

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

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Abstract

Previous empirical studies suggest that citizens' presumed knowledge of economic inequality in their society may differ substantially from related objective measures of the income distribution. This discrepancy between objective facts and subjective assessments, which is usually associated with an underestimation of inequalities in income and wealth, is relevant since political attitudes, preferences and behavior are impacted by citizens' perceptions of fairness in society. So far, very little is known about the root causes of this objective-subjective discrepancy and in particular about which shortcuts, heuristics and representations of inequality people use to construct a personal idea about the extent of economic inequality that they are exposed to at different levels of personal proximity (i.e., neighborhood, community, region, country). To address these shortcomings, our paper provides new empirical insights as it is based on recently collected online focus group discussion data in three prototypically different welfare regimes that simultaneously exhibit different levels of economic inequalities. Our findings reveal commonalities and striking differences at the same time that might, indeed, in part be associated with the institutional settings and extent and immediacy of inequalities.

1. Introduction

Ever since Wilkinson and Pickett's empirical study (2009) on the wide-ranging consequences of income inequality made headlines at the end of the 2000's, has the scientific community adopted the notion that high levels of economic inequality might not only impair the life of those at the bottom of the income ladder but also of those on top of it. Individuals living in more equal societies are healthier, happier and become older than individuals who belong to the same income category but live in a more inegalitarian society, irrespective of the individual level of income. More equal societies are also more trustful, more protective of the environment, and less affected by high rates of crime (Wilkinson, Pickett 2009). Other studies also suggest that economic inequality affects political participation (Shore 2014), diminishes political trust (Zmerli, Castillo 2015) and social cohesion (Larsen 2013) and reinforces political polarization (Ghetin, Toledano and Piketty 2021).

In view of the mounting empirical evidence of these individual and societal shortcomings of economic inequality one could expect increasingly solidifying political demands for more redistribution. As a matter of fact, the renowned median-voter-theorem postulated by Meltzer and Richard in 1981 suggests that as inequality increases demands for redistribution would do so as well. And yet, these long-held theoretical expectations have, so far, not been empirically corroborated (Jost et al. 2003; Kenworthy, McCall 2008).

Two different phenomena could be contributing to this alleged paradox. Firstly, empirical studies suggest that individuals tend to systematically *underestimate* objective levels of income and wealth inequalities (Hauser, Norton 2017; McCall 2013; Gimpelson, Treisman 2018). Whether these discrepancies between subjective perceptions and objective indicators of inequality are caused by limited access to encompassing information on the latter is currently subject of numerous experimental studies (see for an overview Hauser, Norton 2017; Iacono, Ranaldi 2019). Secondly, system justification theory, a burgeoning field of research in social psychology, postulates that individuals tend to legitimize a societal hierarchy which is based on perceived meritocratic achievements in order to reduce cognitive complexity and resort to explanations for one's own social position, even if perceived to be disadvantageous (Jost et al. 2003). As a result, individuals might accept and legitimize a certain degree of inequality in society (Sachweh 2012) and would thus not feel compelled to ask for a more equal distribution of income and wealth.

Similar findings on the importance of personal beliefs are also put forward by a myriad of studies on the impact of welfare regimes on citizens' political attitudes and preferences (Rehm 2007). According to those, Esping-Andersen's 'prototypical' welfare regimes, i.e. liberal, conservative and social-democratic, rest on different principles of de-commodification and bring about different social norms pertaining to distributive justice principles and the roles of the market and the state to pursue this goal (Jæger 2006; Reeskens, van Oorschot 2013). Economic inequality would, in line with these arguments, be perceived to be less legitimate in social-democratic welfare regimes, such as the Scandinavian countries, than in liberal regimes, such as Great Britain or the U.S. irrespective of the objectifiable levels of inequalities (Svallfors 2007). These findings are complemented by several other empirical studies which underline the complexity and heterogeneity of beliefs individuals hold on distributive justice principles even *within* welfare regimes (Sachweh 2012; van Hootehem 2022), thereby suggesting that perceptions and evaluations of inequality are based on a multitude of factors. In light of empirical evidence that demonstrates the importance of subjective perceptions of economic inequality as a relevant predictor of support for redistribution and related voting choices (Hauser, Norton 2017), understanding the origins of perceptions of economic inequality becomes vital (Xu, Garand 2010; Iacono, Ranaldi 2019). To test these and similar hypotheses, a number of international population surveys include measurement instruments that are supposed to grasp people's perceptions and evaluations of economic inequality. Survey items such as "Differences in income are too large" or "The distribution of income is (un)fair" are two examples of the most common proxies that have already proven useful as relevant predictors (Starmans, Sheskin, Bloom 2017).

In stark contrast to the recent accumulation of knowledge and insights outlined above, we know surprisingly little about the information or mental shortcuts that people draw on to form their (subjective) perceptions of inequality. Are these assessments mainly based on media reports and the consumption of

accessible statistical data or 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?

This paper aims to address this blind spot by analyzing online focus group data collected in three different welfare regimes, i.e., France, Great Britain and Sweden, with three different levels of economic inequality at the beginning of the year 2022. This data collection effort is embedded in the ERC funded project POLINEQUAL (ERC Consolidator Grant 2019, 866340), "The Politicisation of Economic Inequality: The Impact of Welfare Regimes, Elites' Discourse and Media Frames on Citizens' Perceptions, Justice Evaluations and Political Behaviour", and serves to give an overview over citizens' answers to this topic provided in the social setting of online focus groups conducted in three presumed dissimilar countries.

After a brief discussion of conceptual and empirical advances in this field of research and an outline of our methodological proceedings, we present the first major findings of our comparative study with a view on commonalities and noteworthy differences.

2. Theoretical framework

If scholarly interest of political scientists in economic inequality during the 1980's and 1990's mainly revolved around societal and political repercussions of *objective* levels of income distributions (Meltzer, Richard 1981), patchy, inconsistent or unexpected empirical findings stimulated a whole new strand of research which acknowledges the importance of subjectively constructed *perceptions* of inequality that, more often than not, can differ from economic reality (Aalberg 2003). According to Aalberg (2003), perceptions reflect the way people observe reality. While they are less normative than ideals, they are nonetheless colored by the values the individual holds.

By now, we have come to a tentative understanding of some root causes of these perceptions. Many would claim, for instance, that individually held distributive justice principles are associated with these perceptions (van Hootegeem 2022; Taylor-Gooby, Leruth 2018; Heuer et al. 2018). While they might rather affect the way in which individuals evaluate and legitimize inequality, neuroscientific evidence suggests that these justice beliefs are also involved in the partly subconscious process of forming perceptions of inequality. Although distributive justice principles are individually held, their de facto manifestations do not occur independently of institutional settings. Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential typology of welfare regimes has proven to be particularly useful in this regard. For example, Arts and Gelissen (2001) found empirical evidence that the type of welfare regime in which citizens live is associated with their views about solidarity and distribute justice principles. These findings are also

consistent with Sachweh and Koos' (2017) assessment of the market as not only a mode of economic but also of "social organization" given that market principles are translated into non-economic social spheres.

Yet, perceptions of inequality are impacted by contextual factors as well. Baron et al. (2018) suggest, for instance, that individuals experience different types of exposure to economic inequality that shape their perceptions. One of them would be based on "societal observation" of the direct environment and personal experience. From a cognitive perspective, and given the complexity of the world, people need to operate mental shortcuts to simplify things (Jost, Hunyady 2010). In this cognitive process, Galesic et al. (2012) postulate that people use their social environment as a reference point to judge "broader societal concepts". In this line of argument, what people see in their daily environment, signals of wealth or poverty (from appearances, cars, clothes, housing), might give people a sense of the level of inequality that they could project at broader societal scales.

As a matter of fact, these assumptions were corroborated by Minkoff and Lyons' (2019) study of the impact of income diversity in one's neighbourhood in the U.S. Their results support the notion that perceptions of income inequality at the national level are subject to one's spatially close personal experiences and observations of inequality. Conversely, individuals who live in socio-economically homogeneous neighborhoods perceive smaller income gaps and express less concern about it. From this vantage point, segregated neighbourhoods would potentially induce a skewed and more favorable view on the extent of economic inequality in society. However, Condon and Wichowsky's (2020) experimental studies point to additional factors that play a significant role in shaping one's perception. As upward comparisons, i.e. comparisons with people who are wealthier than oneself, can trigger psychological distress and feelings of inferiority, individuals tend to either avoid to expose themselves to situations which are conducive to these kinds of comparison or resort to legitimising the position of the "economic other" (Condon, Wichowsky 2020; Jost et al. 2003). Downward comparisons, by contrast, i.e. comparisons with people who are worse off, enhance an individual's self-esteem.

Apart from these outlined intricacies at play when forming perceptions of economic inequality, we can certainly also consider the impact of the media as information provider (Grisold, Theine 2017), political parties as they are expected to influence people's attitudes and behaviour (Dalton 2016) and individual political ideology (Jost et al. 2003).

Having said all this, we still know surprisingly little about the information and mental shortcuts that people draw on to form their (subjective) perceptions of 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?

In the following, this paper aims to provide some answers to these questions by analyzing online focus group data which were collected in three different welfare regimes, i.e., France, Great Britain and Sweden, with three different levels of economic inequality at the beginning of 2022.

Cases, Data and Methods

The main purpose of this qualitative comparative fieldwork is to assess in a systematic, yet mainly exploratory manner the myriad of mental shortcuts, or so-called heuristics, or other sources of information upon which individual perceptions of economic inequality are constructed. We expected that these questions were difficult to address as the bases of these perceptions might, in part, also be rooted in subconscious processes and therefore not directly accessible to the focus group participants. Moreover, we aimed at understanding whether and to what extent people would differentiate between inequalities at different levels of personal proximity which added to the complexity of the research design.

In addition, under the rigid social contact conditions imposed by the Corona pandemic we were unable to conduct our focus group discussions in commonly used face-to-face settings. Instead, and after nearly two years of experiences with the pandemic, we decided to stick to our initial comparative research design yet conduct our focus groups via an online platform of communication.

As the comparative research design necessitated the reassurance of comparable recruitment procedures of participants in France, Great Britain and Sweden, different linguistic skills, professional moderator experiences as well as technical skills and administrative resources, we placed a Call for Tender in spring and summer 2021 to solicit an experienced survey agency for this matter. The contract was ultimately signed with Kantar TNS-MB, an international survey agency specialized in qualitative and quantitative data collection, that was responsible for the recruitment of participants, the organization, moderation and audio and video recording of all online focus groups (including the three pilot focus groups), the collection of survey data and the transcribing of all focus group discussions in the original languages. All British and Swedish focus groups were conducted by one male moderator, respectively, while the French focus groups were conducted by two female moderators.

To construct a rich pool of qualitative data without risking to become repetitive (Cyr 2019), we fielded eight online focus groups and one pilot study per country (24 online focus groups and 3 pilots in all) between December 2021 and February 2022. In close cooperation with Kantar TNS-MB, we constructed

the groups in such a way that we would be able to subsequently compare the answers given in socio-economically homogeneous (lower or upper social class) vs. heterogeneous groups (level of education and professional status) as we expected that people with different social status might be exposed to different cues or resort to different interpretations (Cyr 2019). However, with regard to age, gender and region of residence, we aimed at achieving the highest level of group heterogeneity.

Of our 24 online focus groups, 12 were socio-economically heterogeneous and 12 socio-economically homogeneous (equally divided over our three countries); they consisted on average of six participants, resulting in 145 participants altogether. Although the recruitment procedures did not exclude non-nationals, ‘representation’ of immigrants in the focus groups could not be achieved.

The participants were recruited from national access panels compiled by national service agents contractualised by Kantar TNS-MB. They were only superficially informed about the purpose of the group discussion to avoid any prior individual preparation on the topic of inequality but were at length informed about the subsequent usage of the data and data protection measures in place to which they all consented in writing. All online focus groups, whose discussions lasted for approximately 90 minutes, were audio- and videotaped. Before and after the group discussions, all participants were invited to answer to a short survey questionnaire consisting of 20 to 30 survey items each that tapped attitudes towards distributive justice principles, preferences for redistribution, system justification beliefs and social dominance orientations as well as emotions felt when thinking about inequality. Questions directly related to economic inequality were asked after the focus group discussions had taken place. Although the small number of cases (N=145) as well as the sampling procedures do not allow us to conduct inferential analyses, the data can still be meaningfully linked to the participants and as such tested for consistency of statements made during the discussions.

For the focus group discussions, the POLINEQUAL team members constructed a semi-open interview guide that aimed at soliciting participants’ mental shortcuts of economic inequality at different levels of personal proximity, starting with the most immediate one. Further questions revolved around the importance of the media and political actors as potential sources of information, how participants would feel about inequality, whether they discuss this topic with others and who should be doing something about inequality, if at all. For each new round of question, the moderators were advised to solicit an answer from each participant while simultaneously creating an atmosphere of free exchange of views and opinions. Immediately before the beginning of the focus group discussion, and *after* the first round of survey, the participants received a brief explanation from the moderators about the scientific purpose and value of the discussion. They were encouraged not to hold themselves back as every answer or expressed view and opinion would be a valuable contribution.

The interview guide, that every moderator employed diligently during the discussions, was constructed as follows:¹

- 1) 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? (The same question was then asked for the city/community of the participant, her region, and finally for the participant's country).
- 2) In forming your personal knowledge about inequalities in income and wealth, how important political parties or politicians are for you as sources of information?
- 3) And what about the media as sources of information in forming your personal knowledge about inequalities in income and wealth? (a follow-up question was then tapping the importance of social media)
- 4) When you think about your own knowledge about inequality in income and wealth in [country], would you say that it is more based on your own experiences and observations, on other sources or a mix of the two?
- 5) I would also like to know how you feel about inequality when you think about it. What kind of emotions do you feel when you are confronted with the clues about inequality that you have mentioned earlier?
- 6) Now that we have spoken about how you feel about inequality, we would like to know whether it has 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?
- 7) If you believe that inequality in income and wealth is a problem in [country] who should do something about it?

Before the moderators started employing the interview guide, they invited all participants to briefly introduce themselves in an informal manner which allowed them to stay anonymous.

All focus group discussions were transcribed and the Swedish and French transcripts were then translated into English by the POLINEQUAL team members.

To analyze the qualitative data, we have developed a coding scheme in MAXQDA which systematically takes the mental shortcuts and other sources of information used at different levels of personal proximity into consideration. The data analyses presented and discussed below are still at an early stage and therefore incomplete, yet they already illustrate noteworthy commonalities and differences in our three European societies.

¹ The complete interview guide with moderator instructions can be obtained by the authors upon request.

4. Empirical findings

In the following, we will present citations or summaries of reoccurring statements made by our focus group participants that illustrate mental shortcuts for economic inequality at different levels of personal proximity. Each level will be discussed in a comparative manner, thereby highlighting commonalities and differences.

As a general observation pertaining to most of the online focus groups and all three countries under investigation, the discussions were animated and took place in a pleasant atmosphere. Many participants seemed to be interested in the topic and appeared to feel comfortable expressing their views and opinions about it and engaging in conversations with the other participants of their online focus group. Interestingly, and at first sight of the data, we did not find any sizeable differences of statements made in heterogeneous or homogeneous groups.

Inequality at the neighbourhood level

Inquiring participants about their mental shortcuts or sources of information on economic inequality at this level comes with two difficulties, as we could infer from their responses. First, although the question wording was concise in terms of personal proximity (“thinking about the neighbourhood in which you live”), participants, at times, considered a broader geographical scope, irrespective of the size of their community or compared it to other places they had lived before. In each corresponding case, however, the moderator politely redirected the participant to the neighbourhood level. Second, while designing the interview guide we were aware that a question about mental shortcuts at this level of proximity might require some moment to reflect either about the underlying intention or meaning of the question or the shortcuts themselves, as such a kind of inquiry might be rather uncommon. Notwithstanding, once these caveats were addressed, participants were willing and able to engage in the following discussion.

Particularly in the French and Swedish case, several participants stated that they could not observe any meaningful inequalities in income or wealth in their neighbourhood.

“When I look at it that way, I think we're all more or less middle class, so there's no real inequality in terms of wealth” (Jean-Marc, France_202)

“I don't see it so much, actually. It seems like there's pretty good prosperity right where I live. So just, well...” (Henry, SWE FGR 301)

This was hardly the case for the British focus groups where a sense of the immediacy of inequality was prevalent. According to Minkoff and Lyons (2019), income diversity of neighbourhoods has, indeed, an impact on people's perception of the income gap and their redistributive preferences. In this vein, one would expect the British spatial conditions to be particularly conducive to elicit more redistributive

demands, yet British citizens have generally not proven to be more demanding in this regard (Svallfors 2007).

Across all three countries, though, we found that housing was conceived of as a major indicator of inequality. Examples referred to social or council housing or ‘run-down’ residences next to well-maintained or high-end residences in the neighbourhood or unaffordable prices for real estates.

Cars were also often mentioned as an indicator although participants often questioned the reliability of this shortcut as people are thought to get indebted to buy cars in order to appear wealthier than they actually are. Similar observations also occurred with regard to high-end clothes.

“Maybe people who want to put themselves on an equal level with others by spending a lot of money, on money, on appearance while in fact they eat noodles and potatoes every night, maybe in fact, I don't know. (...)” (Cédric, French pilot online focus group).

In France and Great Britain, participants were also sensitive to the number and diversity of restaurants and shops in their immediate vicinity.

“I think that... it can also be seen in terms of, for example, the restaurants offered. Are there fast food restaurants or are there organic grocery stores...? (Jeanne, French pilot online focus group)

“Trying to think of anything else, like someone else said the range of shops, and the fact that there are shops and cafes and restaurants open, where else, I have seen plenty of kind of, strips, or like shopping centres, where things are kind of, boarded up, and you know, like there's nothing there.” (Peyton, UK FG15)

One participant in the French pilot group even mentioned the presence of medical doctors who would exclusively treat patients who are privately insured. British participants, by contrast, often pointed out the presence – or absence – of private schools in their neighbourhood. Noise, dirt and conditions of streets as well as the absence – or presence – of public green spaces and playgrounds were recurring indicators. Moreover, particular in the Swedish case, several participants mentioned acts of vandalism in their neighbourhood. In addition, the comparative analytical approach corroborated what is well known about Scandinavian countries with regard to public accessibility of personal information on income and tax payments. As many Swedish participants pointed out, they were particularly well informed about income levels of their immediate neighbours or their neighbourhood writ large as they often made use of these sources of detailed information that are not available to citizens of France or Great Britain. The reference to the real estate internet site “Hemnet” stood out in this regard.

Inequality at the community/city level

Assessing inequalities at the community or city level was a much easier task for most of the participants. In some respect, the Swedish groups were exceptional as they frequently mentioned vandalism, high crime rates or segregation as shortcuts for economic inequality. The names of some suburbs of

Stockholm were referred to as either particularly notorious in this regard or as particularly wealthy and all Swedish participants seemed to understand these cues.

By contrast, British participants seemed to be particularly concerned about the ubiquity of homelessness which they perceived as a suitable proxy. Abandoned inner cities, areas of social housing or the presence of charities and food banks were frequently mentioned. Often, they were juxtaposed with areas where high-end shops, brands, boutiques and expensive residences were located, services available and public transport well developed and accessible.

The French focus groups did not particularly stand out in this comparative perspective as they can be conceived of as being somewhat located between these two country-cases. Clearly, prices and standard of housing played the most significant role as indicators of inequality; to a lesser extent did shops, restaurants, services and public transport. The within-city inequalities seem to be particularly noteworthy in Paris as the following citation suggests:

(...) So there are really big differences. And between the sixteenth [very rich neighborhood] and the nineteenth or the eighteenth [working class neighborhoods] uh...it's...it's really two worlds. Really two worlds. (Garance, France_204)

Yet, participants also referred to non-visual cues as indicators of inequality, although, in some cases they explicitly mentioned that these cues were unrelated with an unequal distribution of economic resources. Participants of the French focus group France_201, for instance, underlined the importance of cultural and intellectual wealth in saying:

Norbert: I would like to add something, yeah. We're talking about wealth, so economic wealth, but for me there's something that's more important than financial wealth, well money: it's cultural and intellectual wealth. I think that even when you don't have a penny, if you have this intellectual and cultural wealth and if you have...if you have been taught to manage, to have confidence in yourself, I put that in the cultural bag, I think that we would solve a lot of problems in fact. (...) *Adeline*: I agree with Norbert, because, in the cultural sphere, it can also cause inequality. For example, in a discussion between friends, if there are those who have more knowledge than others, it can provoke uneasiness and, as a result, these are inequalities just the same. Except that it has nothing to do with money."

What is more, language, either in terms of dialects or accents or the presence of foreign languages, were considered to be indicative of inequalities, too, although cautious interpretations of these 'signs' were admonished.

"So here it is, so appearance is a point, places, buildings, the way of communicating, also I think. That's it, the cultural aspect. Are they people who have a level of culture, a level of dialogue, well I think there are many things to give signs and it is true that we can quickly fall into stereotypes. And that can be dangerous." (Cédric, French pilot online focus group)

"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 FG9)

“And also with...with...and very...community neighborhoods with...with...well, for example, in the tenth [arrondissement in Paris], there's the whole Pakistani corner, the Indian corner, which is really...where people really speak Indian, even in the streets. The Chinese quarter. In short, there are...there are really very strong identities that also reflect...obvious income inequalities.” (Garance, France_204)

Inequality at the regional level

Economic inequality at this more far-ranging and abstract 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. While the lack of public transport infrastructure seemed to be of particular concern to British participants, discrepancies in the availability of health care facilities were uttered by several Swedish discussants.

“... 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

Evoking this most abstract level of proximity revealed a number of interesting assessments by the participants. Particularly, the British focus groups stressed significant regional disparities within the country where Northern England was often mentioned as impoverished and disadvantaged compared to other regions. Simultaneously, London constantly stood out as a major point of comparison. Regional disparities were also on the minds of French participants, albeit to a lesser extent, yet Paris and its region were equally perceived as a ‘kind of its own’. Regional disparities were also decried by the Swedish focus groups, yet here to a lesser extent than in Great Britain or in France, and Stockholm did not seem to function as an omnipresent point of comparison or benchmark either.

Interestingly, some participants also considered developments over time when saying, for instance:

“We saw it during Covid, well...not far away there are the “Restos du Cœur” [sort of food bank] and the queues are not the same as before.” (Lambert, France_205)

Moreover, particularly Swedish participants seemed to be concerned with the prevalence of unequal pay between men and women which was also brought forward several times by French participants.

“I totally agree. We are living in 2022 and there are still very big differences between men and women with the same job. Even the fact that a woman has to work much harder to be equal to a man is absurd.” (Vivianne, SWE FGR 308)

“Sometimes we don't have the same salary. Men, women. We do the same job but we don't get paid the same.” [laughs...] (Séverine, France_206)

Surprisingly, and although we had not integrated this level of abstraction on purpose, some participants compared the situation of economic inequality in their country with the one of 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. There's much worse.” (Damien, France_202)

Whether these comparisons primarily serve the purpose to comfort oneself is unclear but seems likely and would also corroborate Condon and Wichowsky's (2020) arguments about increasing one's self-esteem and well-being when adopting a posture of downward comparison. As a matter of fact, in many instances, participants used proxies for poverty and deprivation rather than indicators for high income or wealth although the question wordings were unambiguous in this regard.

What did participants feel towards economic inequality?

Notwithstanding, when asked directly how participants felt towards inequality in income and wealth when thinking about it they expressed, in many instances, feelings of 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)

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

“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)

Some of them also expressed a sense of resignation towards a societal economic disparity that, as they were convinced, would never be overcome.

We repeated a similar question in the subsequent short survey that participants filled in and offered a range of mostly negative emotions they could choose when thinking about economic inequality. To get a better idea whether and to what extent their emotions would be subject to the respective group of comparison we also included recipients of social benefits as well as much richer people than the respondent. Table 1, column 1, depicts the distribution of answers and demonstrates that sadness and powerlessness are the prevailing emotions in France, while frustration and compassion are dominating in Sweden. In Great Britain, by contrast, it is mostly helplessness, frustration, anger and powerlessness that elicit the most responses.

Recipients of social benefits are often perceived with compassion in all three countries, complemented in France by powerlessness and sadness, frustration in Sweden and helplessness in Great Britain.

Turning to emotions towards the wealthy, by contrast, seems to corroborate, once again, one of Condon and Wichowsky's (2020) central arguments which postulates that individuals try to avoid to compare themselves with rich(er) people as these comparisons bear the risk to elicit feelings of inferiority. In fact, in particular the Swedish high share of non-responses could be interpreted as an unwillingness or discomfort to fathom such a comparison. What is more, all countries exhibit a high share of respondents who express indifference towards these people with French participants being particular numerous in this regard. Swedes and the British, by contrast, also express jealousy towards the rich and Swedes also frustration.

Table 1: 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

Although these quantitative findings lack generalizability, they provide precious insight into participants elicited state of emotion that might be consequential for political behavior writ large. Feelings of frustration, hopelessness, helplessness and powerlessness, for instance, could be associated with a lack of internal political efficacy, a central precursor for political action (Zmerli 2008) and a potential explanation for the lack of political mobilization in favor of more redistribution. The fact that powerlessness, which taps directly into the political realm, is particularly prevalent in France is in line with French citizens' widespread political disenchantment as the abstention rates during the recent presidential and legislative elections have also demonstrated. Anger, by contrast, an emotion which is assumed to reinforce preexisting political attitudes and trigger political action (Marcus, Neuman, MacKuen 2000), is less noticeable. As a matter of fact, greater economic equality would require more redistribution, either in terms of pre- or post-market income distribution. This rather 'matter-of-fact'

analysis is not sufficient, however, to set up the political stage for the emergence of corresponding demands. Looking at the majority of participants' responses, we clearly can detect that rich people do not have to be afraid of overwhelming demands for redistribution as their privileged economic situation is mostly met with indifference or a lack of consideration altogether.

Media and political actors as sources of information

What French and British participants had mostly in common were their profound disregard or even rejection of politicians and political parties as sources of information on economic inequality. They were either regarded to be detached from the people or genuinely not interested in their needs and demands. Examples are descriptions of being "*disconnected*" (Anthony, France_202) or of living "*in their own world (...) beyond reality*" (Lionel, France_201) or of "*politicians [to be] all about I promise, I promise, I promise, I promise, and in the end there's never anything*" (Vanessa, France_206).

While Swedish participants did not cite politicians and political parties as relevant sources of information either, they clearly exhibited less disdain and distrust, and referred to them several times as important actors to initiate and frame public debates.

Interestingly, similar between-country discrepancies could be observed with regard to the media as sources of information. Although French and British participants appeared to be less distrustful than before, they were, nonetheless, eager to express their caution, critical distance and independence. Once again, the Swedish participants expressed more appreciation for the media as sources of information, be it TV, newspapers or radio channels.

Social media, by contrast, was polarizing the group discussions. In all three countries, there were examples of participants that either outright rejected them as reliable sources of information ("*I'm radical. I don't use any social network. It's that I will say, ninety percent fake*" (Philippe, France_201) or expressed rather positive views ("*On social networks, people can express themselves more and denounce inequalities*" (Cynthia, France_205).

All in all, however, the majority of participants conceded that their assessment of economic inequality was based on a combination of personal observations and experiences and other sources of information that could also stem from the media.

"Personally, I think we are all impacted by the media" (Chantal, France_203).

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

In many instances across all three countries we found that participants happen to engage in discussions on inequality with family members, friends, acquaintances or colleagues. Several times, however, participants even indicated that they would avoid talking about this issue with people in their inner circle as they feared conflictual exchanges.

“I mean, some of my friends are at either end of the social spectrum, and therefore, you know, it’s something I just leave.” (Brandon, UK_FG13)

We were surprised to find that inequality was featuring relatively high on our participants’ personal agenda. Combined with the elicited emotions described above though, we believe to better understand why redistributive demands addressed to the political sphere are rather patchy and can, therefore, be easily overheard.

Our final question aimed to identify actors that could take measures against inequality if the latter was perceived to be a problem in society at all. Interestingly, in all online focus groups participants agreed that inequality should be alleviated, yet the identified responsible and efficacious actors varied by country. France stood particularly out in this regard, as the responsibility for action was clearly attributed to the political sphere although the responses varied as to whether to expect more from the government, politicians in general or the regional administrations. The British participants ‘offered’ an alternative set of actors. While many British participants agreed that the government should take more action, some of them had even radical views on it, calls for more collective action as a society could also be heard. The responses of the Swedish participants were also more in line with the British findings.

Although this final question did *not* ask *which measures* should be taken but only *who* should act on inequality, a number of responses suggested that participants were mostly concerned with lifting people out of poverty or providing for a decent standard of living. Demands for targeted redistributive measures that aim at the rich and the wealthy were not brought to bear. Although surprising when discussing economic inequality for more than one hour, these findings reflect to some extent the emotional state towards richer people outlined above. While stronger and more audible demands for more redistribution could pave the way for more equality in society, the existing cognitive and emotional soil does not seem to lend itself for these requirements.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative comparative research was to unravel citizens’ breadth of mental shortcuts they draw on when trying to make up their minds about economic inequality in society. Much is known about the manifold repercussions of people’s perceptions of inequality, yet no qualitative study has been conducted so far which addresses this blind spot in a comparative perspective. The first work package of POLINEQUAL was meant to fill this gap by comparing three ‘prototypically’ different welfare regimes associated with different objective levels of income inequality.

While the analyses presented here are still in an early phase, we believe that some findings are already worth noting. First, we can infer that inequalities in income and wealth are perceived to be problematic in all three countries irrespective of the objective level of inequality, which is the most pronounced in Great Britain. Besides, these findings do corroborate assumptions about the relevance of politicisation

of economic inequality, or in other words, the impact of the politically and socially anchored perceptions of ‘permissible’ levels of inequality. Moreover, our findings suggest that individuals are perfectly able to perceive inequalities even if their own living environment is socio-economically homogeneous which to some extent contrasts Minkoff and Lyons’ (2019) findings on the importance of income diversity in the neighbourhood. Contrary to numerous French and Swedish participants who said that they would not encounter inequality in their immediate surroundings, British participants were often very forthcoming in describing the spatial immediacy of their inequality experiences and observations.

Second, although the same interview guide, with fairly strict, at times even repetitive, question wordings, was employed in all three countries and in all 24 online focus groups, we find surprisingly distinct between-country mental shortcuts that, in part, are rather indirectly related with economic inequality. Sweden stands out in this regard where high levels of crime, vandalism and segregation are on top of participants’ minds when thinking about inequality in income and wealth. In Great Britain, by contrast, one could infer that there is truly a housing crisis as a fairly high number of participants mentioned homelessness as cue for inequality. French participants, in turn, were mostly concerned with issues revolving around social housing or unaffordable real estates.

Third, we find qualitative confirmation in what quantitative studies have already demonstrated in the past: French citizens appear to particularly distrustful of political institutions and actors with British participants largely joining in. This French ‘particularity’ stands in contrast to French citizens’ nearly unanimous conviction that the state and the government should be the central actors in combatting economic inequality. Conferring responsibility linked with expectations without having confidence in the capacities or goodwill of the actors certainly creates a dilemma of its own kind. Signs of Sweden as a high-trust society, by contrast, are reflected in the answers of numerous Swedish participants who appear to be less disdainful all in all. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the answers assessing the media as sources of information: French and British participants seem to be particularly distrustful while Swedes rather express a critical posture yet not an outright rejection.

Fourth, once the participants were willing to express their emotions when thinking about inequality we could detect widespread emotional states that are not necessarily conducive to political action: helplessness, powerlessness, or indifference are certainly rather attenuating citizens’ disposition to get engaged than encourage it. This might not be the case for expressed anger or frustration, yet when thinking about the preconditions of redistribution the absence of politically ‘activating’ feelings towards the rich is remarkable.

Finally, we are fully aware of the limitations of this comparative qualitative study, both in terms of generalizability of findings and of relevant issues *not* addressed. Distributive justice principles are one of those which feature prominently in this realm of research. While it is still unclear to what extent

different distributive justice principles affect the *perception* of inequality, fairness assessments of economic inequality are significantly impacted by them (van Hoote gem 2022). As a matter of fact, justifications of inequality based on meritocracy or of attributions of allowances based on ‘deservingness’ criteria were frequently and unsolicitedly brought to the virtual fore. To complement the multifaceted picture of citizens’ complex relationship with economic inequality, participants have, by this, unwittingly already outlined a new promising avenue.

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