

Income inequality is unrelated to perceived inequality and support for redistribution

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This is a pre-copy-edits version of a paper accepted at Social Science Quarterly; please use DOI when citing: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ssqu.13269>

Abstract

Objectives: To contribute to our understanding of the relationship between income inequality, perceptions of income inequality, and support for redistribution. In particular, to ask whether income inequality affects support for redistribution by influencing perceptions of inequality.

Methods: Combining the pay ratio measures from the International Social Survey Project (ISSP) with income inequality measures from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID). The analysis proceeds in three steps, asking whether 1) inequality is related to perceived inequality, 2) whether perceived inequality is related to preferences for inequality, and 3) whether perceived inequality is related to support for redistribution.

Results: Income inequality is unrelated to perceptions of inequality. Perceptions of inequality strongly predict preferred inequality, reinforcing the prior conclusion that anchoring effects likely cause this close relationship. Perceptions of inequality also predict support for redistribution. However, because actual inequality is unrelated to perceived inequality, there is no link between actual inequality and either preferred inequality or support for redistribution.

Conclusion: The overall pattern of results is consistent with the interpretation that perceptions of income inequality may be politically co-determined with support for inequality and redistribution, instead of perceptions being mental antecedents of these attitudes.

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Introduction

There is an ongoing scholarly discussion concerning how accurately the public perceives income inequality (Pontusson et al. 2020; Volpi and Giger 2022), and whether these perceptions inform preferences for inequality (Trump 2018; Giger and Lascombes 2019) and/or redistribution (Heiserman and Simpson 2021; Weisstanner and Armingeon 2021; García-Castro et al. 2022). Scholars care about these questions in part because perceptions of inequality may be an intermediate step connecting actual levels of inequality to support for redistribution.

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion by exploring whether income inequality affects perceptions of inequality, thereby affecting support for redistribution. The paper asks, first, whether income inequality affects perceptions of inequality. It then examines the relationship between perceived inequality, preferred inequality, and support for redistribution. The empirical strategy involves combining two of the largest available cross-national datasets on inequality: perceptions of occupational income inequality from the International Social Survey Project's (ISSP) Social Inequality modules and objective income inequality estimates from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID). The analysis explicitly accounts for the uncertainty that arises from the measurement of inequality and from missing data in survey responses. This approach results in one of the most data-rich explorations, to date, of the relationship between income inequality and public opinion toward unequal outcomes.

The results show that actual income inequality is not related to perceptions of inequality. Perceptions of inequality are strongly related to preferences for inequality (operationalized through occupational pay ratios); this reinforces prior findings regarding anchoring effects in these survey

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items (Trump 2018; Pedersen and Mutz 2019). Finally, preferences for inequality and redistribution are related to perceived - but not actual - income inequality. The overall pattern of results is consistent with perceived inequality being the result of the same political and psychological processes as normative attitudes toward inequality and redistribution (Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, and Ho 2017; Bussolo et al. 2019; Du and King 2021; Waldfogel et al. 2021).

The relationship between income inequality and support for redistribution

The prediction that income inequality should lead to support for redistribution is common (Meltzer and Richard 1981). One mechanism that may plausibly connect objective inequality to support for redistribution involves perceptions of inequality. In this formulation, increasing inequality leads to higher perceived inequality, which in turn leads to negative evaluations of perceived inequality and to increased support for redistribution. This paper explores whether the available evidence is consistent with these intermediate steps.

The first step in this mechanism is that objective levels of inequality should influence perceptions of inequality. Prior research on perceptions of inequality has shown that people generally underestimate inequality (Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Kuhn 2019b), and appear to prefer even less inequality than they perceive (Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014). The results are more divided, however, on whether actual inequality is related to perceptions of inequality. Researchers variously conclude that actual levels of inequality either do not influence perceived inequality (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Kuhn 2019b), that the effects exist but are small (Bussolo et al. 2019) and/or

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that the effects are inconsistent across countries (Giger and Lascombes 2019). Contributing to the ongoing discussion, the first hypothesis tested in this paper will be:

H1: Objective levels of income inequality affect perceptions of inequality.²

The step from higher perceived inequality to more demand for redistribution theoretically arises from a negative comparison of perceived inequality with desired (lower) levels of inequality. As the contrast becomes starker, the evaluation of perceived inequality should become more negative. This link implicitly relies on the assumption that perceptions of inequality do not change people's preferred levels of inequality. However, the concern that experiences of inequality systematically affect preferred levels of inequality has been repeatedly brought up in the literature (Gijssberts 2002; Kelley and Zagorski 2004; Castillo 2011, 2012; Trump 2018). If preferences for inequality increase when perceived inequality increases, this may break the link between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. The scholarship on this question has leaned heavily on the ISSP's occupational income questions, which recently have been shown to be subject to strong anchoring effects (Trump 2018, Pedersen and Mutz 2019), displaying low inter-correlation with other inequality-oriented items (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018), and having high rates of inconsistent and missing responses (Heiserman and Simpson 2021). In the results and discussion sections, I will return to the interpretation difficulties this raises for the results. For now, I will state the hypothesis in the direction needed for the connection between inequality and redistribution to work:

² The hypotheses are formulated using causal language because the theoretical models clearly predict a causal direction. The data in this paper does not allow for causal identification, so results will be evaluated for whether they are consistent or inconsistent with (rather than providing proof of) the hypothesized causal direction.

H2: Perceptions of inequality do not affect preferred levels of inequality.

The last step in this mechanism predicts a connection between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. Indeed, prior research suggests that those who perceive more inequality tend to support redistribution more strongly (Kuhn 2019a; Bussolo et al. 2019). Occasionally, this relationship has been used to argue that, especially in the presence of substantial under-estimation of inequality, we should think of perceived inequality (and not actual inequality) as a key driver of support for redistribution (Niehues 2014; Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Kuhn 2019b). Additionally, it is possible that perceptions of inequality are politically and psychologically co-determined with (rather than being antecedents of) support for redistribution (Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, and Ho 2017; Macdonald 2019, 2020; Du and King 2021; Waldfogel et al. 2021). A correlation between perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution can thus occur as part of the specific mechanism under examination in this paper, or it can exist independently of this mechanism. Formulated according to the causal logic consistent with the mechanism under consideration, the third hypothesis will be:

H3: Perceptions of inequality affect support for redistribution.

These three hypotheses jointly constitute one plausible mechanism that links income inequality to demand for redistribution. This is not the only possible link between inequality and support for redistribution; for example, political entrepreneurs who react to income inequality could influence

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redistributive politics even if most voters remain unaware of the levels of inequality. However, the mechanism that operates through public perceptions is a straight-forward logical connection and commonly implied in the literature; it is therefore worthwhile to empirically examine its plausibility.

Data and methods

This paper uses all four currently available ISSP Social Inequality modules (ISSP Research Group 2014a, 2014b). The modules were fielded in 1987, 1992, 1999, and 2009,³ and the complete dataset includes 27 countries, 76 country-years, and 101,484 respondents.⁴ To measure inequality perceptions, I make use of the occupational pay survey items. These items are widely used in public opinion research on inequality, and ask respondents to estimate how much various occupations (e.g. CEOs, doctors, shop assistants, unskilled factory workers) make, as well as to indicate how much these occupations ought to make. Following Jasso and Rossi (1977), I measure “perceived” and “just” income inequality by calculating perceived and preferred pay ratios based on the estimated and suggested incomes, respectively.

³ A fifth wave was fielded in 2019, but due to pandemic delays this dataset has not been released as of the date of this writing. Given the upcoming release of more data, which is bound to draw academic interest, it is particularly relevant to improve our understanding of the correlates of these survey items.

⁴ The country-year samples in the social inequality modules are: Australia (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Austria (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Bulgaria (1992, 1999, 2009), Canada (1992, 1999), Chile (1999, 2009), Cyprus (1999, 2009), Czech Republic (1992, 1999, 2009), France (1999, 2009), Germany (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Great Britain (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Hungary (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Israel (1999, 2009), Italy (1987, 1992, 2009), Japan (1999, 2009), Latvia (1999, 2009), New Zealand (1992, 1999, 2009), Norway (1992, 1999, 2009), Philippines (1992, 1999, 2009), Poland (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), Portugal (1999, 2009), Russia (1992, 1999, 2009), Slovak Republic (1992, 1999, 2009), Slovenia (1992, 1999, 2009), Spain (1999, 2009), Sweden (1992, 1999, 2009), Switzerland (1987, 2009), United States of America (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009). Two country-years, Austria (1992) and Italy (1987) participated in the module but did not ask the occupational incomes questions; these country-years are excluded from analysis.

I use multiple imputation to address significant missingness in the occupational income items (a problem that most of the literature does not discuss explicitly). For example, consider the estimates for CEO pay. The rate of missingness varies widely between country-years, ranging from no missing observations in Cyprus (1999) to 60% missing in Poland (1987). The mean share of missing estimates of CEO pay (per country-year) is 16%; 10 of 76 country-years have missingness rates above 30%. Missingness rates for estimated factory worker salaries are lower but still concerning, with the mean share of missingness at 11% and 4 country-years with missingness above 30%. Most published research using these items does not mention how missingness was addressed, which suggests that listwise deletion is common. However, multiple imputation is an alternative approach to missing data that may improve on listwise deletion (King et al. 2001).

Listwise deletion can be advisable when data is not missing completely at random, the determinants of missingness cannot be completely controlled for, and there is missingness in the independent as well as dependent variables (Arel-Bundock and Pelc 2018). Whether the determinants of missingness can be completely controlled for is untestable by definition (Lall 2016); however, here as in most social science data they probably cannot. In this situation we cannot know for sure whether multiple imputation or listwise deletion yields the most accurate results (Pepinsky 2018). This paper does not argue that multiple imputation is the a priori superior approach. Instead, I observe that both approaches are reasonable, and that a precise adjudication of the models is not possible as long as the exact data generation mechanism is unknown. As a result, it is an omission in the literature that the results from multiply imputed models are not yet included in the accumulation of knowledge, and this paper helps complete the record.

The analyses below use log-transformed salary ratios, as is common practice (Jasso and Rossi 1977; Heiserman and Simpson 2021).⁵ The ratios are based on perceived and preferred CEO and unskilled factory worker salaries. Intuitively, the ratios indicate how many times more the respondent thinks a CEO makes (or ought to make), compared to an unskilled factory worker. In addition, three items about attitudes toward redistribution are used. These items ask whether inequality is too high, whether the government should take steps to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, and whether the rich should be taxed more.

The ISSP data is combined with the Standardized World Income Inequality Database, SWIID (Solt 2016). The SWIID is the largest available data source for cross-national studies of income inequality; in particular, it includes a larger number of country-years than the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS). While the LIS provides a gold-standard in comparability at the cost of lower country-year coverage, the SWIID provides comprehensive coverage at the cost of larger uncertainty. Reflecting this, the SWIID includes imputed datasets which model the uncertainty in their measures of inequality; these imputed datasets are used in the analyses below.

The SWIID includes estimates for market inequality and for disposable inequality, raising the question of which variable to use. Theoretical models of demand for redistribution typically assume that support for redistribution should be informed by perceptions of market inequality. However, disposable inequality is arguably easier for citizens to perceive, as inequality of disposable incomes leads to observable differences in purchasing power. Thus, the analyses below

⁵ Before multiple imputation, I log-transformed the income estimates to conform with imputation assumptions; inspection revealed the income estimates are indeed distributed approximately log-normal.

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are performed separately with market and disposable inequality estimates, and both sets of results are reported.

One limitation of this combination of datasets is that while the ratio measure refers to a difference of incomes between occupational categories, the SWIID operationalizes inequality through the Gini coefficient. Unfortunately, I am not aware of a cross-national dataset that would have the reach of SWIID and also report inequality measures that are conceptually more similar to the occupational pay ratio measures. Extrapolating Gini coefficients from the occupational earnings questions has been attempted before, but extrapolating from occupations that cover only a small share of the workforce to a measure that summarizes the entire income distribution requires significant assumptions. It is unclear that the resulting artificial Gini would be a good theoretical match to the real Gini. Therefore, I proceed with the combination of objective data on Gini coefficients and survey data on pay ratios, while acknowledging the potential concern.

Results are obtained by fitting multilevel linear models, with respondents nested in country-years, nested in countries. The regressions include objective inequality measures on the country-year level, and demographic controls (gender, age, college education, religious attendance, income quintile⁶, self-ascribed social class, union membership, and marital status) on the individual level. Tests of model fit confirm that the multilevel set-up crucially improves fit compared to a simple linear regression. The inclusion of individual-level demographic controls also improves model fit, but less dramatically. Additional inclusion of individual-level attitudinal variables like political preference was tested, but ultimately not implemented due to very marginal improvements in

⁶ Income quintiles are estimates derived from country-year specific income categories.

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model fit and clear increases in the risk of confounding. Testing the main multilevel model for assumption violations using the “performance” package in R revealed no violations. The regression coefficients reported below have been pooled from regressions estimated on five multiply imputed datasets.

Results

Figure 1 visualizes the raw relationship between market-based income inequality and country-year means of perceived income inequality (measured as the logged CEO-unskilled factory worker ratio). As the figure shows, there is considerable variation both in objective inequality and in mean perceptions of it. The figure also shows that there may be a positive relationship between inequality and perceptions of it. It may be tempting to conclude from this visualization that the relationship is real; prior work has sometimes done so on the basis of similar patterns, especially when there is not sufficient data available to allow a regression analysis. However, this figure hides substantial variation in perceptions within countries. It is therefore important to verify whether the apparent relationship holds up in a statistical model.

Turning to the statistical models, I first ask whether actual income inequality is related to perceptions of inequality (H1); regression results are shown in Table 1. The Gini coefficient is coded 0 – 1 throughout; the actual range of the Gini coefficient in this dataset is 0.36-0.53 for market income inequality and 0.18-0.48 for disposable income inequality.

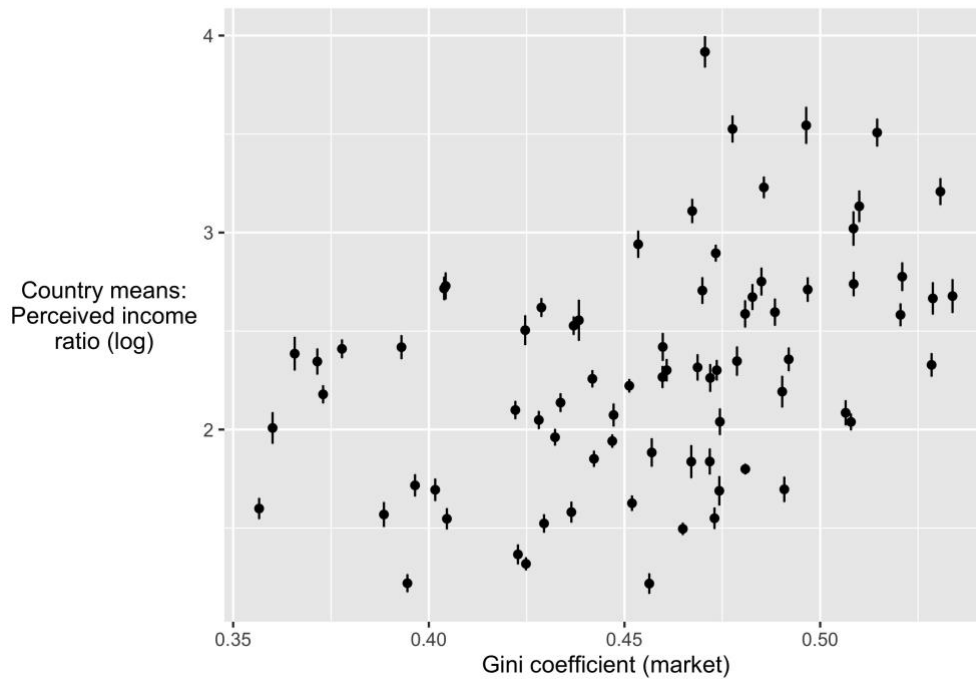


Figure 1: Country-year means of perceived CEO-worker income ratios (on a log scale) plotted against market inequality.

There is no statistically significant relationship between perceptions of inequality and either market-based income inequality (Model 1) or disposable income inequality (Model 2). Even though this is the largest available dataset with these survey items, the statistical power is limited by the number of included countries (27), so we may want to additionally consider the estimated size of the coefficient. However, the point estimates are substantively small. To illustrate, consider the larger of the two point estimates, 0.35 for disposable income inequality. This coefficient, if significant, would imply that a person who lives in the most equal country-year in the dataset and perceives a 10:1 CEO to factory worker income ratio would, if moved to the most unequal country-year, perceive a 13:1 income ratio instead.

Turning to H2, Table 2 examines whether preferred levels of inequality are related to perceived and actual inequality. The results first show that actual inequality is unrelated to preferred inequality (Model 1 for market inequality and Model 3 for disposable income inequality). When

Table 1: Perceived inequality as a function of actual inequality.

DV: Perceived income ratio (log)		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gini (market, 0-1)	0.12 (0.28)	
Gini (disposable, 0-1)		0.35 (0.48)
Country-year fixed effects	Y	Y
Country fixed effects	Y	Y
Demographic controls	Y	Y

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Results from multilevel linear models fitted on multiply imputed data.

Table 2: Preferred inequality as a function of perceived and actual inequality.

DV: Preferred income ratio (log)				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gini (market, 0-1)	0.25 (0.28)	-0.01 (0.25)		
Gini (disposable, 0-1)			0.42 (0.40)	0.04 (0.28)
Perceived pay ratio (log)		0.50*** (0.00)		0.50*** (0.00)
Country-year fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Results from multilevel linear models fitted on multiply imputed data.

perceived inequality is added to the model (Models 2 and 4), it closely predicts preferred inequality, while actual inequality continues to be insignificant. The close relationship between perceived and preferred inequality is consistent with the previously documented existence of anchoring effects in these survey items (Pedersen and Mutz 2019, Trump 2018). If actual inequality were a strong predictor of perceived inequality, this anchoring process could lead to higher reported support for inequality in unequal country-years. However, the lack of a relationship between actual inequality and perceptions of inequality breaks this hypothetical chain. Instead, we find a relationship between perceptions and preferences, but without a connection to real inequality.

Table 3: Normative attitudes toward redistribution and inequality.

	Dependent variables:		
	Inequality too high	Reduce diff's in income	Tax high incomes
Gini (disposable, 0-1)	-0.42 (0.40)	0.67 (0.53)	-0.09 (0.32)
Perceived pay ratio (log)	-0.07*** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)
Country-year fixed effects	Y	Y	Y
Country fixed effects	Y	Y	Y
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Results from multilevel linear models fitted on multiply imputed data.

Turning to H3, Table 3 shows the relationship between inequality and attitudes toward redistribution. For brevity, this table presents results only for disposable income inequality; results remain unchanged for market-based income inequality. Inequality of disposable incomes is consistently unrelated to perceptions that inequality is too high, support for reducing income differences, and support for higher taxes on people with high incomes. However, perceived inequality is significantly related to each of these outcome variables. Once again, the resulting picture is one of a relationship between perceptions and attitudes, but without a link to actual levels of inequality.

Discussion

This paper contributes to the accumulating evidence that actual income inequality is unrelated to perceptions of income inequality (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). The results also reinforce

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previous findings that actual inequality is unrelated to measures of normative attitudes toward inequality and redistribution (Breznau and Hommerich 2019).

The first finding, that actual inequality is unrelated to perceived inequality, can be interpreted in different ways. One possibility is that the mismatch between the Gini coefficient and the pay ratio variable matters, and that more compatible measures would yield different results. Until a substantial dataset of more compatible measures becomes available, however, the results from this data remain one of the better indicators we have. Alternatively, we may conclude that the public does not perceive income inequality in detail and that the measures accurately reflect this. This is plausible in light of what we know about the limited levels of numeric and political awareness among the general public. If we conclude that there is not a relationship between actual and perceived inequality, then this also changes the interpretation of the two downstream hypotheses, because the null finding breaks the overall mechanism connecting inequality to attitudes toward redistribution.

The second finding is that preferred pay differences are very closely related to perceived pay differences. This relationship is strong enough that it is likely dominated by an anchoring mechanism (Pedersen and Mutz 2019, Trump 2018), which means this finding may be dependent on the use of pay-ratio measures of inequality (Pedersen and Mutz 2019). However, even if alternative survey measures were to improve our ability to measure how preferences for inequality adapt to higher inequality, the overall results in this paper would still suggest that adaptation to inequality is unlikely to occur in practice, because perceptions of inequality do not change as inequality changes.

Finally, the analysis confirms an association between perceived (and by extension, preferred) pay ratios and attitudes toward redistribution (Niehues 2014; Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Kuhn 2019b). This relationship could mean that perceptions of inequality are key independent variables that influence attitudes toward redistribution (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Niehues 2014). However, the relationship is also consistent with the interpretation that perceptions of inequality are themselves an outcome of the same political (Macdonald 2019, 2020) and psychological (Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, and Ho 2017; Du and King 2021; Waldfogel et al. 2021) processes that determine attitudes toward inequality. If the latter interpretation holds up in future research, then we may need to think of perceived pay ratios as intrinsically political items, rather than as reflections of objective reality that mentally precede normative judgments.

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