

Exploring Representations of Economic Inequality in three Welfare States: The Cases of France, Great Britain and Sweden

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POLINEQUAL: Project Presentation

- Core research interest: Politicization of Economic Inequality in a Comparative Perspective (France, Great Britain, Sweden).
- Funded by the European Research Council, Consolidator Grant 2019 (<https://www.polinequal.eu/>)
- Central “problems”:
 - 1) Objective and subjectively perceived economic inequality are not equivalent
 - 2) The level of economic inequality is not a reliable indicator for more demands for redistribution
- POLINEQUAL is composed of 5 work packages. Today, we present our results of the first WP: online focus group discussions

Introduction

- Abundant empirical evidence on the negative consequences of economic inequality (Wilkinson, Pickett 2009; Shore 2014; Zmerli, Castillo 2015; Larsen 2013) for individuals and society as a whole.
- And yet, political demands for more redistribution do not emerge in accordance with levels of inequality (Jost et al. 2003; Kenworthy, McCall 2008).
- Explanations for this paradox:
 - Discrepancies between subjective perceptions and objective indicators of inequality.
 - People legitimize inequality (e.g., system justification theory, Jost et al. 2003).

- We know that citizens' perceptions of economic inequality (and their distributive preferences related with that) have social and political consequences.
- BUT much less is known about individuals' mental shortcuts/heuristics they use to "construct" and form their subjective perceptions of inequality.
- WP 1 POLINEQUAL : online focus groups in three countries : France, Great Britain, Sweden (based on Esping Andersen' typology of welfare regimes, 1990), to explore people's perceptions of economic inequality at different levels of personal proximity, i.e., neighbourhood, city-community, region, country.

Theoretical Framework

- Citizens' perceptions of economic inequality are often detached from reality (objective level of inequality).
- Perceptions: way people observe reality, less normative than ideals, but still colored by the values of the individual (Aalberg 2003).
- How people form their perceptions about inequality ?
 - Association between perceptions and distributive justice principles (van Hootehem 2022; Taylor-Gooby, Leruth 2018; Heuer et al. 2018)
 - Influence of welfare regimes (Esping Andersen 1990) which affect citizens' views, for instance, about solidarity and distributive justice principles (Arts, Gelissen 2001)
 - Contextual factors :
 - Baron et al. (2018) : "societal observation" and personal experience shape perception of inequality, which make sense from a cognitive perspective (Jost, Hunyady 2010).
 - Galesic et al. (2012) : people use their environment as a reference point to judge "broader societal concepts".
 - Visual cues might give a sense of the level of inequality?
 - Minkoff and Lyons (2019) : study on neighbourhood income diversity in the US.
 - Condon and Wichowsky's (2020) : importance of comparison (downward vs. upward) in shaping one's perception.
 - Impact of the media : information provider (Grisold, Theine 2017)
 - Political parties : influence people's attitudes and behavior (Dalton 2016)
 - Political ideology (Jost et al. 2003)

Resulting Research Questions

- How do people assess economic inequality ? Which mental shortcuts, cues, signs, signals or sources of information do they use in order to form their perceptions of economic inequality?
- Are these inequality assessments mainly based on media reports and the consumption of accessible statistical data or on personal observations and experiences, or both?
- And if we assume that personal observations might play a role in this cognitive process, are these playing out at personally very proximate levels, such as one's neighbourhood or community, or are they rather based on inferences made from regional or national levels?

Data Collection

- 8 online focus groups per country (24 online focus groups and 3 pilot groups) between December 2021 and February 2022.
- Conducted in France, Great Britain and Sweden
- On average, 6 participants per group - 145 participants altogether. 90 minutes discussion.
- 12 socio-economically heterogeneous groups (lower and upper social class) and 12 homogeneous ones.
- All groups were diverse in terms of age, gender, region of residence.
- Before and after the focus group discussions, two short survey questionnaires were fielded which measured attitudes towards distributive justice principles, system justification beliefs, social dominance orientation, emotions felt when thinking about economic inequality, etc.

Interview guide

- First of all and thinking about the **neighbourhood in which you live**, would you say that there is inequality in income and wealth and based on which clues, signs, or signals or sources of information do you think there is? (same questions for **city/community, region, country**)
- In forming your personal knowledge about inequalities in income and wealth, how important **political parties or politicians** are for you as sources of information?
- And what about **the media** as sources of information in forming your personal knowledge about inequalities in income and wealth?
- I would also like to know **how you feel** about inequality when you think about it.
- Has it ever happened to you **to speak about inequalities** in income and wealth with people around you and if yes, in which context did this happen?
- If you believe that inequality in income and wealth is a problem in (country) **who should do something about it?**

Empirical findings

Inequality at the neighbourhood level :

- French and Swedish: several participants stated they could not observe any meaningful inequalities in income or wealth in their direct environment
- British: sense of the immediacy of inequality was prevalent
- Across all three countries: housing was conceived of as a major indicator of inequality
- Some cues, such as cars, clothes are often mentioned, but participants also questioned the reliability of these shortcuts
- French and British: sensitive to number and diversity of restaurants and shops
- One cue specific to Sweden: Hemnet, real estate internet site
- Other cues mentioned: private/public (schools, health...), noise, dirt, conditions of streets, public green spaces

Inequality at the community/city level :

- Swedish: frequently mentioned vandalism, high crime rates or segregation as shortcuts
- British: particularly focused on homelessness, abandoned inner cities, social housing, presence of charities and food banks
- French: often refer to prices, standard of housing, as well as services and public transports. Participants living in Paris seemed to particularly notice economic inequality
- In the three countries, participants sometimes assess “non visual cues” such as language and accents

“That’s not an opinion, that’s just a fact of what I see, essentially, and I know it has a stereotype, if a high street has a lot of pound shops or charity shops. It’s also [pauses] the way that people... like the accents essentially are very different.” (Peter, UK_9)

Inequality at the regional level

- Was often associated with divergences in infrastructure, services, public transport or also work opportunities
- Offers and prices in real estate were equally mentioned as reliable indicators
- Lack of public transport (British); health care facilities (Swedish)

“.... Also Dorotea municipality, they had a hospital which was also closed down. They didn't have... You went to a health centre instead of emergency care. They kind of didn't have no community service with medical care during weekends, evenings and nights. That alone is fundamental, I think.” (Kalle, SWE FGR 301)

Inequality at the country level

- British and French focus groups stressed significant regional disparities within the country. This is also present in Swedish focus groups, but to a lesser extent
- London and Paris often used as a point of comparison. Stockholm did not seem to function as a similar benchmark
- Some participants also considered the development of inequality over time
- Some referred to other types of inequality, such as the gender pay gap
- More surprisingly, some compared the situation of economic inequality in their country with other countries which are far worse off

“And I went abroad, uh...whether it was Colombia, Turkey, Africa and uh...we say France, of course we have troubles, there’s the homeless, but there’s much worse.” (Damien, France_202)

Emotions towards economic inequality

- Recurrent feelings: anger, sadness, frustration, helplessness and powerlessness:

“It pisses me off, it pisses me off to see people like that. In this day and age, we're not in the Middle Ages anymore. We make money. In our country, there are people who drive a Tesla and there are other people who eat sandwiches...well, who ask for a sandwich. It drives me crazy when I see that.” (Norbert, France_201)

“There is frustration and irritation then too. Some people who really need help don't get help, then some people slip through society and get help that others would have gotten more easily!” (Vivianne, SWE FGR 308)

“It is sad that you feel that you can't help.” (Amelia, UK FG14)

- Sense of resignation, disenchantment that inequality would never be overcome

Emotions towards economic inequality in general and towards two different groups of people

Emotions	Feeling toward economic inequality in general (most important)			Feeling toward people living from social benefits			Feeling toward people who earn much more money than you do		
	France	Sweden	GB	France	Sweden	GB	France	Sweden	GB
Helplessness	2	3	10	5	5	6	1	1	1
Frustration	5	12	9	3	10	5	4	8	4
Compassion	2	12	5	9	14	14	2	0	2
Guilt	0	0	1	0	1	4	0	1	0
Anxiety	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	0
Hostility	1	1	0	4	0	0	1	0	4
Anger	3	5	8	4	1	1	4	1	2
Hopelessness	2	4	3	0	1	1	1	0	1
Indifference	1	0	0	4	2	4	25	12	11
Hate	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Jealousy	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	9
Sadness	14	3	3	6	3	4	0	0	1
Shame	1	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	4
Powerlessness	16	4	8	10	3	4	3	2	5
Can't choose	1	1	0	3	3	3	7	13	5
N	51	46	48	51	46	48	51	46	48

Media and political actors as sources of information

- Politicians and political parties
 - French and British : share profound disregard, distrust, rejection
 - Much less disdain and distrust in Sweden
- Media
 - French and British: less distrustful than in political parties, but still express critical distance towards media
 - Swedish: expressed more appreciation for the media
 - Social media polarized the group discussions in the 3 countries: participants either outright rejected them, or expressed positive views
- In many instances, the participants conceded that their assessment of economic inequality was based on a combination of personal observations/experiences and others sources of information

Inequality: topic for private discussions, and who should act on it?

- Most participants happen to engage in discussions on inequality with family members, friends, acquaintances or colleagues. But some people perceive this topic as conflictual
- In all online focus groups, participants agreed that inequality should be alleviated, yet the identified responsible and efficacious actors varied. France = government/UK and Sweden = government + collective action (government and civil society)

Conclusion

- Inequalities in income and wealth are perceived to be problematic in all the three countries
- Individuals are able to perceive inequalities, even if they don't necessarily perceive them in their immediate environment (France and Sweden).
- Regularly, people use mental shortcuts that are rather indirectly related with economic inequality.
- Qualitative confirmation of quantitative evidence on trust and distrust (media and politicians) in our three countries.
- Expressed emotional states are not necessarily conducive to political action.
- The absence of expressed feelings towards the rich is remarkable.
- Limits of this approach : lack of generalizability and other relevant issues *not* adressed.

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