

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

Sonja Zmerli, Linnéa Sturmhoefel Warnberg, Hope Isabella Hunter

MPSA Annual Conference, Chicago, April 2023

Introduction

- Abundant empirical evidence on the negative consequences of economic inequality (Wilkinson, Pickett 2010; 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).

Introduction

- We know that citizens' **perceptions** of economic inequality (and their distributive preferences related with them) have social and political consequences. **BUT** much less is known about individuals' mental shortcuts/heuristics that they use in order to “construct” or build/form their subjective perceptions of inequality.
- Work Package 1 of POLINEQUAL attempts to fill this blind spot by exploring people's shortcuts/heuristics of economic inequality at different levels of their personal proximity, i.e., at the neighbourhood, city/community, region and country level.

Theoretical Framework

- How do people form their perceptions about economic inequality?
 - Association between perceptions and distributive justice principles of equality, equity and need (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”.
 - Minkoff and Lyons (2019) : study of neighbourhood income diversity in the US endorse the latter.
 - Condon and Wichowsky's (2020a, 2020b) : 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 build/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?

Methods

Studies that pursue theory building often rely on qualitative methods to prepare the ground for generalization through methodological triangulation (Creswell 2014)

→ Explorative study through **Online Focus groups**:

- data collection tool that stimulates the **production of data** at both the **individual** and **group** levels, as a result of interaction / online form due to COVID but + allows for participation from different geographical locations;
- **social form** helps participants to formulate their definitions of complex concepts (Cyr 2017) and favours justification of positioning (Duchesne, Haegel 2007);
- Analysis based on **narratives** (stories) which are mechanisms that help people make sense and communicate about complex or contested issues (Boswell 2007) → cues about perceptions of inequality and preferences.

Data Collection

- Cases: France, Great Britain and Sweden
- Conducted by Kantar (survey agency)
- 8 online focus groups per country (24 online focus groups and 3 pilot groups) between December 2021 and February 2022.
- 12 socio-economically heterogeneous groups (lower and upper social class) and 12 homogeneous ones.
- On average, 6 participants per group - 145 participants altogether. 90 minutes discussion.
- 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 towards 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 groups: several participants stated they could not observe any meaningful inequalities in income or wealth in their direct environment
- British groups: a 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 groups: 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 groups: frequently mentioned vandalism, high crime rates or segregation as shortcuts
- British groups: particularly focused on homelessness, abandoned inner cities, social housing, presence of charities and food banks
- French groups: often refer to prices, standard of housing, as well as services and public transports. Participants living in Paris particularly seemed to notice economic inequality
- In all 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, GB_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 groups); health care facilities (Swedish groups)

“... 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 are often used as a point of comparison. Stockholm did not seem to function as a similar benchmark
- 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)

Media as sources of information

- Media
 - French and British groups: express critical distance towards the media
 - Swedish groups: 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

“I'm radical. I don't use any social network. It's that I will say, ninety percent fake.” (Philippe, France_201)

“On social networks, people can express themselves more and denounce inequalities.” (Cynthia, France_205)

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, GB FG14)

- Sense of resignation, disenchantment that inequality would never be overcome
- But also blame attributions exist:

“I want to put the responsibility on the individual. Almost all my friends and their children have studied and fought their way, struggled hard! [...] I think those who don't succeed have only themselves to blame.” (Bengt, SWE FGR 301)

Emotions towards economic inequality in general and towards two different groups of people, (survey results)

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

Participant surveys before and after focus group discussions:

Table 2: Perceived Fairness of Income and Wealth Distribution in Country (column in %)

	France	Sweden	Great Britain
Very fair	0	0	0
Fair	8	25	2
Unfair	52	67	66
Very unfair	40	8	32
Total N	48	36	41

- Table 2 shows how fair respondents from France, Sweden and Great Britain see the income and wealth distribution in their respective countries.
- A larger percentage of Swedish respondents said that the income and wealth distribution in their country was fair (25%), more so than any other country focus group respondent. This could entail that Swedish respondents see their country as being more equal in terms of income and wealth than respondents from France or the British which is also reflected in objective macro-level indicators of economic inequality.

Table 5 shows the percentages of level of agreeance of French, Swedish, and British respondents to the statement “Social benefits and services in [country] make people lazy” by social class.

Table 5: Cross-Tabulation of Social Benefits Make People Lazy with Country by Social Class (column in %)

	France				Sweden				Great Britain			
	Working	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle/Upper	Working	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle/Upper	Working	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle
Agree strongly	24	0	10	8	0	0	0	20	0	0	18	10
Agree	38	42	40	38	29	14	17	40	22	9	18	40
Neither Agree nor Disagree	31	25	10	15	29	29	25	20	33	36	27	20
Disagree	8	33	20	23	14	43	50	20	22	36	27	30
Disagree strongly	0	0	20	15	29	14	8	0	22	18	9	0
Total N	13	12	10	13	7	7	12	10	9	11	11	10

- French focus group respondents stand out in their counter intuitive responses
- Unlike the Swedish and British focus group respondents who support the idea that those who may receive social benefits would disagree that social benefits make people lazy, we find the inverse in the working-class French focus groups who, interestingly, agree more with the statement.

In conclusion

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

- Aalberg, T. (2003). *Achieving justice: Comparative public opinions on income distribution*. Leiden, Boston: Brill
- Arts, W., Gelissen, J. (2001). Welfare states, solidarity and justice principles: Does the type really matter? *Acta Sociologica*, 44(4), p. 283–299.
- Condon, M., Wichowsky, A. (2020a). *The economic other: Inequality in the American political imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Condon, M., Wichowsky, A. (2020b). Inequality in the social mind: Social comparison and support for redistribution. *The Journal of Politics*, 82(1), p. 149-161.
- Dalton, R. J. (2016). Party identification and its implications. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics Online* first [DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.72].
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Galesic, M., Olsson, H., Rieskamp, J. (2012). Social sampling explains apparent biases in judgments of social environments. *Psychological Science*, 23(12), p. 1515–1523.
- Heuer, J-O., Mau, S., Zimmermann, K. (2018). Attitudes to inequalities: Citizen deliberation about the (re-)distribution of income and wealth in four welfare states regimes. In: Taylor-Gooby, P., Leruth, B. (eds.) *Attitudes, aspirations and welfare: Social policy directions in uncertain times*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 93-135
- Grisold, A., Theine, H. (2017). How come we know? The media coverage of economic inequality. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, p. 4265-4284.
- Jost, J. T., Pelham, B. W., Sheldon, O., Sullivan, B. N. (2003). Social inequality and the reduction of ideological dissonance on behalf of the system: Evidence of enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33(1), p. 13-36.
- Kenworthy, L., McCall, L. (2008). Inequality, public opinion and redistribution. *SocioEconomic Review*, 6(1), p. 35–68.
- Larsen, C. A. (2013). *The rise and fall of social cohesion. The construction and deconstruction of social trust in the US, UK, Sweden, and Denmark*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Minkoff, S. L., Lyons, J. (2019). Living with inequality: Neighborhood income diversity and perceptions of the income gap. *American Politics Research*, 47(2), p. 329-361.
- Taylor-Gooby, P., Hvinden, B., Mau, S., Leruth, B., Schoyen, M. A., Gyory, A. (2019). Moral economies of the welfare state: A qualitative comparative study. *Acta Sociologica*, 62(2), p. 119–134.
- Shore, J. (2014). How welfare states shape participatory patterns. In: Kumlin, S., StadelmannSteffen, I. (eds.) *How welfare states shape the democratic public: Policy feedback, participation, voting, and attitudes*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, p. 41-62.
- Wilkinson, R., Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin.
- Zmerli, S., Castillo, J. (2015). Income inequality, distributive fairness and political trust in Latin America. *Social Science Research*, 52, 179-192.
- van Hootegem, A. (2022). *Balancing equality, equity and need. Public opinion on distributive justice in the changing welfare state*. PhD thesis submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven.