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Representations of economic inequality in Sweden: Exploring cues, signals and shortcuts at different levels of personal proximity

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POLINEQUAL: Project Presentation

Core research interest: Politicisation of Economic Inequality in a Comparative Perspective

Comparative Research Project (France, Sweden, Great Britain), funded by the European Research Council (Url Address: 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

Demands for redistribution rests on a multitude of factors situated at different levels (e.g., welfare institutions and related social norms, economic factors, individual factors (socio-economic position, **values**, ideology)

Values: Preferences for distributive justice principles (equality, equity, need)

Important research is being conducted on the causes and consequences of distributive justice preferences (see, for instance, Arno Van Hootegem, 2022)

POLINEQUAL contends that the development (level of intensity) of these preferences is also affected by political and public discourse, in particular whether and how economic inequality in its multitude of facets is framed.

Work Package 1: Online Focus Groups

As a matter of fact, we know that citizens' perception of economic inequality (and their distributive preferences related with that) has social and political consequences and there is no shortage of items in population surveys tapping exactly into their corresponding assessment.

BUT much less is known about individuals' shortcuts/heuristics they use to « construct » their assessment of economic inequality.

Work Package 1 of POLINEQUAL is set out to inquire individuals, in a focus group setting, about their shortcuts of economic inequality at different levels of personal proximity, i.e., neighbourhood, city/community, region, country

Data Collection

In view of the comparative design of POLINEQUAL, we conducted 24 online focus groups à 90 minutes (6 persons on average) in our 3 countries.

Of these 24 groups, 12 were socio-economically heterogeneous and 12 socio-economically homogeneous (lower or upper social class) composed. All were mixed with regard to age, gender and region of residence.

One pilot group per country was conducted in December 2021, the field work then took place in January and February 2022.

The POLINEQUAL team constructed an encompassing interview guide which was used to conduct all 24 online focus groups.

Recruitment of participants, group moderation, transcription, etc. were executed by KANTAR, an international survey agency specialised in qualitative and quantitative data collection.

Data Collection

Before and after the 90 minutes focus group conversation, all participants answered to a short questionnaire. In an open question, we asked them twice which image comes to their mind when they think of economic inequality.

Before the discussion we also measured system justification beliefs and social dominance orientations.

After the discussion we asked a number of questions related to distributive justice principles as well as emotions.

We are currently coding and analysing the data but some findings already stand out at this stage.

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.

If you believe that inequality in income and wealth is a problem in (country) who should do something about it?

Open question on economic inequality, some examples	
Before discussion	After discussion
Women in the Arab world live very unequally	Big differences between those who bought a home 20-30 years ago and those who rent
Places with poorer socio-economic conditions are isolated	Unequal education and conditions
Time and money left to spend on leisure	Standard of living, e.g. housing, car and time with family
Women vs men	Women vs men + new arrivals vs highly educated
I don't know	Pensioners
Women are often paid less for the same work	Children and those in a "poorer" social class miss out
IQ, social skills, genetics, friends and family	Don't know
That it is very different depending on where in the world you live	Children at risk of poverty.
Those who are richest in the world, there is no plausibility in this.	I become worried
Miljonprogram	Unwillingness to integrate into society.
Gender	Elderly and school

Some first interesting findings

Participants do often not recognize economic inequalities in their neighbourhoods

Swedish specificity: Interesting source of information: Hemnet and specific Swedish statistics

Housing, villas, residential areas, miljon programme

Cars

Immigrants, segregation

Gang violence in a number of cities

Vandalism

Regional infrastructure regarding health care

Question: When you think about inequalities in income and wealth, what kind of emotions do you feel?		
Emotions (choose max. 3), sorted by most important emotion	In Percent (N=46)	Most important (in percent)
Frustration	72	26
Compassion	44	26
Anger	20	11
Hopelessness	33	9
Powerlessness	17	9
Helplessness	13	7
Sadness	20	7
Anxiety	7	2
Hostility	2	2
Guilt	15	0
Jealousy	7	0
Indifference	7	0
Hate	0	0
Shame	9	0
Can't choose		2

What kind of emotions do you feel when thinking about the following groups of people?

	People who live from social benefits	People who have much more money than you do
1 Helplessness	10.9	2.2
2 Frustration	21.7	17.4
3 Compassion	30.4	
4 Guilt	2.2	2.2
5 Anxiety	2.2	
6 Helplessness		
7 Anger	2.2	2.2
8 Jealousy		17.4
9 Hopelessness	2.2	
10 Indifference	4.3	26.1
11 Hate	2.2	
12 Sadness	6.5	
13 Shame	2.2	
14 Powerlessness	6.5	4.3

Interpretations/Further steps

- We are aware of not taking the participants too literally by their words – shortcuts, heuristics and cues “work” at the subconscious level
- Housing as a shortcut plays a major role but every country comes with its specificities
- The Swedes have very accurate sources of information on income in very close personal proximities
- Analyses will continue and shall inform the subsequent qualitative and quantitative investigations (WP 2 to 5)