

## FAIRNESS IN SANCTIONS: EXPLORING CITIZENS' VIEWS ON WELFARE RECIPIENT PENALTIES

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### Article Info

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### Abstract

This paper examines citizens' attitudes towards the adjustment of welfare benefit payments in the context of job search obligations being neglected. The legitimacy of welfare systems depends on the social acceptance of sanctions for welfare recipients, making citizens' perceptions of benefit cuts crucial. Using a quasi-experimental design, the study analyzes how individuals perceive the justness of various triggering events and the duration of sanctions in determining the fair amount of sanctioning. The research investigates the three normative concepts for justice evaluations: equality, contribution, and need, while incorporating elements of deservingness theory such as control, attitude, reciprocity, and identity. Additionally, the study recognizes that sanctions serve functions beyond redistribution, including influencing the behavior of welfare recipients and serving as a form of punishment. Through a literature review and an examination of the German welfare system, the paper develops a theoretical framework and formulates hypotheses. The empirical analysis confirms that citizens consider general justice principles when evaluating the appropriate level of sanctioning. The study employs vignettes presenting fictitious scenarios to measure participants' perceptions of justice and fairness in welfare benefit sanctions.

The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the social legitimacy of welfare state institutions and shed light on the factors influencing citizens' views on the adjustment of welfare benefits. By considering a wide range of triggering events and sanction durations, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the assessment of different reasons for sanctioning. The study's results have implications for policy-making and the design of welfare systems that align with societal norms and expectations.

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## Introduction

Welfare states insure individuals against risks and provide a safety net for keeping poverty at bay. One of these risks is unemployment, and unemployed job seekers can therefore apply for social benefits when in need. Specific institutional arrangements can take many forms and vary widely across countries, of course, but in many countries, unemployed job seekers are required to fulfill certain obligations to obtain welfare benefits. Job search requirements include keeping appointments with caseworkers, participating in further training measures, writing applications, and accepting jobs they could reasonably be expected to do. In the case of insufficient cooperation, the employment agency can partially reduce or even completely cut off benefits. In most European countries, even a complete withdrawal of benefits is possible (Eleveld 2018), and sanctions also play a role in US welfare policies (Davis 2019). Sanctions in regard to the basic social security provision are a highly controversial issue, and not only in the political arena (e.g., De Wilde et al., 2019). The German Federal Constitutional Court, for instance, recently assessed whether these sanctions were compatible with the fundamental right to a minimum subsistence level.

Social policy research is paying increasing attention to the social legitimacy of such arrangements (van Oorschot et al., 2017). Welfare state institutions affect not only the lives of those who receive certain benefits, but (indirectly) those who contribute to the system financially as well. Thus, welfare states build on peoples' support of certain norms of reciprocity and obligations, with underlying notions of a just relation between effort and reward (Bowles and Gintis 2000; Mau 2004; Liebig and Sauer 2016; Sachweh 2016). As Roosma et al. (2013) put it: "The welfare state's redistribution process must be embedded in a shared idea of social justice and fairness to be legitimate." Empirical justice research examines the political acceptance and thus legitimacy of institutional designs. Thus, who in a welfare state should get what, and why (van Oorschot 2000) are important questions.

Looking at social benefit sanctions in Germany, this paper investigates a variant of these questions by asking what people think about the adjustment of welfare benefit payments in the case of various job search obligations being neglected (see Buss 2019 and Naumann et al., 2020 as well, for example). Citizens' attitudes toward sanctions for welfare recipients are an interesting (and under-researched) topic that is important for the legitimacy of welfare systems. We look at the sanction for unemployed individuals who neglected various obligations to cooperate in searching for a job and ask what size of benefit cuts survey participants perceive as just under differing circumstances. One major contribution of our study—and one that is new in the field—is the analysis of how the fair amount of sanctioning varies with a broad range of triggering events (e.g., not keeping an appointment at the job center or unwillingness to move somewhere else for a job) and with the duration of the sanction. This allows us to get a much more fine-grained picture on the assessment of different reasons for sanctioning than previous studies provided. We use a quasi-experimental design and let interviewees assess the justness of randomly selected fictitious situations. Vignettes of this kind have proven to be particularly useful in justice research (e.g., Jasso 2007; Konow 2003).

To answer our research question, which asks what determines citizens' justice perceptions regarding sanctions, we rely on the three basic normative concepts for justice evaluations: equality, contribution (often also called merit or equity), and need. We enrich this framework with elements of deservingness theory: Van Oorschot (2000) suggests that in addition to need, perceptions of a group's deservingness depend on control, attitude (e.g., gratefulness), and reciprocity; these three criteria we interpret as specific forms of contribution. Beyond these normative principles, moreover, deservingness theory postulates that identity (closeness to oneself) influences justice considerations. While these justice criteria are usually applied to the distribution of benefits, sanctions involve a withdrawal of previously assigned benefits. It thus remains an empirical question as to how well this specific application can be explained by equality, contribution, and need. Furthermore, sanctions have important

functions beyond redistribution. They are supposed to have ex-ante and ex-post effects on the behavior of welfare recipients and they contain an element of punishment.

In the following, we first provide a short literature review and describe the specific situation in Germany, then develop a theoretical framework and a number of hypotheses, and finally put the resulting hypotheses to the test empirically. Our results confirm that general justice principles are taken into account when assessing the just amount of sanctioning.

### 1. Literature review

There is an increasing body of literature on the acceptance and assessment of welfare state institutions (e.g., van Oorschot 2006; Roosma et al., 2013; Meuleman et al., 2020; van Hootegem et al., 2020). While people generally have a positive attitude concerning the objectives of the welfare state, they are quite critical regarding its efficiency and effectiveness. This especially holds for the system of social benefits for the unemployed, which is an important pillar of modern welfare systems. In most welfare regimes, job seekers are expected to search for a job actively and to contribute to their reintegration into the labor market in exchange for receiving benefits. In many countries, benefit sanctions are a tool to enforce these contributions and to punish those who do not fulfill their obligations.

A large strand of the economic literature has investigated the causal effects of such sanctions on the labor market results of social benefit recipients. This literature focuses on the monitoring function and the activating effects of sanctions. In addition to an ex-post effect for those who are indeed sanctioned, benefits have an ex-ante effect for all individuals exposed to potential sanctioning (Boone et al., 2009). Empirical studies find that both the threat of possible sanctions and the actual reduction in benefits increase the outflow out of unemployment (e.g., Abbring et al., 2005; Arni et al., 2013, 2020; van den Berg et al., 2017). However, sanctions can also have negative consequences. Imposed sanctions can temporarily lower the standard of living of those sanctioned to below the sociocultural minimum subsistence level (Gotz et al., 2010; Schreyer et al., 2013). Both the threat and the imposing of sanctions can negatively affect the relationship between benefit recipients and their caseworkers (Apel and Engels 2013), result in a lower match quality for accepted jobs, or induce individuals to drop out of the labor market altogether (van den Berg et al., 2017).

We are aware of only a small, but increasing number of empirical studies concerned with the acceptance of such sanctions of unemployed job seekers. In an early study focused on the Netherlands, Houtman (1997) found that a large majority of the Dutch population supported rights and obligations of the unemployed, including harsh sanctions in certain cases. Roosma and Jeene (2017) asked survey participants from the Netherlands about their support for benefit obligations for different groups. Although they find general support for such obligations, they show that the assessment regarding social assistance recipients is more lenient in specific cases, such as for disabled persons, older unemployed benefit recipients, and single parents with small children.

A number of recent studies conduct country comparisons regarding the acceptance of work obligations for the unemployed and sanctioning. Buss et al. (2017) used survey data from a repeated cross-sectional survey for 23 European countries, where respondents were asked if the unemployed should have to take any job available. They conclude that obligations are supported more in wealthier countries, countries with a low unemployment rate, and countries with more generous social policies. Kootstra and Roosma (2018) utilized panel data from the UK and the Netherlands. They asked about the support for sanctioning policies if unemployed persons did not cooperate with work obligations, and then confronted survey participants with arguments against their assessment. In general, they find a high level of support for sanctioning (this is stronger in the UK). Arguments opposing sanctions seem to convince respondents who had previously supported sanctions more (although this was less so for respondents in the UK) than arguments in favor of the policy, and moral arguments were more effective than

economic arguments. Naumann et al. (2020) conducted a survey experiment to investigate public support for sanctioning in 21 European countries, asking how much unemployment benefits persons of varying ages should lose if they turned down a job offer. They show that in the majority of countries investigated respondents would punish older unemployed person's less than younger ones. Furthermore, sanctions are more accepted in countries with stricter labor market policies.

The approach that probably comes closest to ours is shown in the study by Buss (2019), who analyzes opinions on unemployment benefits, conditionality of benefits, and sanctions in Germany. He describes fictional unemployed persons and asks respondents to rate the rights and obligations of these persons, focusing on the failure to report in to the agency. Specifically, he looks at the benefit cut in percent if the person misses one or two appointments with the agency and receives a benefit cut. He finds that these sanctions should be less severe for individuals who are close to retirement, care for a young child, have no foreign background, and make strong efforts to find a new job. Regarding respondents' characteristics, those who tend to sanction less harshly are unemployed individuals, persons in insecure jobs, and those who have received higher education.

A number of qualitative studies also investigated the assessment of sanctions in Germany. Gotz et al. (2010) interviewed caseworkers from German job centers. While most thought that the sanctioning option was important, they were particularly critical of the fact that benefits might be cut entirely in certain circumstances. Furthermore, they pointed to other unintended side effects, such as the committing of petty crime, increasing debt, the breaking off of contact with the job center, and the undermining of the relationship based on trust which had existed with the employee responsible for them at the job center. In another study with a focus on Germany, benefit recipients were also interviewed (Apel and Engels 2013). The majority of respondents considered it acceptable for welfare benefit receipt to be accompanied by certain obligations and potential sanctions for unemployed persons. However, the answers confirmed that sanctions have a high impact on the person's life situation and that those on whom sanctions are imposed often suffer from various psychological problems (such as anxiety, depression, or irritability). In addition, the study shows that stricter sanctions lead to a loss of confidence in caseworkers.

We go beyond this literature by looking at different kinds of deviant behavior on the part of the unemployed job seeker in combination with various individual characteristics, which allows for a broader picture concerning the possible failure to meet obligations. As has been outlined above, an important additional contribution of our study is that we analyze justice considerations with respect to several different job search requirements that are not met. Moreover, we discuss these questions within a broader theoretical justice framework, thus linking the debate on the justice of welfare institutions to the literature on sanctions in the welfare state.

## 2. Institutional framework in Germany

In Germany, unemployed persons in need are entitled to social benefits—also called unemployment benefit II (UB II). First, these benefits cover what are called “standardized” needs, particularly expenses for food, clothing, personal hygiene, household goods, or personal needs. In 2017 (when our survey took place), the sum for this component amounted to EUR 409 (around USD 464) per month for single persons or single parents. This amount is reduced if individuals have other income or assets. Furthermore, for individuals living in multi-person households, standard needs per person are set lower. Second, benefits cover the costs of accommodation and heating as well as possible additional needs (for pregnant women or single parents of minors, for example).

The legislator expects individuals receiving UB II to participate in searching for and finding a job. This includes a wide range of obligations, such as: (i) providing evidence of their own efforts to search for a job, (ii) taking up or continuing a job, training course, or workfare scheme defined as reasonable, (iii) participating in reasonable integration measures, and (iv) meeting deadlines set by the job center. These obligations—as well as the rights—of the job seekers are put down in an integration agreement that is signed by the unemployed person and by his

or her caseworker. If the unemployed person refuses to sign, the caseworker can put the integration agreement into action as an administrative act.

If employable benefit recipients do not fulfill these obligations without good cause, the job agency can impose sanctions, which vary depending on their severity. Table 1 gives an overview of the kinds of sanctions that were in place at the time of our survey. If beneficiaries do not keep an appointment with the job center despite a request to do so and without good cause, or miss an appointment made for a medical or psychological examination, the job center reduces UB II by 10 percent for three months. Tougher sanctions apply to so-called failures to meet an obligation (“Pflichtverletzungen”). This is the case, for example, if beneficiaries (i) send out fewer applications than agreed in their integration agreements, (ii) reject a job offer, or (iii) refuse participation in active labor market programs. For persons aged 25 and over, the first such failure to meet an obligation reduces UB II by 30 percent of the relevant standardized needs amount for three months. If the last reduction commenced no more than one year previously, the individual is

**Table 1**

Sanction regulations in Germany until November 2019.

	Group	Within one year***		
		1st sanction	2nd sanction	Further sanctions
<b>Failure to report*</b>	Irrespective of age	10% cut of the standardized requirement	10% cut of the standardized requirement	10% cut of the standardized requirement
<b>Failure to meet obligation**</b>	Persons aged 25 and older	30% cut of the standardized requirement	60% cut of the standardized requirement	UB II cut completely
	Persons under 25	Restricted accommodation and heating needs	to UB II cut completely	cut UB II cut completely

\*) Failure to report in to the job center, not keeping appointments\*\*) Violation of obligations laid down in the integration agreement, rejection of work/training/job opportunity, non-take-up of or drop-out from a labor market program \*\*\*) A repeated failure to meet obligations occurs if the start of the previous period of sanctions occurred no more than one year previously. Note: Sanction duration is three months. For persons under 25, the sanction period may be reduced to six weeks in individual cases. Source: § 31, § 31a, § 32 SGB II (German Social Security Code II), authors’ own illustration.

Sanctioned for a repeated failure to meet an obligation, which, until November 2019, resulted in higher sanctions. For persons under 25 years of age, UB II is reduced to the needs for accommodation and heating after the first failure to meet an obligation; after the second failure, benefits would be cut completely. The sanction period for this group may be reduced to six weeks. In the case of sanctions in excess of 30 percent of the standardized needs, the job center may (or, in the case of families with underage children, must) grant additional benefits in kind upon application.

As Venn (2012) shows for the 35 EU and OECD countries, in 2001, Germany was among the five countries with the lowest level of sanctioning (together with Japan, the Netherlands, France, and Australia). At the other end of the scale, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Turkey, and the United States suspend benefits completely for an initial refusal of a job offer or ALMP placement (Venn 2012). Eleveld (2018) also confirms that Germany has a comparatively low level of sanctioning. This makes Germany an interesting case since respondents could at least theoretically call for much harder rules.



During September 2021, roughly 1.6 million persons were registered as unemployed and receiving UB II (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2022a); this figure was quite stable over the last few years. During 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged), a total of more than 800,000 sanctions were imposed for unemployed UB II recipients in Germany (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2022b). Failure to register caused almost 80 percent of these sanctions and, on average, the reduction amounted to nearly 20 percent of the total entitlement to benefits that persons without sanctions would have had.

During November 2019, however, the German Federal Constitutional Court decreed that the current welfare regime in Germany violated the basic right to a subsistence minimum (Gantchev 2020). In particular, sanctions that cut standardized needs by more than 30 percent were not compliant with German constitutional law. The court criticized the lack of comprehensive empirical evidence on the effectiveness of sanctions in Germany and referred to the fact that some study results even pointed to sanctions having a counterproductive effect on social reintegration. The court ruling has meanwhile been passed into law by the new German government, which was elected in 2021. On top of the court ruling came the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The German government thus decided to implement a welfare system involving low-level conditions temporarily until the end of 2021. Furthermore, many meetings with caseworkers could not take place due to pandemic-related restrictions, there were fewer job offers, and fewer labor market measures could be started. In consequence, the number of sanctions imposed decreased to around 170,000 during 2020.

Finally, we would like to mention the fact that sanctions are a highly controversial topic in the political discourse in Germany. While the left-wing party DIE LINKE in particular is in favor of abolishing UB II sanctions completely, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) adamantly defend them. Recently, the new government coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green party (BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) have modified the entire system of basic benefits and associated sanctions in Germany. As mentioned above, sanctions should not exceed 30 percent in the future.

### 3. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Welfare states are institutions regulating the allocation of resources and thus inequality among a society's citizens. They consist of rules which determine who gets support from the state—and thus from society—when and why. These rules are based on normative beliefs in regard to these questions which may differ across societies and time, leading to different types and forms of welfare states (e.

g., Esping-Andersen 1990). Although these rules are formed by culture, tradition, and history, there are some basic principles which influence these norms on a general level. In the literature on welfare state principles, theoretical reasoning is mostly based on three core normative principles. First, the principle of equality, which is often framed within Rawls' theory of justice (Rawls 1971), implies that people should be treated equally, *ceteris paribus*. Second, the principle of need implies that we should support people who need help. The third principle dictates that for a decision about allocation we should take into account how much people contributed to the resources or the greater good in the past. In the literature, different terms are used for this contribution-based distribution of goods, such as merit (Jasso et al. 2016) or equity (Adams 1965; Reeskens and van Oorschot 2013). In accordance with Tornblom and Kazemi's (2011), we use the most general term "contribution" in the following. Hence, people who contributed more to social security systems (e.g., due to higher wages) are entitled to higher benefits if they require support. Finally, the need principle implies that a higher need should be met with more resources.

Although these three principles are powerful norms, they are often too general, especially regarding the specific question of how to allocate welfare support. We therefore employ the deservingness approach (van Oorschot

2000; van Oorschot et al., 2017; Meuleman et al., 2020) in order to differentiate further the principle of contribution. This theory predicts that members of a society will find (welfare) support more justified for one person over another, the higher that person's relative deservingness is. Van Oorschot (2000) summarizes five criteria for deservingness in the "CARIN" model: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, and need. The added value of deservingness theory is that it focuses on preferences for supporting particular groups, allowing heterogeneous justice assessments for different groups of people.

We argue that the first three deservingness criteria help to specify the principle of contribution in more detail. First, according to this approach, if individuals have control over a situation, they are responsible for their own fate, and this makes them less deserving of benefit receipt. People who are in need despite being in control did not therefore make the expected contributions. Second, attitudes describe the compliance with general rules, among other factors. Compliance of this kind can be seen as a contribution to society, which also makes individuals more deserving. Reciprocity mirrors the contribution principle by focusing on past contributions, such as paying social security contributions before becoming unemployed. The general principle of reciprocity then dictates that those who contribute to a system are judged as more deserving. Furthermore, the general justice principle of need is implemented directly in the deservingness approach: the greater the person's need, the more deserving they are. This principle seems to be specifically important for the support of the unemployed (van Hootegeem et al., 2020). Finally, Oorschot suggests a fifth principle: identity. In our opinion, this is not rooted in normative justice principles but in a basic tendency toward homophily. Identity reflects the fact that individuals judge those similar to them as more deserving. Deservingness is assessed on the basis of the five criteria outlined above. If information on deservingness is missing, it is assumed that the principle of equality provides a default, leading to equal support. Within this framework, we focus on two types of determinants for the deservingness evaluation: the characteristics of the benefit recipient and the type of non-compliance.

We apply this theoretical framework to the question of which job seeker receiving unemployment benefits should be sanctioned more heavily in the case of non-compliance with the rules of the welfare state. This is a special application as the distributional justice framework and deservingness theory are usually applied to answer the question of who should get which resources. Welfare sanctions correct the amount of resources previously granted to fit a new situation. We thus focus on a withdrawal of resources which were already granted in the past. Ultimately, however, both approaches aim at an explanation of an allocation result, and the sanctions in question are an instrument used to correct the amount of resources previously granted to fit a new situation. This new situation arises as a result of the benefit recipient's behavior. The question of whether these adaptations work according to the same allocation principles that people use for the decisions regarding basic support in the welfare state is a relevant one. By applying the same theoretical framework, confirmation for our hypotheses would indicate that this should be the case. Note that in our specific case, the withdrawal of resources through sanctions not only implies redistribution but can also contain elements of activation (e.g., Abbring et al., 2005) and retribution (see Tornblom and Jonsson 1987" ; Rossi et al., 1997, for example): Sanctions may also be imposed in order to induce a certain behavior in the future—in our case active participation in the job search. However, the question of how extensively a person should be sanctioned is subject to justice considerations (Rossi et al., 1997). With respect to the justice criteria outlined above, the wish for activation and retribution might underlie applications of contribution-based justice criteria in particular. We do not aim to disentangle people's motives for distribution and retribution when looking at their assessments but assume that for the legitimacy of the sanctions people will make an overall justice assessment, which includes motives for distribution as well as retribution. In our empirical approach, we focus exclusively on the withdrawal of resources and do not draw attention to possible additional functions of sanctions such as activation and retribution.

As outlined above, there are three basic justice principles for these assessments. The basic principle underlying legal norms is the principle of *equality*. In the case of sanctions, this would imply that benefit recipients violating legal obligations should likewise be sanctioned according to the law. This would imply that characteristics or the situation of the beneficiary—gender, for example—that are not taken into account by legislation should have no effect on the extent of sanctions for deviant behavior. This is certainly the case for gender, particularly as we only consider individuals from one-person households. Thus, the first hypothesis is that gender should not have an impact on the extent of the sanction (H1a). However, some uncertainty might remain as to the causes of the failure to meet the obligation in the scenarios described, and under certain circumstances women have been shown to be more norm conforming than men (Eagly and Chrvala, 1986). When in doubt, people might ascribe more positive *attitudes* to women, which could be reflected in the perceived just amount of sanctioning (H1b).

Young beneficiaries have better labor market prospects in general than older persons and also often fewer responsibilities. Both facts could increase their *control* over the situation. Moreover, older people may be hit harder by a reduction in benefits as they are less flexible when it comes to cutting down expenses, thus the *need* principle might apply here too. Older workers might also be perceived as more committed, which would signal a more positive *attitude* (see Naumann et al., 2020). We therefore assume that higher sanctions are accepted for young beneficiaries than for older people as the former are perceived as less deserving (H2). Furthermore, German law also stipulated heavier sanctions for young persons.

Unemployment duration is not a criterion that underlies legal provisions regarding sanctions in Germany. This could imply that the *equality* principle prevails and that people do not take this characteristic into account when judging the just amount of sanctioning (H3a). However, the duration of unemployment may influence justice assessments of sanctions for the unemployed for at least two reasons: On the one hand, a longer period of unemployment could indicate that the benefit recipient has made little effort to search for a job. The *reciprocity* principle implies that welfare benefit receipt must be counterbalanced by appropriate input (in this case: effort). This might justify higher sanctions in order to increase the efforts—and thus contribution—of the benefit recipient (H3b). On the other hand, a long period of unemployment may signal problems which are beyond the influence of the unemployed person and certainly indicate greater need on the part of the beneficiary. Thus, norms of *control* and *need* may also influence peoples' judgments and make them more lenient toward sanctioned benefit recipients (H3c).

A similar line of argument refers to repeated sanctions. Persons who have been sanctioned for the first time might meet with more understanding and leniency than those who have already neglected their job search efforts previously. Repeated sanctions would indicate that the sanctioned individuals have made a particularly low contribution to job search efforts and that they disrespect the law (H4). Both would violate norms of *reciprocity* and *attitude*.

The *reciprocity* principle also applies to the event that triggered the sanction. Lower compliance of beneficiaries with job-search requirements should be counterbalanced by higher sanctions. To a certain extent, the reason for the sanction could also mirror recipients' *attitudes*. Not complying with legal requirements could be interpreted as not being grateful for support. From this we derive the hypothesis that the reason for the sanction should be crucial for the perceived fairness of a sanction (H5a). We expect the most serious failure to meet an obligation to be a refusal to contribute to job search efforts. A refusal to take up a lower paid job than before or to move somewhere else to take up a new job require sacrifices on the part of the individual and might thus be interpreted as less severe. Failure to report in to the job center is less offensive than other reasons that lead to sanctions. The failure to report in may also be due to unfortunate circumstances, scheduling problems, or a lack of self-organization rather than unwillingness. However, if respondents take legal regulations into account and base their



judgments on the *equality* rule, they might only differentiate between the failure to report in and other kinds of failure to meet obligations (H5b).

The *identity* principle creates a relationship between the characteristics of the benefit recipient described and the respondent, assuming that individuals grant more to persons to whom they feel closer or more similar. First, we therefore assume that respondents who are unemployed or have received welfare benefits themselves in the past, and particularly those who have experienced sanctions, are generally more lenient and have greater empathy toward the basic income recipients described (H6), independent of other features of the vignette. Second, respondents might be more lenient toward a UB II recipient of the same gender and in their same age category (H7), and thus take into account specific features of the vignette when making their judgement.

Political parties usually have an agenda regarding basic principles of the welfare system, and their voters share these views and (at least to a certain degree) identify with them. As we discussed in the previous chapter, political parties have strongly differing views regarding the use and scope of sanctions. The question of whether deservingness principles interact with political opinions in terms of sanctions is therefore an interesting one. We presume that political tendencies indicated by survey respondents are strongly correlated with their general opinion of sanctioning (H8).

#### 4. Research design: the factorial survey

Empirical research focuses mainly on the question of how redistributive principles influence preferences and attitudes toward the allocation of resources (see Will, 1993; Reeskens and van Oorschot, 2013, Kootstra, 2016; for example). Much less research has been conducted on the just amount of sanctioning for deviant behavior and of benefit withdrawal. Often, the support granted by the state requires the beneficiary to cooperate. In our case, unemployed individuals asking for state support, for example, may have the obligation to search for a job actively or to accept jobs yielding less income than their previous one. Looking at the acceptance of sanctions is interesting because it is an indicator of the legitimacy of the welfare rules that are necessary for the institution to function in the long run (Weber, 2002, pp 122–123).

To analyze the acceptance of sanctions empirically we conduct a factorial survey (Auspurg et al., 2009; Liebig et al., 2015), an often-used approach to investigate deservingness (e.g., Will 1993, Kootstra, 2016; De Wilde et al., 2019). We construct several fictitious situations (vignettes) and ask respondents how extensively—measured in percentage points—the persons described should be sanctioned in each situation. These situations randomly combine different characteristics along several dimensions. This approach has three major advantages: First, respondents have to assess realistic situations. Second, we can identify the causal effects of different characteristics on assessments. Third, vignettes are relatively robust regarding socially desirable answering behavior. The bias is reduced by the fact that people have to weigh several dimensions at the same time—this makes it more difficult to produce a consistent bias (Auspurg and Hinz 2015, p. 114, see also Liebig et al., 2015). However, since the topic is highly controversial in political debate, respondents are unlikely to believe that they are expected to give a particular answer.

The vignettes consist of six dimensions whose characteristics we vary (Table 2) and which are chosen according to theoretical considerations. To keep the vignettes simple, they are limited to single-person households. As personal characteristics, we vary age, gender, and previous benefit duration of benefit recipients. Regarding the nature of the sanction, we distinguish between a first sanction and a repeated one, between different kinds of failure to meet obligations, and between sanctions of different duration. As a reference, we choose a sanction duration of 3 months as this corresponds to the current legal regulation regarding the failure to meet obligations. While the dimensions are the same across all vignettes, characteristics varied randomly across questionnaires. Randomization ensures that contrast and sequence effects are avoided (Auspurg et al., 2009). The six dimensions

with their characteristics result in a vignette universe of 240 ( $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 5 \times 3$ ) possible combinations and therefore 240 possible vignettes. All possible vignettes were assigned the same probability. Each respondent had to assess an individual combination of five vignettes, resulting in about 3500 vignette assessments and about 15 assessments for each vignette. We are confident that the number of vignettes per respondent is sufficient for the respondents to regard the persons described as real people. In Germany, the number of unemployed persons receiving UB II is substantially larger than the number of those receiving unemployment benefits financed by unemployment insurance, and sanctions have been the subject of a heated public debate since the “Hartz IV” reform in Germany that was enacted in 2005.

Fig. 1 shows an example of a vignette and the assessment scale. An introductory text which also provides some basic information on institutional details is included in the Appendix. We tried to make it clear from the introductory text and from our question that we were interested in the personal, honest opinions of respondents in regard to how many percentage points living expenses should be cut by in each situation described.

**Table 2**

Vignette dimensions, characteristics, and potential justice principles applied.

Dimension	Characteristics	Potential justice principles applied
Gender	• Male	Equality (H1a)
	• Female	Contribution: Attitude (H1b)
Age	• 22	Need; Contribution: Control, Attitude (H2)
	• 45	
Length of unemployment	• 1 year	Equality (H3a)
	• 3 years	Contribution: Reciprocity, Control (H3b) Need (H3c)
Number of sanctions	• First sanction	Contribution: Reciprocity, Attitude (H4)
	• Second sanction	
Reason for sanction	<i>Failure to report</i>	Equality (within kinds of failure to meet an obligation) (H5a)
	• Not keeping an appointment with the job center without an important reason	Contribution: Reciprocity, Attitude (H5b)
	<i>Failure to meet an obligation</i>	
	• Reject a job which requires moving somewhere else (120 km from place of residence to date)	
	• Reject a job offering 25% less wages than the previous job	
	• Send out fewer applications than agreed in the integration agreement	
	• Refusal to search through job advertisements and online job boards and thus actively participate in reintegration into the labor market	

Duration of sanction	• 1 month	—
	• 3 months	
	• 6 months	

A single **woman** aged **22** has been **unemployed for a year** and receives unemployment benefit II. She has **not yet received any sanctions**. **The job center offers her a job 120 km away from where she has lived to date, which would require her to move. She refuses this job offer.** As a result, the job center decides to reduce the set amount for living expenses (EUR 409) for the duration of **three months**.

Please use the slider to determine the just amount you think the lump sum should be reduced by as a percentage. 0% would mean no reduction, while 100% would mean that the EUR 409 would be withheld completely. The slider appears when you press on any point in the gray bar.

0%

100%

**Fig. 1.** Example of a vignette

Note: Sections in bold type varied between vignettes. Original German version: “Eine alleinstehende Frau von 22 Jahren ist seit einem Jahr arbeitslos und erhält Arbeitslosengeld II. Die Frau wurde in der Vergangenheit noch nicht sanktioniert. Das Jobcenter bietet ihr eine Arbeit an, die sich 120 km vom bisherigen Wohnort entfernt befindet und für deren Annahme somit ein Umzug notwendig wäre. Sie lehnt die Arbeit ab. In der Folge will das Jobcenter den Pauschalbetrag für den Lebensunterhalt (409 Euro) für drei Monate kürzen. Bitte stellen Sie anhand des Reglers ein, um wie viel % der Pauschalbetrag aus Ihrer persönlichen Sicht gerechterweise gekürzt werden sollte. 0% würden keine Kürzung, 100% einen vollständigen Einbehalt der 409 Euro bedeuten. Der Regler erscheint, wenn Sie auf einen beliebigen Punkt des grauen Balkens drücken.”

##### 5. Data and methods

The online survey took place in September 2017 and was restricted to individuals aged 18 to 65. A total of 811 persons opened the link to the online questionnaire over a period of five days, and 754 persons completed the survey. After all persons who did not provide all of the information on personal characteristics used in the multivariate analysis were excluded, the final sample consisted of 686 persons. For those who worked on the questionnaire without interruption the mean processing time was 7 min, while the median was 5.5 min. This seems reasonable to us. The survey was carried out through a commercial online panel (Survey Sampling International, SSI). The panel provider uses various channels to recruit survey participants and provides different incentives for participation (e.g., money, non-monetary prizes, charitable donations). The premiums offered vary according to survey duration or target group characteristics. As individuals register for online panels of this nature voluntarily, we do not have a representative sample of the German population. However, this should not pose a problem for our research question as we are interested in how assessments change compared to a reference situation and a reference person if the characteristics of the situation or the characteristics of the persons interviewed vary.

The survey consisted of three parts. First, after a short introduction, we provided some information on who is eligible for UB II, the benefit amounts, the obligations associated with the receipt of benefits, and when sanctions are imposed (see Appendix). Second, each participant had to judge five randomly drawn vignettes. Third, the survey included questions about the respondents' sociodemographic background and attitudes.

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the sample of participants. As has already been mentioned, we do not have a representative sample. A comparison with the results of the last federal election in Germany, for example, shows that an above-average number of survey participants feel more of an association with the left-wing The

Left party, while the number of participants supporting the conservative Christian Democratic Union or center-left Social Democratic Party is disproportionately smaller. Individuals over the age of 50 are overrepresented in the data set, while persons under 30 are underrepresented in comparison to their share of the population. We control for these variables in our estimates.

Fig. 2 shows the distribution of the sanctions selected across all situations described. Overall, answers covered the entire range of possible responses. The mean value of the selected sanction levels is 26 percent. Survey participants would have waived a sanction completely for 18 percent of the vignettes. The median of the cuts perceived as fair amounts to 20 percent. Of the 686 people surveyed, only 47 assessed all five vignettes identically, and 27 of these persons chose the option “zero percent” (i.e., no penalty). We can thus conclude that only a small proportion of respondents was in favor of abolishing sanctions completely.

For the multivariate analysis, the hierarchical structure of the data has to be taken into account. Each person judged five vignettes and we cannot assume that assessments are independent of each other. This calls for models with standard errors correlated at the individual level or for the use of panel data models. Furthermore, as the dependent variable we use the perceived just sanction as a

**Table 3**

Composition of the sample.

Characteristic	Value	Share
Gender	Male	0.51
	Female	0.49
Current job status	In employment subject to social security contributions or employed as a public servant	0.49
	Self-employed	0.09
	In marginal employment	0.05
	In training or studying	0.07
	Retired	0.15
	Registered as unemployed	0.08
	Otherwise not employed (e.g., housewife)	0.07
Political tendency	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	0.17
	Christian Social Union (CSU)	0.05
	Social Democratic Party (SPD)	0.18
	Green party (BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN)	0.06
	The Left party (DIE LINKE)	0.14
	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	0.08
	Free Democratic Party (FDP)	0.08
	Other party/No party	0.24
UB II receipt	No experience of receipt	0.71
	Experience of receipt	0.29
Sanctions	No experience of sanctions	0.95
	Experience of sanctions	0.05
Nationality	German	0.97
	Other	0.03
Region	West Germany	0.76

	East Germany	0.24
Age group	Aged up to 29	0.15
	Aged 30 to 49	0.40
	Aged at least 50	0.45
School leaving certificate	5 years of secondary school (Hauptschulabschluss)	0.14
	6 years of secondary school (Realschulabschluss)	0.40
	High school (Abitur)	0.46
Number of participants		686

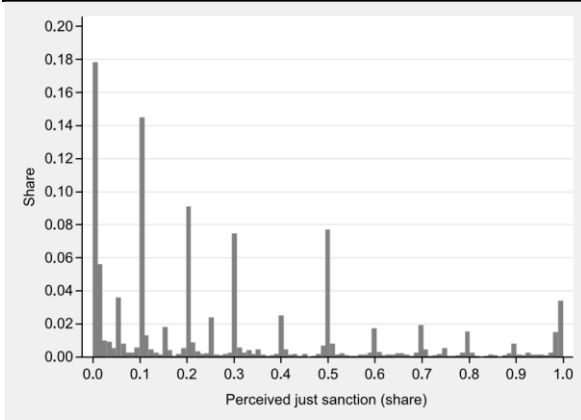


Fig. 2. Distribution of the sanctions deemed just.

**Table 4**

Regression results of the vignette analysis.

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	OLS		Fractional logit		Random effects	
<i>Sanctioned person (Reference: Woman, 45 years old, unemployed for 1 year, first sanction)</i>						
Male	0.021**	(0.008)	0.021**	(0.008)	0.020**	(0.006)
22 years old	0.039**	(0.009)	0.039**	(0.009)	0.035**	(0.006)
Unemployed for 3 years	0.013	(0.009)	0.013	(0.009)	0.010	(0.006)
Second sanction	0.052**	(0.010)	0.051**	(0.009)	0.057**	(0.006)
<i>Reason for sanction (Reference: Fewer applications than agreed)</i>						
Failure to report	- 0.049**	(0.015)	- 0.049**	(0.015)	- 0.046**	(0.010)
Rejects job with 25% lower earnings	0.025	(0.017)	0.025	(0.016)	0.026*	(0.010)
Rejects job if move required	- 0.084**	(0.014)	- 0.084**	(0.014)	- 0.078**	(0.010)
Refuses active participation	0.164**	(0.018)	0.164**	(0.018)	0.156**	(0.010)
<i>Duration of sanction (Reference: 3 months)</i>						
1 month	0.009	(0.011)	0.009	(0.011)	0.019*	(0.008)
6 months	- 0.010	(0.011)	- 0.009	(0.011)	0.001	(0.008)
<i>Characteristics of survey participant (Reference: Female, employed, CDU, never unemployed/sanctioned)</i>						
					(0.017)	- 0.036* (0.017)



Male	– 0.036*	(0.017)	– 0.036*			
Self-employed	– 0.023	(0.034)	– 0.024	(0.034)	– 0.023	(0.031)
In marginal employment	– 0.031	(0.038)	– 0.032	(0.036)	– 0.030	(0.041)
In training/Student	– 0.017	(0.034)	– 0.019	(0.032)	– 0.016	(0.033)
Retired	– 0.006	(0.024)	– 0.005	(0.024)	– 0.007	(0.025)
Unemployed	– 0.084**	(0.026)	– 0.098**	(0.029)	– 0.085*	(0.034)
Not employed or unemployed	– 0.075*	(0.033)	– 0.072*	(0.032)	– 0.076*	(0.034)
Experienced UB II receipt	– 0.062**	(0.019)	– 0.060**	(0.019)	– 0.061**	(0.021)
Experienced sanctions	– 0.070*	(0.032)	– 0.084*	(0.038)	– 0.070	(0.043)
CSU	0.051	(0.044)	0.049	(0.043)	0.049	(0.044)
SPD	– 0.029	(0.029)	– 0.028	(0.028)	– 0.029	(0.028)
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	– 0.014	(0.039)	– 0.015	(0.039)	– 0.014	(0.040)
DIE LINKE	– 0.105**	(0.028)	– 0.107**	(0.028)	– 0.105**	(0.030)
AfD	– 0.047	(0.038)	– 0.049	(0.037)	– 0.047	(0.036)
FDP	0.045	(0.037)	0.046	(0.036)	0.046	(0.035)
Other party/No party	– 0.009	(0.027)	– 0.009	(0.027)	– 0.010	(0.026)
Constant	0.269**	(0.029)			0.263**	(0.026)
Observations	3430		3430		3430	
Persons	686		686		686	
(Pseudo-)R <sup>2</sup>	0.167		0.062		0.228	

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, standard errors in parentheses. Notes: Dependent variable: Perceived just sanction as a share; OLS estimate with clustered standard errors at the individual level; marginal effects from fractional logit model; random effects model with random intercept at the individual level.

share, which is naturally bounded between zero and one; this can be taken into account by a fractional logit model. We include gender, employment status, political preferences, and experience of benefit receipt and sanctions as explaining variables. Additional estimates (not displayed here) show that results for the features of the vignettes remain the same when these variables are taken into account. Further additional estimates show that variables like nationality, age, education, household size, household income, and region do not have an impact on assessments that significantly differs from zero. As the Akaike information criterion indicates that the sparser set of covariates described above is to be preferred, we only present results for this variable set.

## 6. Main results

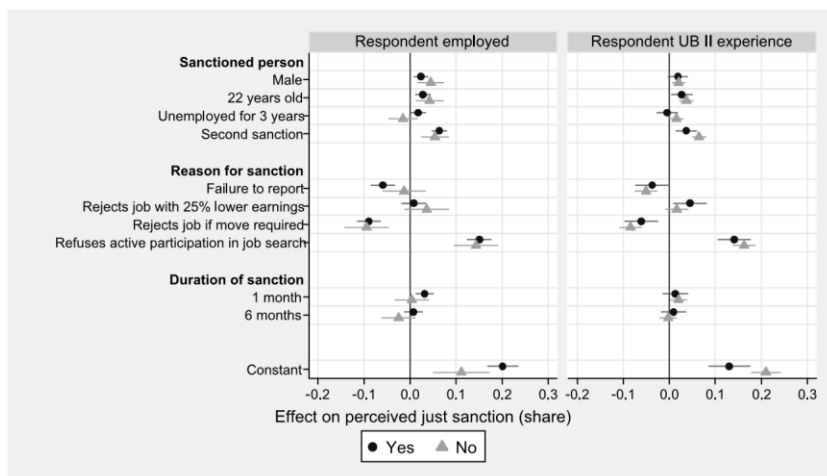
Table 4 presents the main results of the multivariate analyses. Column (1) in the table contains the result from a simple OLS regression with standard errors clustered at the individual level. Column (2) shows marginal effects from a fractional logit model, also with clustered standard errors at the individual level. Finally, column (3) displays the results from a random intercept model. Overall, the results for the point estimators are very robust. In particular, the results from the OLS and the fractional logit model are virtually identical. Point estimates differ very slightly for the random effects model, and in consequence there are a few differences regarding statistical significance. Statistical tests show that the random intercept model is preferable to an OLS-model without individual effects and also to a fixed effects model. Furthermore, the (pseudo) coefficient of determination is 0.17 for the OLS model, 0.04 for the fractional logit mode, and 0.23 for the random intercept model. Thus, in the following discussion we focus on the results from the latter model.

The reference situation describes a hypothetical 45-year-old woman who has been unemployed for a year and is to receive a UB II sanction for the first time for three months because she has not sent out enough applications. The reference survey respondent is a woman working as an employee or public servant who feels politically aligned with the Christian Democratic Union and has not yet received UB II (and has therefore never been sanctioned). For the reference situation described above, this reference person would have judged a sanction of 26 percent to be fair (purely by chance, this equals the mean value of the dependent variable).

As a first result, we find that gender matters—the perceived just sanction is two percentage points higher for male benefit recipients. This rejects H1a, which is based on the equality principle and refers to vignette dimensions not taken into account in legislation. However, it does lend some support to H1b—that people ascribe more positive *attitudes* to women. Respondents would cut the standardized need for men by two percentage points more than for women (this is true irrespective of whether the survey participant is male or female). This is, in fact, difficult to explain, as we only look at one-person households.

Regarding age, survey participants would impose four percentage points stronger sanctions where the person described is only 22 years old instead of 45 (note that the age of survey respondents had no influence on ratings). This is in line with H2 and could be explained by both the *control* and *need* criteria. Supplementary estimates show that survey respondents would sanction younger men more severely than they would older men. However, they would not make such an age distinction across female benefit recipients. This indicates that they would particularly use sanctions as an educational measure for young men. However, all in all, participants would differentiate noticeably less between younger and older people than is currently prescribed by law.

Unemployment duration does not have an impact on the extent of the sanction, which supports H3a and rejects H3b and H3c. One



**Fig. 3.** Results by employment status and experience of UB II receipt

Notes: Dependent variable: Perceived just sanction as a share. Random effects model with random intercept at the individual level with vignette features only, confidence intervals at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Reference vignette features: Woman, 45 years old, unemployed for 1 year, first sanction, refuses active participation in job search, sanction duration 3 months. Left panel: The employed category contains persons in employment subject to social security contributions, persons employed as public servants, self-employed persons, and persons in marginal employment; the not employed category contains individuals registered as unemployed or persons otherwise not employed. Source: Authors' own calculations. 2650 (3430) observations for 530 (686) persons in left (right) panel.

Explanation for this might be that interviewees do not interpret longer unemployment durations as an indicator of a lack of effort in searching for a job or greater need or less control over the situation. Instead, they seem to apply the *equality* criterion—which is also in line with current legislation.

As suggested by H4, individuals propose a greater benefit cut (six percentage points) if a person receives his or her second sanction. This can be explained by both the *contribution-based criteria reciprocity* and *attitude*. The difference, however, is also much lower than prescribed by the provisions of German law.

An important question is how far surveyed persons take the reason for a sanction into account when assessing the fair amount of sanctioning. German law distinguishes between the failure to report in on the one hand (10 percent cut) and sanctions for all other kinds of failure to meet obligations on the other (30 percent cut). The reference sanction in Table 4 refers to a situation where a person has sent fewer applications than specified in his or her integration agreement with the job center. Interviewees would reduce benefits by five percentage points less if the person described had failed to report in to the job center—this difference from the reference situation is again much smaller than the current law stipulates. A sanction that is even lower on average—eight percentage points less compared to the case with too few applications—is suggested if someone refuses to move somewhere else to take up a job. In contrast, interviewees would reduce benefits by three additional percentage points if the recipient rejected a job due to a 25 percent salary reduction and by 16 additional percentage points if that person did not actively participate in the reintegration process. These findings strongly suggest that the choice of the fair amount of sanctioning takes the underlying reason for the benefit cutoff into account. This is predicted by H5a, based on the principles of *reciprocity* and *attitude*.

We did not formulate a hypothesis on sanction duration, but this dimension also has an impact on the level of sanctions perceived as fair—which is, however, small. The reference situation describes a benefit reduction period of three months. If sanctions were imposed for one month only, respondents would cut benefits by two additional percentage points. If a sanction is imposed for six months instead of three, it does not affect the amount of the reduction perceived as fair at all. This finding might imply that respondents care about the reduction of transfer payments in a given month rather than the absolute size of sanctions and need, and that they do not find duration important.

Furthermore, Table 4 shows that the size of sanctions perceived as fair varies with the individual characteristics of survey participants. Benefit cutoffs imposed by non-workers or persons who are currently unemployed would be eight to nine percentage points lower than by employees or public servants. Interviewees who have experience with UB II decide on a sanction that is six percentage points lower. Beneath feelings of similarity to the person described, this can reflect self-interest but also the experience that sanctions have a great impact on lifestyle. This is in line with the *identity* principle, and is investigated further in Section 8.

Finally, the levels of sanctions regarded as fair by those who politically support the left-wing party DIE LINKE are around 10 percentage points lower than those considered fair by persons aligned with the reference category (CDU). The effects of preferences for other political parties have the expected direction, but are not significantly different from zero.

## 7. Effects by subgroups of respondents

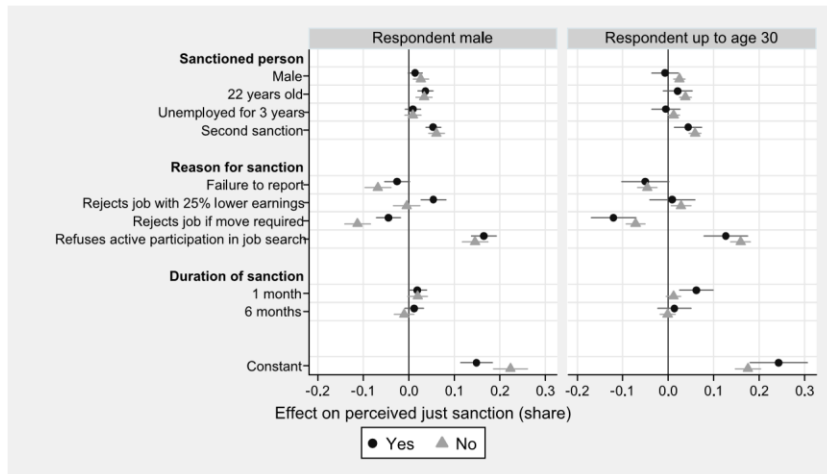
In this section, we delve further into the issues of identity and political tendencies. To do this, we estimate random intercept models for different subgroups, in which we only include vignette characteristics.

First, Fig. 3 differentiates between employed and not employed respondents (including unemployed persons but excluding students and retired persons) in the left panel and between respondents with and without experience of unemployment benefit II in the right panel. Both panels show that respondents who are not employed and those with experience of receiving benefits would generally sanction to a lower extent (as displayed by the constant).

However, we find no significant differences regarding the effects of specific features of the vignettes. The results imply that there is a general feeling of *identity* that is determined by the recent and past labor market status (H6). Second, Fig. 4 presents results by gender and age, differentiating between respondents up to the age of 30 and those above (results do not change much if we choose other age categories). As we see in the left panel, male and female survey participants would both ascribe higher sanctions to male benefit recipients, and effect sizes do not differ significantly by gender. Furthermore, the right panel shows no significant differences in the assessment of fair sanctions when comparing 22- and 45-year-old benefit recipients by respondents' age categories. Thus, gender and the (broadly measured) age category do not seem to contribute to a feeling of identity, and H7 is rejected. Finally, Fig. 5 takes up the issue of potential heterogeneous effects by political tendency. The left panel distinguishes between those favoring DIE LINKE (The Left party) and all other respondents, while the right panel compares those supporting the conservative parties (CDU/CSU) with all others. Indeed, supporters of DIE LINKE would generally set sanctions lower than persons with a different political orientation, but we find no significant differences across the effects of vignette dimensions. Thus, supporters of DIE LINKE generally reject sanctions regardless of whom they affect and why, which supports H8 for this group. In contrast, for respondents who tend to belong to the conservative spectrum, we do not find significant differences compared to respondents with all other political tendencies.

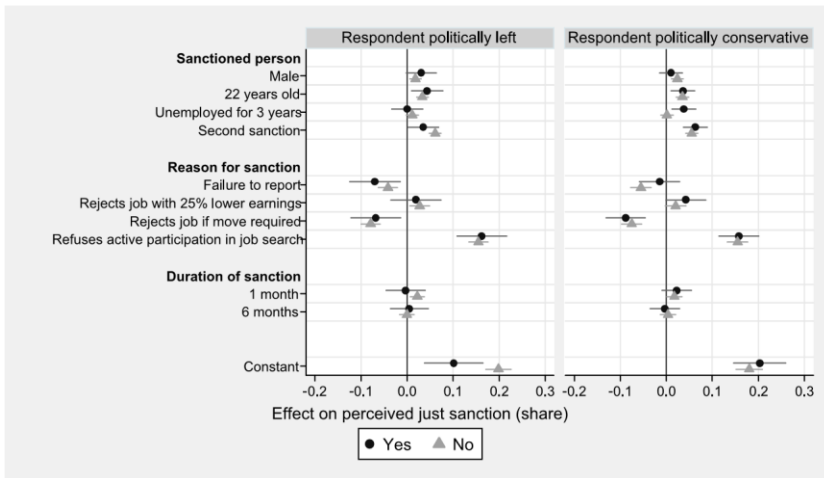
## 8. Conclusions

The discourse on welfare benefit sanctions in the basic social welfare system has economic, sociopolitical, legal, moral, and ethical aspects. Empirical studies show that sanctions increase the rates of transition from benefit receipt into employment and reduce the duration of unemployment spells (e.g., van den Berg et al., 2017). However, sanctions can also induce transitions into more unstable



**Fig. 4.** Results by gender and age group

Notes: Dependent variable: Perceived just sanction as a share. Random effects model with random intercept at the individual level with vignette features only, confidence intervals at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Reference vignette features: Woman, 45 years old, unemployed for 1 year, first sanction, refuses active participation in job search, sanction duration 3 months. Source: Authors' own calculations. 3430 observations for 686 persons.



**Fig. 5.** Results by political tendency

Notes: Dependent variable: Perceived just sanction as a share. Random effects model with random intercept at the individual level with vignette features only, confidence intervals at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Reference vignette features: Woman, 45 years old, unemployed for 1 year, first sanction, refuses active participation in job search, sanction duration 3 months. Left panel: Compares between those favoring DIE LINKE (The Left party) and all other respondents. Right panel: Compares those supporting the conservative parties (CDU/CSU) and all other respondents. Source: Authors' own calculations. 3430 observations for 686 persons.

and lower paid employment relationships or lead to a withdrawal from the labor market. Sanctions may also have the effect of transfers undercutting the sociocultural subsistence minimum—in Germany this could particularly happen due to stricter sanctioning regulations for persons under 25 years of age as well as repeated sanctions (e.g., Gotz et al., 2010”).

We investigate the assessment of welfare benefit sanctions within the framework of welfare state theory and apply basic justice principles to investigate the amount of sanctioning which people perceive as just under different circumstances. Respondents indicated which sanction they would consider fair in various situations which featured a failure to report in or a non-fulfillment of other obligations. These justice assessments can include distributional motives as well as those of retribution. One distinguishing feature of our study is that we make a distinction between a broad range of potential cases of failure to meet obligations. Compared to previous studies, this allows for a more fine-grained picture with respect to different kinds of sanction-triggering events.

We find that only a very small proportion of respondents would waive sanctions in all of the scenarios presented to them. We explain differences in the amounts of sanctioning which people perceive as just by drawing on the three basic justice principles of equality, need, and contribution. We further differentiate the contribution principle by referring to deservingness theory (van Oorschot 2000; Meuleman et al., 2020), and specifically to the principles of control, attitude, and reciprocity. Moreover, from deservingness theory we integrate the identity principle—that is, the similarity between beneficiary and respondent—in our analysis. Our results may contribute to a deeper understanding of how people perceive the withdrawal of welfare benefits for different groups of individuals who failed to meet different job search requirements. We show that people apply general justice principles to the question of how extensively the failure to search for a job should be sanctioned, and that the subprinciples of deservingness theory can be used to differentiate between various motives behind the contribution principle. The results thus confirm that the legitimacy of sanctions follow the same principles as the legitimacy of benefit receipt. However, it should be noted that our approach cannot identify which exact deservingness principle plays a role in each attribution.



We are particularly interested in the extent to which fairness assessments deviate from recent legal practices in Germany. In their fairness assessments, respondents clearly take into account which particular violation of obligations results in a sanction being imposed. In particular, interviewees make hardly any distinction between the failure to report in and not sending out enough applications—but the legislation sanctions the former with a 10 percent cutoff and the latter with 30 percent. Furthermore, respondents would make much less of a differentiation according to age (under and over 25 years of age) or between the first and second failure to meet an obligation than had been prescribed by German law. Interestingly, survey participants more or less ignore the duration of the benefit cutoff period in their fairness assessments.

Our results have to be interpreted within the limits of our research design, of course. We opted for a slim vignette design which mirrors the institutional rules and the political debate on this subject in Germany, which is one large, industrialized country. Consequently, the vignettes contain relatively few characteristics overall and the quantitative features have few levels. Although we are confident that respondents were able to make valid judgments based on the vignettes, future studies should enrich the design by varying or adding dimensions and their levels.

From a political point of view, the most important result is that repeated sanctions and much stricter sanctioning practices for younger people do not correspond to the common sense of justice. It is precisely these regulations which have repeatedly been subject to critical debate, as they can entail great hardship. Only recently, the German Federal Constitutional Court ruled out the harsher sanctions for repeated failure to meet obligations. Van den Berg et al. (2017) already recommended that sanctioning practices should be adapted accordingly: if the legislation wants to impose noticeably harsher sanctions for young people and for the repeated failure to meet obligations, one option would be to increase the duration of sanctions instead of the percentage of the cut in benefits. This would take the economic findings on desired effects of sanctions into consideration, but would have less of a negative effect on the living situation of those affected—and it would be compatible with the justice assessments presented in this study.

As a conclusion for social policy, we would like to stress that citizens' attitudes should be taken into account in policy reforms as these attitudes are pivotal for the legitimacy of the welfare state. Our results cannot be generalized to other countries and other regulatory frameworks, of course, but they clearly confirm the more general finding from the literature that individuals take individual circumstances and deservingness into account when assessing the just allocation or withdrawal of resources.

**Declaration of competing interest** none.

### **Acknowledgement**

We are very grateful to the editor and the reviewers for their helpful comments and to Theresa Koch for her assistance in preparing the first draft of the manuscript.

### **Appendix. Introductory text**

#### *Translated English version*

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our survey on the topic of sanctions for job seekers. You are making a valuable contribution to our research.

The survey consists of two parts: In the first part, you will be presented with various scenarios, each of which you are asked to evaluate personally. Please note that there are no right, wrong, or desirable answers in this part—we are only interested in your honest opinion. In the second part, you will be asked some questions about yourself.

We are interested in how you think sanctions should be designed. When evaluating the situations presented for this purpose, you are free to switch back and forth between the situations at any time. The survey will take about

15 min. We would ask you to answer all questions in Part 1 and Part 2 completely so that we can evaluate the results successfully. All data will of course be treated anonymously and confidentially.

Thank you for your support!

In Germany, the basic benefit for job seekers is unemployment benefit II (UB II, often referred to colloquially as “Hartz IV”). UB II is paid by job centers to people who could work in principle, but who are currently unable to support themselves (e.g., due to unemployment).

In addition to a housing allowance, UB II, which is granted by the job centers, also includes a lump sum to cover living expenses (food, clothing, personal hygiene, household goods, and participation in social and cultural life). This lump sum is currently EUR 409 euros for single persons.

The receipt of UB II is linked to obligations, including keeping appointments at the job center, making one’s own efforts to find a job (e.g., actively applying for jobs), and taking up or continuing a job that is considered reasonable by the job center.

If recipients of UB II do not fulfill these obligations, sanctions can be imposed. In this case, payments are temporarily reduced or even stopped completely.

*Original German version*

Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit nehmen, an unserer Umfrage zum Thema “Sanktionen für Arbeitsuchende” teilzunehmen. Sie leisten damit einen wertvollen Beitrag zu unserer Forschung.

*Die Umfrage besteht aus zwei Teilen: Im ersten Teil werden Ihnen diverse Szenarien geschildert, die Sie jeweils persönlich bewerten sollen. “ Bitte beachten Sie, dass es in diesem Teil keine richtigen, falschen oder wünschenswerten Antworten gibt, wir sind ausschließlich an Ihrer ehrlichen Meinung interessiert. Im zweiten Teil werden Ihnen einige Fragen zu Ihrer Person gestellt*

Wir sind daran interessiert, wie Ihrer Meinung nach Sanktionen ausgestaltet werden sollten. Bei der Bewertung der zu diesem

Zweck vorgestellten Situationen ist es Ihnen jederzeit möglich, zwischen den Situationen und her zu wechseln. “

*Die Befragung nimmt ca. 15 Minuten in Anspruch. Um die Ergebnisse erfolgreich auswerten zu können, bitten wir Sie, alle Fragen zu Teil 1 “ sowie Teil 2 vollständig zu beantworten. Alle Daten werden selbstverst“ andlich anonym und vertraulich behandelt “*

Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung!

Die Grundsicherung für Arbeitsuchende ist in Deutschland das Arbeitslosengeld II (Alg II, umgangssprachlich oft „Hartz IV“ genannt). Alg II wird von Jobcentern an Personen ausgezahlt, die grundsätzlich arbeiten können, für ihren Lebensunterhalt derzeit “ allerdings nicht selbst aufkommen können (z. B. aufgrund von Arbeitslosigkeit). “

Das von den Jobcentern bewilligte Alg II umfasst neben Wohngeld auch einen Pauschalbetrag für den Lebensunterhalt (Ernährung, “ Kleidung, Körperpflege, Hausrat, Teil-habe am sozialen und kulturellen Leben). Dieser Pauschalbetrag betr“ agt für Alleinstehende “ derzeit 409 Euro.

Der Bezug von Alg II ist an Pflichten gekoppelt, u. a. an die Einhaltung von Terminen im Jobcenter, Eigenbemühungen bei der Arbeitssuche (z. B. aktives Bewerben), die Aufnahme oder Fortführung einer Arbeit, die vom Jobcenter als zumutbar angesehen wird.

Kommen Bezieher von Alg II diesen Pflichten nicht nach, können Sanktionen verhängt werden. Dabei werden die Zahlungen “ vorübergehend gekürzt oder sogar komplett eingestellt.

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