

# **The winners and losers of unemployment protection reforms: an analysis of changing the benefit rights and conditions in the UK, the Netherlands, and Finland in 1980-2006<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is a well-documented fact that the last 26 years have witnessed a curtailment of the social rights for social security benefit recipients. Overall in Europe, measures have been implemented that have cut the level of the cash transfers, tightened the conditions related to the benefit award, and introduced stronger obligations (and sanctions) to the people claiming benefits or receiving them. In the academic literature, this discussion has generally centered around the concept of retrenchment (Pierson 1994; 2001). Pierson argues that due to irresistible forces, such as increased costs of social protection and aging populations calling for change, policy-makers are striving for welfare state restructuring, where the costs are cut, access to social protection is made more conditional on paid work, and where reforms must update the welfare systems to meet new demands (Pierson 2001: 419-427). A similar picture arises from a large number of volumes depicting welfare state change (Esping-Andersen 1999; Ferrera et al. 2000; 2007; Kuhnle 2000). Most of these studies do not, however, reflect that welfare state change does not always affect all claimants similarly. This is somewhat curious, since the basic question who should get the benefit (and who not) has been inherent in welfare provision since the early poor laws. Traditionally, a right to state aid has unquestionably been given to older and ill workers, and workers with a long record of employment have been generally granted with more generous, longer lasting, and less conditional benefits. At the same time, since the introduction of unemployment provision, the aid has been denied, or at least lowered for those who considered guilty for their unemployment or otherwise work-shy or misbehaving claimants. The fact that certain groups are perceived more deserving than the others has been widely discussed in the academic literature (see e.g., Coughlin 1980; van Oorschot 2000; 2005; 2006) and we suggest that the deservingness literature can provide a useful theoretical lens to capture in-country differences when analysing welfare reforms. We can glean from this literature that some groups, for instance older workers and sick are better protected than the others (such as young people,

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