, thereby influencing user activity to boost platform traffic.

I download, pre-process and analyse a corpus of tweets (for this and the following, see Appendix) based on a keyword search of the names of German pandemic economic relief programmes for businesses, focusing on the direct subsidies for small businesses and the self-employed. I include all tweets authored between March 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021 that mention one of the designated keywords. This corpus consists of 357,398 tweets (for the text analysis, I remove retweets, narrowing the corpus down to 135,381 tweets).[2]

I use text-as-data tools (Benoit et al., 2018) for constructing a sample from this main corpus, cleaning the data, and analysing the text statistically. The analysis proceeds in three steps: pattern detection, pattern refinement, and pattern validation (Nelson, 2020, see Appendix). Why rely on qualitative methods and hand-coding when analysing discourses on social and economic policies? Automated analyses of text are rapidly advancing this field. However, I concur with (Gielens et al., 2022, pp. 4–5) that if we aim to comprehend nuanced variations in arguments supporting or opposing specific welfare policies, along with particular claims about the appropriate relationship between these instruments and target groups, adopting a mixed-methods approach with an interpretive emphasis offers a deeper level of insight than standardised analyses.

Figure 1 summarises the overall workflow. It is guided by the principle that the primary corpus should be condensed based on relevant dimensions through a series of transparent steps that allow to investigate qualitative research questions using the available data (Andreotta et al., 2019; see Figure A1 in Appendix).

I introduce deservingness criteria only in the pattern refinement stage of the analysis. Deducing them directly from this material would overlook crucial contextual details: What are these tweets about? In what ways do moral claims appear in them, as part of what kinds of relational logics? To be able to address these broader questions, the qualitative analysis of the final sample of tweets is performed by, initially, drawing on inductive qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2014). Using open coding, I generate codes inductively (up to three main codes are allowed in a single tweet). I then analyse symbolic boundaries found in the material – constructions of 'us' and 'them' to better understand the relational logics

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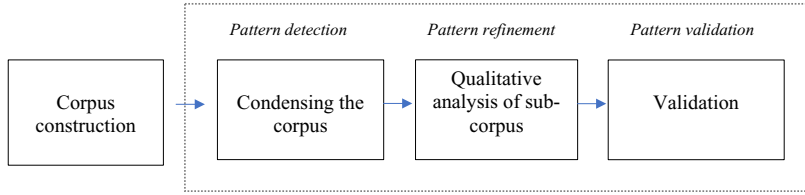


Figure 1. Workflow.

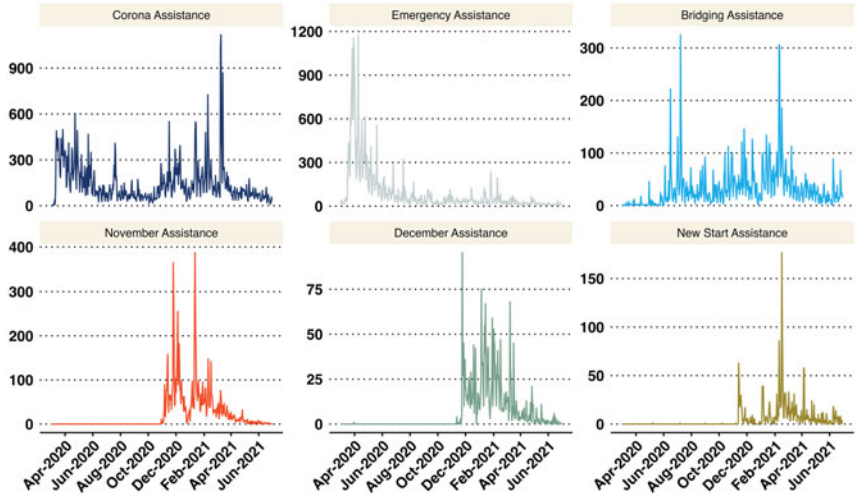


Figure 2. Number of times German Covid-19 direct subsidies are mentioned in tweets. March 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021, *n* = 142585 (excluding retweets).

at play. On these grounds, I identify tweets in which deservingness criteria are articulated and analyse examples of this connection.

Results

Mapping trends and topics associated with the subsidies

In mid-March 2020, about a week after the first measures to contain the virus were implemented, the German government announced its first set of cash transfers for small businesses (Federal Ministry of BMF, 2020). Figure 2 shows the distribution of the keywords found in all tweets (excluding retweets) between March 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021. The debate about the direct subsidies follows cycles of attention, with single transfers becoming more or less salient over time.

The term *Corona Assistance* (*Coronahilfen)* functions as an overarching term, as utilised by the federal government. The most vocal participants in this debate (see Table A1 in Appendix) are institutional accounts, such as the Federal Ministry of Finance, leading newspapers, and credit-issuing banks. Consequently, focusing solely on the most active users or the most influential tweets could bias the analysis towards content from professional accounts, typically managed by press departments. Therefore, to understand everyday, unscripted views on economic policies,

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Table 1. Key claims that entail deservingness ideas

Claim	Deservingness criteria articulated
Criticising inefficiency and delays	NEED
Criticising exclusionary nature of assistances	NEED, RECIPROCITY
Criticising unequal distribution (who gets what)	IDENTITY, NEED
Criticising 'excessive' complaints by the self-employed	NEED

the qualitative analysis concentrates on tweets from non-institutional accounts, namely private, lay Twitter/X users. A random sample of tweets from various institutional accounts – including politicians, administrative organisations, journalists, media platforms, interest groups, and tax advisors – was analysed and contrasted. This was done to understand and validate the implications of this selection (for details on this step, see Appendix).

Qualitative analysis

The final analysis is based on a sub-corpus of 2,359 tweets. It comprises two steps: first, mapping the range of claims and positions presented; and second, identifying the relevant arguments associated with deservingness criteria within them. A set of distinct patterns of claim making arise from the qualitative coding of the final corpus (see Table 1). Recurring statements in the discussion which do not entail moral arguments – and are thus not analysed in the following – frequently focus on sharing information about the payments.

Roughly half of the analysed tweets can be linked to deservingness criteria – this is a significant finding in itself. The claims made in them focus on questions such as the distribution of resources, the reasons behind such allocations, and who should receive support and why. These questions, it emerges, are often framed through symbolic boundaries.

Criticising inefficiency and delays

Numerous arguments raise concerns about the overall inefficiency or inadequate implementation of pandemic relief measures for small businesses and the self-employed. This recurring motif is prevalent in public discussions surrounding social and economic policies in a broader sense, as observed by welfare scholars (cf. Gielens et al., 2022, p. 10). It includes assertions that characterise the assistances as inadequate to meet the needs of the affected individuals, thereby typically linking it to the principle of need. As one person remarks, '[The money] is not enough. I am a solo self-employed [. . .] I had to close down one of my two carate schools for good at the end of April, because I could not sustain it any more. The second will follow soon!'. Additionally, there is widespread criticism of the delays, excessive bureaucratic procedures, and a cumbersome application process, with numerous issues reported regarding the ministry's website.

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Criticising the exclusionary nature of assistances

In the Twitter/X debate, the exclusionary nature of assistances emerges as a significant concern, with many businesses experiencing a decline in profits but not meeting the eligibility criteria for subsidies to cover their operating expenses in the fall of 2020 (Bardt & Hüther, 2021, p. 21). Here, need-based deservingness claims are often articulated. Such claims foreground the damage – not just to one's economic activity, but also to one's livelihood.[3] The self-employed (and more frequently even, the solo self-employed) are described as 'falling through the cracks'. A recurring argument is that this is the case because the relief programmes only address specific types of expenses, such as fixed operating costs (e.g., office space rent), which are not typically incurred by these groups or are only incurred to a minimal extent. There is significant frustration and anger regarding the fact that the pandemic relief funds cannot be utilised for everyday expenses, such as living expenses or private insurance contributions, which are typically essential for sustaining a small business. As one person put it, 'And what about the solo self-employed? You cannot leave us out in the cold with the 25 per cent ('New Start Assistance') by the federal government! This doesn't even cover my social security contributions, let alone my rent or my living expenses! We are falling through the cracks in every respect!' These arguments may focus on issues such as the inadequacy of basic social assistance or the critique that certain individuals within the small business community are unable to access it due to specific insurance or living arrangements. As one person asserts, despairingly, 'voluntary unemployment insurance does not apply, because of #Corona-Emergency Assistance, which can only be used for operating costs. #Hartz IV does not apply, because of an existing voluntary unemployment insurance. #Solo self-employed'. In a more detailed analysis, it is possible to differentiate between two types of need-based claims: one asserting that certain essential expenses, such as 'rent', 'food', and 'pension payments' are excluded, and another highlighting that entire groups in need are excluded, such as 'artists', 'event industries', 'technicians', and 'musicians'.[4] Arguments of the latter type often portray these groups as 'forgotten' or intentionally disregarded, and hence disrespected, by political decision-makers.

The claim regarding exclusion can also be connected to the criteria of reciprocity, which concerns perceptions of how much a person or group has contributed to society in the past or is presently contributing (Knotz et al., 2022). It is articulated as a symbolic boundary, distinguishing small businesses and the self-employed from another group they wish not to be associated with: the unemployed. Central to this argument is the notion that being a contributing means being a worthy member of society.

To receive support for living expenses, many self-employed had to resort to basic social assistance (Business Insider, 2021; Stamm et al., 2022). In the Twitter/X debate, it is frequently asserted that this situation amounts to a devaluation of their status in society. Frequently, people speak of 'being forced into' this programme, and some depict this as the literal end of their economic and social existence. As one person remarks, 'I didn't receive any Corona Assistance, I was only eligible for Hartz IV [basic social assistance], because, as a solo self-employed person, I have low operating costs. On one level with the scroungers. Thank you for that, dear state'. In problematising this issue, individuals often draw a symbolic boundary that defines a

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social and economic position they consider inadequate for themselves. According to this perspective, pandemic relief measures have the potential to blur the boundaries between those who *legitimately* belong to that category and those who are only categorised as such due to the *failure of the political system* to adequately respond to the crisis. Many articulate specific criteria to explain why this blurring of boundaries is unacceptable and emphasise the importance of restoring these boundaries. As one person remarks, 'You're paying #taxes as a #solo self-employed for more than 35 years and then there's a pandemic and [a politician] offers you a lump sum payment of up to 5000€! I feel screwed. Thanks for the alms'. Next to tax-paying, the self-employed are also depicted as 'contributing', 'hard-working', 'business-growing' and 'bread-winning' – in contrast to typical recipients of basic social assistance. This, of course, relies on a symbolic boundary that implies that typical recipients of these programmes are not willing or able to work.

According to the principle of reciprocity, if small businesses and the self-employed contribute to the economy and generate productivity, they have a moral entitlement to receive support from the state in return. Within this debate, many express concerns about what they regard as a violation of this principle, and therefore, a skewed relationship with the state. The reliance on basic social assistance is seen as evidence that political decision-makers hold them in contempt and disregard their needs.

Upon closer examination, another dimension of meaning becomes apparent in claims informed by the principle of reciprocity. Some interpret the violation not merely as a moral issue, but also as a legal transgression: 'Please stop [talking]. Breach of contract with 2 million self-employed due to the immediate assistance. Just empty promises. Zero control over the Corona crisis. Even my pet would do a better job as Chancellor'. The notion that the state holds a contractual obligation towards this group and has fundamentally failed to honour it is also reflected in statements referring to the government shutdown as a 'work ban' or 'prohibition of work'[5]. Consequently, in order to restore a balanced relationship, legal action against the government is necessary: 'The only way to object: File a lawsuit!'. This notion can be labelled a 'logic of redress'. Its legitimacy stems from the notion that a previous situation must be restored, thus centreing around the reciprocity dimension of the CARIN scheme which connects past actions with present outcomes (Knotz et al., 2022).

Criticising unequal distribution

A second salient set of claims that entails deservingness principles is articulated in the form of comments about who receives these funds and why. These claims are closely aligned with identity-based assertions in deservingness theory. A recurring theme in this respect is a sense of indignation regarding the favouritism of large companies over small businesses in pandemic state assistance. As one person writes, '[. . .] TUI continues to receive billions, while thousands of self- employed are waiting for #NovemberAssistance. Just my kind of humor'. Here, people often reference media debates about pandemic assistance to major companies such as Lufthansa, TUI (a travel industry giant), or Galeria Karstadt Kaufhof (a major retailer chain). The criticism, to be sure, has a point: A comparison of Covid-19 fiscal support in five European countries in 2020 reveals that in Germany, a significantly larger share of credit guarantees went to large companies than in neighbouring countries (Anderson

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et al., 2021, p. 20). On the one hand, this argument centres on need, portraying large firms as inherently privileged; on the other, it is interwoven with an identity distinction: the assertion that large businesses benefit while small firms struggle serves to affirm one's identity as a *small* business owner.

There is also a debate about fraud in the implementation of state assistance, in some cases, with openly racist assertions. Some highlight the alleged receipt of pandemic state assistance by 'Islamic clans', 'terrorists', or 'migrants', while portraying the self-employed (in this context, representing a nativist 'we') as neglected. Portrayals that ascribe undeservingness to recipients based on their race or ethnicity are characteristic of identity-based arguments (Van Oorschot et al., 2017). Additionally, concerns about the inequitable distribution frequently highlight another associated symbolic boundary: many express frustrations with the comparatively more favourable support provided to employees through the comprehensive German short-time work programme, while self-employed individuals faced numerous obstacles throughout the process. Some criticise the provision of 'bonus payments' to employees during the pandemic, arguing that these funds are sourced from 'taxes generated by the self-employed'. One columnist (Der Spiegel, 2020) who is frequently quoted in tweets comments on this situation sarcastically, mocking employment in Germany as a form of 'state religion', and arguing that, conversely, the state 'despises the self-employed'.

Criticising 'excessive' complaints by the self-employed

A small yet vocal faction in this debate chooses not to show solidarity with small businesses and the self-employed but instead launches attacks, questioning their demands. These arguments frequently challenge the principle of need, contending that the self-employed are not actually excluded from state support, and that therefore their claims are excessive and unfounded. One person remarks, 'freelancers currently can apply for basic social assistance, even if they own more than the Schonvermögen [the amount of wealth a Hartz 4 recipient is allowed to keep]. The amount of rent is not considered, and it is paid. In addition, there's up to 5,000, – New Start Assistance. They are complaining about first-world problems'. Another person demands that the solo self-employed stop 'crying for the state'. Others criticise that, because the pandemic state assistance was rolled out practically overnight, the self-employed were granted access to public resources in indiscriminate ways. Many more mechanisms of means-testing are necessary, these voices assert, invoking the danger of a rise in 'zombie firms' (businesses that are de facto insolvent but are sustained by state subsidies). Others go one step further even, attacking the foundations of reciprocity claims, suggesting that many solo self-employed are 'have-nots' and 'life-artists' who never deserved state support in the first place. This position, in fact, lumps the self-employed together with the 'undeserving poor' and further entrenches the critical symbolic tension between those who are seen as contributing and those who are not that pervades this debate. Arguments of this nature also draw upon a criticism of the perceived negative consequences of social policy spending for the overall economy, akin to the 'perversity thesis' famously identified by Albert Hirschman (1991) in the conservative critique of welfare reform. The act of dismissing someone's (alleged)

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claim of neediness is particularly powerful in this context, as it can draw upon prevailing welfare stereotypes.

The remaining deservingness criteria – attitude and control – are notably scarce in this debate. There are a few instances of expressions of gratitude in tweets, which can be understood as a performative signaling of attitude. There is a notable absence of discussions around control in terms of entrepreneurial responsibility for economic damage. This is likely because of the prevailing view of the pandemic as an exogenous shock, as an event whose ramifications cannot be blamed on anyone's actions individually.

Discussion: restoring the boundaries of worth

The small business community has been significantly impacted by the economic shock triggered by the coronavirus pandemic (Dörr et al., 2022; Stamm et al., 2022). As of March 2020, a large number of small business owners, self-employed individuals, and solo entrepreneurs suddenly found themselves in need of public assistance. In this article, I examined how these existentially important cash subsidies were evaluated in public discourse on Twitter/X in Germany. In this country, significant state relief was provided; while, at the same time, an institutional legacy where self-employed individuals remain excluded from social safety net mechanisms was in place.

There is a rich and variegated social media discourse about economic relief for businesses. Overall, it is a deeply contentious debate. Within these discussions, the material and symbolic dimensions of pandemic relief are perceived as deeply intertwined. People bring attention to their own or others' situations. They share information about the relief programmes, express criticism regarding delays and inefficiencies, address issues of fairness in terms of inclusion and exclusion, and respond to those who critique these measures. A particularly pronounced set of claims is nurtured by the sense that small business and the self-employed are effectively *excluded* from pandemic relief efforts – against the background of the massive (if temporary) expansion of the German welfare state after March 2020, the argument is that the small business community has been overlooked, and that these ad-hoc programmes violate distributive justice norms and the obligations of the state vis-à-vis this community. A major issue of contention in this regard is the fact that many self-employed must, in the situation of dire economic need, resort to basic social assistance to cover their living expenses (Stamm et al., 2022). Many – though, to be sure, not everyone – who problematise this find that fundamental boundaries of material and symbolic status are blurred in this situation.

Identifying deservingness criteria in process-generated data

This context offers a naturalistic setting for the study of deservingness criteria (Theiss, 2022). The analysis has brought to light that need, reciprocity, and identity emerge as particularly salient criteria. These three elements also interact with each other, a point supported by recent qualitative research (Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020). In this context, the principle of reciprocity appears as the 'most legitimate' assertion of business identities in relation to the welfare state. While need is also a significant factor in the debate, there is a noticeable reluctance

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among the self-employed to portray themselves as 'needy', which indicates a boundary issue (and, as the criticism of 'exaggerated' demands by the self-employed shows, it is a vulnerable assertion). Identity criteria are intertwined with need and reciprocity and are also relevant in critiques of the distribution of pandemic economic relief to 'illegitimate' target groups, such as large businesses or foreigners.

Recent contributions to the CARIN scheme have demonstrated that reciprocity can be further differentiated into arguments about past contributions versus those about present contributions (Knotz et al., 2022). In this analysis, references to an imagined past emerge as particularly important: it became evident that there are many arguments for a moral entitlement of the self-employed to receive state support based on their past contributions.

Redress claims as a context-specific dimension of reciprocity

The analysis laid bare an additional dimension of meaning of the reciprocity criteria that is tied to this problem of restoring: redress, or retributive justice claim. It is succinctly expressed in a highly popular tweet by interest group representative and entrepreneur Catherina Bruns on June 1st, 2020. Commenting on the pandemic relief for small businesses, Bruns asserts that 'We need to talk about compensation – not about aid'. By earmarking (Zelizer, 2017) state money as compensation, Bruns seeks to redefine its symbolic purpose in order to alter the underlying social relationship that is expressed and confirmed by the financial transaction: away from a relationship that requires those who receive to be gratuitous and towards one that is based on a rational, legal principle of exchange. 'Aid' is reserved for the 'needy', signalling dependency on the state. 'Compensation', in turn, is rooted in the idea of entrepreneurial activity – it clarifies that the state assumes blame for a suspension of this activity and for a loss of profit and business opportunity and thus provides a very different justification for redress – a justification that is rooted in the principle of reciprocity, not in the principle of need. An association with the unemployed can effectively be avoided in this way. Hence, redress claims serve the function to mark an unambiguous position within deservingness criteria.

Arguably, this notion also activates a symbolic boundary towards the employed workforce. A logic of classification by which the status of employees (and the unemployed) is regarded as one of *dependency*, whereas that of businesses and the self-employed as one of *independence* is applied here. This normative distinction, and the symbolic boundaries that are derived from it, are threatened to be undermined in the crisis situation.

This illustrates the importance of context in applying deservingness criteria. These claims are anchored in a strong expectation of status preservation, a characteristic scholars (Mau, 2004; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2020) identify as a defining feature of the German welfare society: the argument that self-employed individuals and small businesses should be comprehensively shielded from the pandemic's impact is based on a rationale of restoring status expectations. The claim responds to the cultural and institutional norms that inform the German model, which rewards citizens according to their contributions (based on the principle of equivalency) and is geared around employment status (Mau, 2004). This is notable considering that these groups traditionally hold a marginal position in the German welfare state, as evidenced by their exclusion from unemployment assistance (Stamm et al., 2022).

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These arguments are a manifestation of the contestation of worth and recognition in a given regime of redistribution, a finding reminiscent of Steensland's (2006) observation that the introduction of a guaranteed annual income in the US in the 1960s and 1970s failed primarily because the proposal was perceived to blur boundaries of worth. This way of framing public assistance achieves to clarify the relation between corporate actors and the state – what the state owes to them, and what they owe to the state. Further research could elucidate the connection between meritocratic orientations (Langsæther & Evans, 2020) observed within the small business community and notions of redress.

Conclusion

The mixed-methods approach adopted in this study, with its emphasis on qualitative analysis as a primary goal, has certain limitations. Working with process-generated data is complex: it requires an open, in-depth examination of claim-making and careful identification of deservingness criteria. The sampling is not representative; instead, it captures segments of conversations by different groups.

However, this approach also reveals a discourse rich in statements that construct social identity. The way people make claims, thereby shaping and performing relational identities in digital spaces, offers valuable perspectives for social policy research. It extends beyond the traditional boundaries of deservingness research and introduces new, relational perspectives for study of welfare target group construction.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279424000096

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Notes

1 Of those, a little more than half are solo self-employed, that is, self-employed who have no employees (see Stamm et al., 2022, p. 4).

2 The code is available on Github: https://github.com/tillhilmar/EconomicReliefTwitter.

3 However, many statements do not fully elaborate on the material and social harm caused by the pandemic shock. This omission may be linked to a reluctance to appear 'needy' (See Discussion section).

4 The first round of Emergency Assistance did not cover living expenses, in response, some federal states instituted supplementary programmes.

5 This notion often seeks to establish a causal interpretation in which the state, not the spread of the virus, is seen as ultimately responsible for the loss of revenue.

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