



*What we want and what we see: Preferences, Perceptions and Judgments
about Inequality and Meritocracy*

S.R. Steijn

Summary

What we want and what we see, preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy.

Income inequality plays an important part in both public and scientific debates. Based on the conviction that it is important to study the social legitimacy of existing inequalities in modern Western societies, this dissertation studies how people think about inequalities. In doing so, three different aspects of people's thoughts about inequality are distinguished: the preferences that people have about the distribution of inequalities in their society, the perceptions that they have about the current distribution of those inequalities and the judgments that they have about those inequalities. This dissertation pays specific attention to the concept of meritocracy, which is understood as the ideal of rewarding people on the basis of their merits. This meritocratic ideal is often put forward as a normative legitimation of existing inequalities. In several chapters of this dissertation the question is addressed whether and to what extent this meritocratic ideal is reflected in how people think about inequalities. Do people believe that their society is meritocratic? And if it were up to them would they want their society to function as a meritocracy?

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to contribute to our understanding of how people prefer, perceive and judge about inequality and meritocracy and how these preferences, perceptions and judgments relate to how people think about society as a whole. The empirical chapters of this dissertation are divided into two parts, each consisting of two chapters, which contribute to this overarching aim in different ways. The first part consists of two studies based on Dutch survey data, which were collected particularly for this dissertation. The second part consists of country-comparative studies on the basis of existing cross-national survey data. Both parts contribute, in different ways, to our understanding of how people think about inequality and meritocracy.

Part I: (Non-) Meritocratische preferences, perceptions and judgments

Chapter two and three of the dissertation together constitute the first part of this dissertation. In chapter two it is argued that existing conceptualizations of attitudes about inequality either consider the extent to which inequality is seen as problematic or the moral judgment that underlies such a judgment. The chapter proposes a new conceptualization, which combines these two aspects by conceptualizing attitudes about inequality as consisting of the comparison between how people would like inequalities to be distributed and how they perceive inequalities to be currently distributed. The chapter showcases the benefits of this new conceptualization with Dutch survey data that were gathered on the basis of the new conceptualization. In this survey, people were asked about both preferences for and perceptions of rewarding (non-) meritocratic characteristics. The chapter examines these (non) meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments and examines to what extent people of different education and income differ on them. To test whether, accordingly with theoretical expectations, the new conceptualization connects to the way people think about inequality the association between the new measures and the (also included) statement that inequality in the Netherlands is too high was examined.

The chapter provides two important findings. First, education, rather than income, seems to be an important predictor for how people evaluate the meritocratic functioning of the Dutch society. People of higher education are more supportive of rewarding meritocratic characteristics and are more critical of rewarding non-meritocratic characteristics. Second, people who judgment that non-meritocratic characteristics are more rewarded than they would like them to be is associated with the judgment that inequality in the Netherlands is too high.

Chapter three examines the association between judgments about meritocratic rewards in society and governmental demand for redistribution of incomes. In the literature on demand for redistribution it is often claimed that negative judgments about meritocracy lead to a higher demand for redistribution. This hypothesis had however never been tested on the basis of an accurate measurement of judgments about meritocratic rewards. In absence of such accurate measures, studies often relied on respectively either measures of meritocratic preferences or meritocratic perceptions. Chapter three in various ways examines if meritocratic judgments- based on their new conceptualization as the difference between meritocratic preferences and meritocratic perceptions- are associated with demand for redistribution. It respectively

examined if (1) the size of the absolute difference between meritocratic preferences and meritocratic perceptions, (2) the direction of this difference and (3) a combination of the size and the direction of this difference, are associated with larger demand for redistribution. The results of the analyses suggest that larger discontent with rewards for meritocratic characteristics and (specifically) the wish to decrease existing rewards for meritocratic characteristics are associated with larger demand for redistribution.

Part II: Cross-national studies

Chapter four, which starts off the second, cross-national, part of the dissertation, studies the association between inequality and corruption perceptions. This chapter argues that it is important to study corruption perceptions, because corruption is a severe violation of the meritocratic legitimation of inequalities. Based on the existing literature on inequality and actual corruption, a hypothesis is formulated that states that increases in inequality lead to increases in perceived corruption. This hypothesis is tested on repeated cross-sectional data from the Eurobarometer, allowing for a first examination of association of the within-country variation in inequality with perceptions of corruption. Furthermore, two rival hypothesis are formulated about the effect that inequality could have on the stratification of corruption perceptions on the basis of socio-economic status. One hypothesis predicts that higher inequality is associated with a larger cleavage in perceived corruption between people of higher socio-economic status (who *ceteris paribus* perceive less corruption) and people of lower socio-economic status, while the other hypothesis predicts that this discrepancy in perceived corruption is lower when the inequality in a country is higher. The results of the analyses confirm our general hypothesis about the association between inequality and perceived corruption: increases in inequality are associated with increases in perceived corruption. Analyses on the effect that inequality has on stratification of corruption perceptions suggest that higher inequality is associated with a smaller cleavage in perceived corruption on the basis of socio-economic status.

Chapter five examines the association between perceived inequality and generalized trust. The chapter argues that many of the arguments in the existing literature on the association between inequality and generalized trust that are tested on actual inequality, actually refer to perceived inequality. When people perceive more inequality, they might be more inclined to experience status anxiety and status

competition, leading to an erosion of social trust. On the basis of these arguments a hypothesis is formulated that states that higher perceived inequality is associated with lower generalized trust, even when controlling for relevant material resources. In the analyses of this chapter an existing measure of perceived inequality, based on survey data where people are asked to estimate the earnings of a list of jobs, is used. The association between perceived inequality and generalized trust is examined both using cross-sectional data (with variation between countries in the level of aggregate perceived inequality) and with analyses on the individual level (with variation within countries in the level of perceived inequality that individuals display). In the cross-national analyses individual generalized trust (measured in the EVS) is regressed on country-aggregated perceived inequality measured in the ISSP. The individual level analyses use simultaneously measured generalized trust and perceived inequality from the German General Survey.

The analyses do not provide conclusive evidence about the association between perceived inequality and generalized trust. The country-comparative analyses find some support for the hypothesis, but the effects are not significant when controlling for national wealth. On the individual level, no support for such an association is found.

Implications for further research

The last chapter of this dissertation discusses three areas of follow-up research on the most important contributions of this dissertation. First, the potential benefits of qualitative research on what people see as merits is discussed. In open interviews, focus-groups or cognitive testing these considerations that people have about meritocracy might be explored more thoroughly. This type of qualitative studies does not only help validate the findings of this study, but also provides interesting additional nuanced insight into how people think about the distribution of inequalities. An important question in such studies should be what role the concept of merit plays in these considerations. Moreover, if these qualitative studies are carried out in multiple countries, they can examine to what extent people from different cultural backgrounds have similar understandings of, associations with, and attitudes about merit and meritocracy.

A second potential area of future research concerns the differences in preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy within countries. Although chapter five does not suggest that perceived inequality and social trust are associated on the individual level, chapter three clearly shows that judgments about meritocracy are associated with demand for redistribution. Judgments about (the absence of) meritocracy could potentially be associated with a whole range of other relevant societal outcomes. Based on that, and many other reasons, it is important to improve our understanding of how people think about meritocracy. Although the association between individual characteristics and preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy was examined in various instances throughout this dissertation, many interesting questions remain unanswered. Do people predominantly form these thoughts about meritocracy in their childhood, or do they adapt them during the life course, based on their own experiences? And is the association between socio-economic status and how people think about meritocracy the same for people of different cohorts? These and other relevant questions can be tackled by follow-up research.

The third and last discussed potential area of future research concerns the study of differences in preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy between countries. Chapter four, which found an association between inequality and (explicitly non-meritocratic) perceptions of corruption, was in accordance with the general theoretical expectation that the national context matters for how people think about inequality. Future research could examine how factors like inequality, wealth, political culture, ethnic fractionalization or religious culture are associated with how people think about the division of inequalities in their society. An important question concerns the possible interaction between these national contexts and the individual characteristics that are related to preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy. Chapter four for example showed that socio-economic status is a less important predictor of corruption in countries where inequality is high, than in countries where inequality is low. Future research could study this type of process also for other country and individual characteristics.

The importance of good measurement of attitudes about inequality and meritocracy

To address the new research questions that this dissertation has evoked, good measures of preferences, perceptions and judgments of inequality, accompanied by good measures of the individual and national characteristics that they are associated with, are elementary. To enable good comparisons between countries it is furthermore necessary that data is gathered in a consistent matter across different countries. Ideally, these data should be collected on multiple times, allowing for analyses of trends and longitudinal effects. Gathering these data will certainly be a substantial challenge. But, as this dissertation has hopefully convincingly shown, research on the preferences, perceptions and judgments that people have about inequality and meritocracy can lead to valuable insights, that allow us to closely monitor the social legitimacy of existing inequalities.