"So you're just a normal person. Just like me?"

Difference evasion in managing an advantaged identity and legitimising inequality

Cáceres Quezada, E.M.

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Chapter 5

General Discussion

Post-WWII, efforts to equalise individuals across groups have coincided with widening inequalities in Western Europe and in relation to global South countries (Chancel et al., 2022; Hickel et al., 2021). While some minoritised groups in Western Europe have gained legal status comparable to those historically advantaged—for instance, through the abolition of racial segregation, the depathologisation of homosexuality, and same-sex marriage—inequality between the top 1% and the bottom 50% has increased 2.55-fold times since 1980 (Chancel et al., 2022). At the same time, the inequality between the global North and the global South has increased since the 1960s, now approaching early 20th-century levels—at the height of Western imperialism (Chancel et al., 2022; Hickel, 2018). In the Netherlands, the poorest individuals remain as economically deprived as they were five decades ago, while the wealthier half of the Dutch population has enhanced its financial status (Salverda, 2014). Rising inequality has been linked to anomy and support for authoritarian leadership (Sprong et al., 2019), and the Netherlands is indeed currently governed by a right-wing cabinet led by the far right (Moses, 2024). In addressing this intersection between burgeoning equalising efforts and widening inequalities, this dissertation examined the role of advantaged groups in this process. I did so by examining two intergroup settings where equalising outlooks have taken deep root in the Netherlands: the ethnic-racial context, on the one hand, and the sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) context, on the other hand. In particular, this dissertation addressed the research question of how advantaged group members construe social categories while managing their advantaged social identity—shaping whether they legitimise or question inequality in turn.

Strides toward equalising individuals coincide with the shift in attitudes in Europe post-WWII. Explicit supremacism became increasingly unacceptable and, in turn, the naming of race as a meaningful category (Essed & Trienekens, 2008; Jugert et al., 2022; Simon, 2017). This reluctance to employ ethnic-racial categories arguably reflects an attempt to move beyond ethnonationalism, the Holocaust, and the very European colonial history (Juang et al., 2021). By enshrining universal formal equality among individuals—such as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—Western and global South societies sought to diminish group-based distinctions deemed sources of oppression in the aftermath of the Holocaust. More than 70 years after the UDHR, these equalising efforts have coincided with widening socioeconomic inequality (Whyte, 2019), with modern prejudices now drawing on the very blurring of social categories once deemed to justify oppression. In the ethnic-racial and SOGI intergroup contexts examples include portraying minoritised people's identity claims as threats to inclusion (Bilali, 2014; Morrison & Morrison, 2011), framing them as seeking preferential treatment (Salvati et al., 2023), and even assuming they enjoy above-average wealth, as in the 'gay affluence' myth (Bettinsoli et al., 2022). Meanwhile, ethnic-racial and SOGI inequalities remain pervasive in liberal societies that claim to uphold individual equality—including the Netherlands (Baalbergen & Jaspers, 2023; Buser et al., 2018; Drydakis, 2022; Geijtenbeek & Plug, 2018; OECD, 2020; Thijssen et al., 2021; van Elk et al., 2019).

Modern forms of prejudice obscure entrenched inequalities by invoking infringements of individual equality. As such, the blurring of social categories may have enabled new ways of managing inequality rather than prevented it (Duyvendak, 2022; Whyte, 2019). In blurring social categories, advantaged group members may be specially prone to dispel the threat of being seen as part of advantaged groups and, thereby, from being associated with benefiting from group-based perks (Knowles et al., 2014; Rios, 2022). However, whether and how the blurring of social categories at the intergroup level takes root in ingroup processes among

members of advantaged groups has received scant empirical attention. This dissertation sought to fill this gap.

At the intergroup level, I answered the specific research question: How do members of advantaged groups navigate difference and inequality in liberal, increasingly unequal contexts? (SQ1) I built on research suggesting that equalising outlooks can reflect, on the one hand, in downplaying the role of social categories in shaping people's lives (difference evasion, e.g., "I don't see colour/sexual orientation and gender identity, I see people") (Knowles et al., 2009; Smith & Shin, 2014). On the other hand, equalising outlooks can reflect in downplaying inequality itself by invoking existing formal equality among individuals (inequality evasion, e.g., "Black/LGBTQ people are not disadvantaged anymore") (Brown et al., 2013; Brownfield et al., 2018). A key insight has been that those who evade difference, even while acknowledging inequality (e.g., "Black people are disadvantaged because of racism"), may still disengage from challenging inequality (i.e., evaders profile)—mirroring patterns seen in those who outright deny inequality (i.e., defenders profile). In contrast, only those who acknowledged both difference and inequality exhibited support for challenging inequality (i.e., acknowledgers profile) (Mekawi et al., 2020).

I then grounded ingroup processes in the intergroup level of analysis by drawing from self-categorisation theory (Oakes, 2001; J. Turner, 1987). In particular, this dissertation posited that acknowledging difference may prompt those advantaged to construe themselves and others as members of social groups—recognising the role of social categories in shaping people's lives. As such, when advantaged group members acknowledge both difference and inequality—acknowledgers—they may be more likely to attribute inequality to external, relatively stable constraints (e.g., group-based historical advantage) rather than to internal characteristics such as inherent deservingness to rule over others, merit, or talent (Vasilyeva & Lombrozo, 2020). In contrast, when advantaged group members evade difference while acknowledging

inequality—evaders—they may dispense with situating themselves in relation to their own advantaged group's standing. This, in turn, may make inequality more likely to be diluted into an individual matter, if acknowledged at all—defenders. From this foundation, I reasoned that how advantaged group members construe both difference and inequality may thus reflect how they manage their own structural standing and help explain whether—and how—they legitimise or question inequality.

This brings us to the ingroup level, where I addressed the specific research question: How do members of advantaged groups manage their standing? (SQ2) At the ingroup level, this dissertation built on the notion that attaining positive self-esteem is a fundamental task of the self in Western contexts (Heine et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Framed as liberal settings, Western societies often praise social standing as a reflection of people's effort and talent (e.g., meritocratic beliefs) (McCoy & Major, 2007). Because meritocratic beliefs attribute inequality to internal traits rather than structural factors—such as belonging to an advantaged group—facing intergroup inequality may pose a meritocratic threat to some members of advantaged groups as they manage their advantaged social identity (Knowles et al., 2014). In this light, evading difference or inequality by invoking existing formal equality may allow advantaged group members to appear egalitarian and, at the same time, equalise themselves to minoritised groups. Thus, distancing themselves from their advantaged membership may represent a key identity strategy for some while navigating intergroup inequality (Shuman et al., 2024).

Those who reject meritocratic beliefs, in contrast, may perceive intergroup inequality as a reputational threat to their advantaged group (Knowles et al., 2014). In dispelling this threat, they may favour structural views citing external, relatively stable constraints that shape category members' features (e.g., historical group-based advantage) (Vasil et al., 2024; Vasilyeva & Lombrozo, 2020). As such, those holding such a structural view may be prompted to acknowledge their own advantaged position, thereby adopting power-cognisance as an identity strategy (Goren & Plaut, 2012).

In examining whether and how ideologically divergent views of social categories stem from these foundations, I addressed the last specific research question: How do advantaged group members legitimise or question inequality? (SQ3) To this end, Chapters 2 and 3 employed a person-centred approach, where subgroups of individuals served as the unit of analysis (Osborne & Sibley, 2017). These chapters identified distinct profiles of white and cisheterosexual people based on their construals of difference and inequality. Next, I examined how these profiles relate to advantaged identity strategies and ideological correlates. In particular, social dominance orientation and meritocratic beliefs were measured as key ideological correlates, representing blatant and system-justifying forms of prejudice in the social-psychological tradition, respectively (N. Kteily et al., 2012; Ledgerwood et al., 2011).

Chapter 4 then experimentally assessed whether and how evading difference—when responding to inequality framings—interacts with key individual factors (e.g., political orientation, distancing identity strategy) in shaping advantaged group members' policy preferences. Specifically, it examined the preference for individual-level vs. structural-level policies in the SOGI context. As mentioned, individual-level policies reflect internalist or downplaying views of social categories by focusing on altering perceptions and behaviours, such as awareness campaigns and anti-bias training. In contrast, structural policies reflect structural views of social categories by targeting external, stable factors that sustain group-based inequality, such as institutional practices in schools, healthcare systems, and labour markets (Chater & Loewenstein, 2023).

In the following sections, I summarise the findings drawing on this rationale across the three empirical chapters. I do so by integrating person-centred and variable-centred results in light of their theoretical implications. Next, I discuss their practical implications, followed by the limitations of our approach and future research directions.

Summary of Results and Theoretical Implications

Chapters 2[2] and 3 identified three profiles of white and cisheterosexual people in the Netherlands based on their construals of difference and inequality: ***defenders*** (high difference evasion alongside high inequality evasion), ***evaders*** (mid-to-high difference evasion alongside low-to-mid inequality evasion), and ***acknowledgers*** (low-to-mid levels of both). Chapter 4 demonstrated that evading difference and inequality jointly shaped policy preferences. Also, it showed that employing SOGI categories shaped policy preferences depending on situational (inequality framings) and dispositional factors (advantaged identity strategies).

I elaborate on each profile in separate subsections, first addressing (SQ1) how advantaged group members construed difference and inequality, then (SQ2) how they managed their standing, and finally (SQ3) how they legitimised or questioned inequality. I begin with defenders and evaders, followed by variable-centred findings on mid-to-high difference evasion as inequality evasion varied—the key feature these profiles share. Next, I elaborate on acknowledgers, followed by variable-centred results on low-to-mid difference evasion—their defining characteristic.

Defenders: When Evading Difference Aligns with Evading Inequality

As expected, categorically distinct subgroups of participants exhibited a defender profile. Defenders exhibited high difference evasion (e.g., 'People preoccupied with ethnicity/sexual orientation and gender identity forget that we are all just people') alongside high inequality evasion (e.g., 'Dutch society is fair toward Black and Muslim people/ Compared to cisgender and heterosexual people, LGBTQ people have equal opportunities'). Defenders correspond to the prideful-distancing and distancing identity profiles in Chapter 2.

2 For parsimony and in line with their quantitative properties, the General Discussion translates the identity-based profiles from Chapter 2 into attitudinally based profiles, as outlined in the General Introduction and Chapter 3: the prideful-distancing and distancing profiles into defenders, the distancing-cognisant profile into evaders, and the power-cognisant profile into acknowledgers.

Reflecting the equalising background that serves as context of the widening of inequalities, defenders articulated principled standpoints to downplay the role of social categories in shaping people's lives. For instance, evading difference among defenders was reflected in statements such as:

I'm really a person who likes to look at individuals. I think it's really wrong to say this whole group is this, this whole group is that. I think it's really wrong and always ends in tragedy. I think really individualised, I think which used to be I guess a core value, right, of the Western society. I really hate the group thinking. (Chapter 2, Irine)

Infusing their views on inequality, evading difference in this way was reflected in obscuring inequality—as defenders hardly ever made reference to it. Instead, they dismissed claims about inequality as biased, casting doubt on their factual basis. Evading inequality among defenders was reflected in statements such as:

You might not count in the gay world if you don't feel discriminated against. […] Kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Chapter 3, Floortje)

Dominance-Affirming Distancing Identity Strategy

While person-centred research has traditionally focused on attitudes or ideologies (Rivera Pichardo et al., 2023; Sibley & Liu, 2013), we sought to expand this literature by grounding participants' construals of social categories in their social identity foundations. A common assumption in social-psychological research is that advantaged group members prone to endorse hierarchy-enhancing motives tend to exacerbate both the symbolic (i.e., differentiation) and material (i.e., inequality) dimensions of their advantage (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Consequently, strengthened categorisation and heightened identification with an advantaged identity have often been equated with increasing inequality (Adorno et al., 1950). Introducing nuance to the notion that

dominance-affirming stances equate categorising themselves and others, defenders asserted their advantage by reinforcing its unmarked nature instead. In other words, they upheld their advantage by conflating it with normality.

Defenders conflated their advantage with normality in two ways. On the one hand, some blended strong pridefulness (e.g., "I see myself as a proud Dutch person of our ethnic heritage") or defence (e.g., "I think we as normal people have the right to defend our lifestyle") while strongly distancing themselves from their advantaged group (e.g., "I feel that my ethnic group does not have a significant impact on how I see the world/I see myself as an individual with a neutral view on things rather than a so-called cisheterosexual person"). On the other hand, most endorsed the distancing identity strategy alone. Either way, this dominance-affirming stance entailed strong distancing, as reflected in statements such as:

I don't like what this is called, like a heterosexual man. If you ask me, "What are you? What species are you?" Oh I'm a human. […] In my opinion, the question should be the other way around, because that's more normal. I think 98% of men are straight. It should be like: How do you know one of the men is not normal? (Chapter 3, Emanuel)

Ideological Legitimation of Inequality

Aligning with the notion that equalising outlooks can serve a hierarchy-enhancing function, defenders exhibited the strongest meritocratic beliefs (McCoy & Major, 2007) (e.g., "Anyone willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding") and some held the strongest belief in inherent deservingness to rule over others as well (Ho et al., 2015) (e.g., "Some groups must be at the top and others at the bottom"). Introducing nuance to the notion that hierarchy-enhancing tendencies in advantaged groups are exclusive to those highly identified, both those with the strongest (i.e., prideful-distancing) and the weakest identification (e.g., distancing) exhibited the highest levels of inequality legitimation.

Defenders exhibited the strongest hierarchy-enhancing tendencies across intergroup contexts. Crucially, they did so while dispensing with categorising tropes both at the intergroup level—by evading difference—and at the ingroup level—by distancing themselves from their advantaged social identity. Social-psychological science has long been shaped by equating discrimination and prejudice with categorisation (Billig, 1985; Oakes, 2001; Park & Judd, 2005). Historically linked to fascism in the first half of the 20th century (Adorno et al., 1950), such portrayals, in turn, equate tolerance and the absence of prejudice with deflecting categorisation. By reinforcing the notion that social categories channel discrimination and may exacerbate inequality, this approach has drawn criticism for enabling those who endorse it to downplay the ways inequality is perpetuated by reflecting equalising outlooks (Hopkins et al., 1997). Distinguishing an anti-egalitarian profile of advantaged group members relying on deflecting categorisation, these results challenge an abstract account of social cognition that equates prejudice with categorisation by uncovering anti-egalitarianism in liberal, increasingly unequal societies.

Evaders: When Evading Difference Aligns with Acknowledging Inequality

As expected, categorically distinct subgroups exhibited an evader profile. Evaders exhibited mid-to-high levels of difference evasion alongside low-to-mid levels of inequality evasion—corresponding to the distancing-cognisant profile in Chapter 2. Evaders therefore quantitatively evaded difference—similarly to defenders. Unlike defenders, evaders acknowledged inequality to varying degrees.

While defenders evaded difference by appealing to principled standpoints, evaders instead bracketed difference by normalising minoritised people with statements such as:

It's okay. I don't see the differences. […] There were no social different groups. So you're just normal people? Just like me. (Chapter 3, Adam)

While defenders dismissed inequality altogether, evaders framed their views as objective and neutral when addressing inequality. In line with the notion that difference evasion manifests at the ingroup level in distancing from advantaged identity (Knowles et al., 2014; Shuman et al., 2024), evading difference prompted them to also demand others detach their views on inequality from their group's position. This was reflected in statements such as:

Of course, it's important to black people [to claim historical linking of colonialism to the present]*, they still find difficulties in having the same opportunities and same chances. […] But objectively, it's much more complicated.* (Chapter 2, Klaas)

Distancing-Cognisant Identity Strategy

Introducing nuance to the notion that distancing from an advantaged status is at odds with recognising its privileges (Knowles et al., 2014), evaders blended distancing with power-cognisance (e.g., "I see myself as a white Dutch person with associated privileges because of my ethnic group membership/Cisheterosexual people in the Netherlands have certain advantages because of their sexual orientation and gender identity"). Unlike defenders, evaders recognised certain aspects of inequality while distancing themselves from their advantaged status. This distancing-cognisant identity blending mirrors the Distancing from Identity facet identified by Shuman et al. (2024) among those who acknowledged white privilege but denied personal benefit (e.g., "It bothers me when other people highlight one's racial identity").

Unlike defenders who conflated their standing with normality, evaders invoked a form of inconspicuousness that they described as more fundamental than being white or cisheterosexual. Evaders thus often employed the word *blank* or default when elaborating on their advantaged group memberships:

Interviewer: *Would you recognise yourself as part of white people?*
Interviewee: *Yeah but even the white people is not one group.*
Interviewer: *How would you say white in Dutch?*
Interviewee: *Blank.*
Interviewer: *And ethnically how would you label that?*
Interviewee: *Normal Dutch? Normal Dutch. […] Very average.* (Chapter 2, Klaas)
No, I don't think I present myself as a heterosexual. […] Just being default. (Chapter 3, Adam)

Ideological Legitimation of Inequality

Unlike defenders, who dismissed claims of inequality by casting doubt on their factual basis, evaders did not dismiss inequality. However, evaders often neutralised the potential for pro-egalitarian change by invoking backlash. In doing so, they exhibited relatively moderate levels of ideological legitimation. In line with the notion that equalising outlooks can also serve a system-maintenance function (Täuber & Moughalian, 2022), evaders invoked backlash by equating the positions of advantaged and minoritised groups when discussing inequality. For instance, this was reflected in white evaders opposing claims to decolonise the Dutch urban landscape or cisheterosexual evaders downplaying collective action:

For instance, this was reflected in white evaders opposing claims to decolonise the Dutch urban landscape or cisheterosexual evaders downplaying collective action:

If we start to politicise certain aspects of the public sphere, everything becomes politicised, in the sense that, ahm, why wouldn't White identity groups emerge, who do want to name, ahm, streets after Hitler, because they, they can also make a claim. (Chapter 2, Daan)

I don't know if you can change minds with protests. Because all the actions, it's always action and reaction. (Chapter 3, Wilma)

Neutralisation, rather than outright dismissal, characterised the ideological stance of evaders on inequalities.

The Malleability of Difference Evasion as Inequality Evasion Varies

Defenders and evaders illustrate how evading difference qualitatively shifts as inequality either fades from sight or is reframed as an individual matter, respectively. At the intergroup level, defenders evaded difference on principled standpoints, aligning with the tendency to dismiss inequality altogether. Evaders, in contrast, bracketed minoritised people's identities, aligning with a framing of inequality as an individual matter.

At the ingroup identity level, defenders conflated their standing with a distinctive normality that conferred entitlement, whereas evaders rendered their standing inconspicuous. While defenders exhibited hierarchy-enhancing tendencies, evaders engaged in system-maintenance reasoning by invoking backlash in response to challenges to inequality.

These findings thus illustrate how difference evasion can overcome blatant categorisation in ways that reinforce hierarchy-enhancing motives, as seen in defenders' conflation of advantage with normality. At the same time, these results point to how difference evasion can align with system-justifying motives by making advantage inconspicuous while acknowledging individual inequality, as seen in evaders.

Our variable-centred findings mirror this pattern. In Chapters 2 and 3, supplementary analyses indicate that inequality evasion consistently predicted meritocratic beliefs, whereas difference evasion was strongly associated with meritocratic beliefs only when inequality evasion was low. In other words, when inequality was acknowledged, evading difference took on the role of inequality evasion in underpinning meritocratic beliefs—paralleling the pattern observed among evaders (see Chapters 2 and 3 supplementary materials). Moreover, in Chapter 4, evading inequality predicted preference for individual-level policy at

the expense of structural ones. In addition, this effect grew as difference evasion increased—echoing defenders intergroup outlook by evading both difference and inequality.

Together, these variable-centred findings support the idea that assessing social categories as 'not meaningful' (difference evasion) and viewing inequality as 'non-existent' (inequality evasion) shape how individuals navigate intergroup relations. As these stances reflect how advantaged group members manage their own social identity—such as mitigating the threat of being perceived as privileged—they serve a functional role in intergroup relations. Extending on pioneering work that drew the foundations of colour and power evasion by Frankenberg (1993), conceptualising construals of intergroup difference and inequality through the lens of *evasion* finds further support in these findings.

Acknowledgers: When Acknowledging Difference Reinforces Acknowledging Inequality

As expected, categorically distinct subgroups among advantaged groups exhibited an acknowledger profile. Acknowledgers endorsed low-to-mid levels of difference evasion alongside low-to-mid levels of inequality evasion—corresponding to the power-cognisant profile in Chapter 2. Unlike defenders and evaders, acknowledgers quantitatively acknowledged both difference and inequality.

While evaders bracketed minoritised people's identities, acknowledgers recognised the role of social categories in shaping people's lives. For instance, they did so when elaborating on sharing reality with non-white people, in statements such as:

It's very interesting to have like a miscommunication, but not in a bad way but more in a way like, wow, I meant it like this, but it's picked up in a different way and then, like, what's going on? And then you got explained it like, oh, I never even thought I could look at it this way. (Chapter 2, Amber)

In line with expectations, acknowledging difference was related to structural understandings of inequality. For instance, they did so by linking colonialism to the present or elaborating on social norms in statements such as:

I feel that this whole racist history is never really stopped. […] The idea that colonialism was acceptable back then, is still kind of what shapes thinking for a lot of people these days. (Chapter 2, Aart)

The whole society is still largely set up for heterosexuality so as soon as you fall outside of that norm […] [In conservative settings] *as a homosexual man then you have an even bigger problem.* (Chapter 3, Thea)

Power-Cognisant Identity Strategy

As theorised, acknowledging difference reflected in recognising themselves bounded to their advantaged group memberships. White acknowledgers, on the one hand, did so by explicitly referencing their skin colour to self-categorise. Using the Dutch word *wit*—white in English—they pinpointed the structural advantages of their ethnic-racial group and, in turn, contested the use of *blank*. Cisheterosexual acknowledgers, on the other hand, employed social categories to describe their passage from unawareness to comprehension. For instance, they did so in statements such as:

Blank *I would translate it to like nude, so like neutral, without colour. For me, it's like a colourblind term. So it's a way to not claim whiteness, like have it* [to] *be the normal, unnamed, natural state.* (Chapter 2, Carlijn)

When I was starting to get more aware of the diversity and automatically following being more able to identify myself. (Chapter 3, Claire)

As mentioned, strengthened categorisation and heightened identification with an advantaged identity have often been equated with increasing inequality in social psychology (Billig, 1985; Oakes, 2001; Park & Judd,

2005). Distinguishing defenders and evaders challenged that notion, highlighting the hierarchy-enhancing and system-maintenance roles of evading difference. Moreover, acknowledgers further challenge it by illustrating how self-categorising in terms of the ingroup can align with pro-egalitarian orientations among advantaged individuals.

By integrating self-categorisation processes (Oakes, 2001) into the study of how advantaged group members manage their social identity (Knowles et al., 2014), these results thus support the potential of social categories to foster structural thinking among the privileged (Vasilyeva & Ayala-López, 2019). As such, these findings complement research on critical consciousness, which has predominantly focused on minoritised groups, by offering a framework to address advantaged people (Freire, 2018; Rapa & Godfrey, 2023; Seider et al., 2020). The current framework also refines prior work that has equated attitudes toward intergroup inequality (e.g., denial, defence, or dismantling of inequality) with advantaged identity strategies (e.g., pridefulness, defence, power-cognisance) (Shuman et al., 2024) by disentangling intergroup construals (e.g., difference evasion, inequality evasion) from self-construals (i.e., advantaged identity strategies).

Ideological Questioning of Inequality

Unlike defenders and evaders, acknowledgers exhibited a markedly pro-egalitarian outlook while finding meaning in their advantaged membership. In turn, acknowledgers rejected beliefs in inherent deservingness to rule over others as well as meritocratic beliefs—exhibiting the lowest and weakest levels across intergroup settings.

White acknowledgers, on the one hand, favoured structural views of racial inequality by endorsing the strongest linkage of colonialism to the present. Cisheterosexual acknowledgers, on the other hand, rejected the notion that LGBTQ identity claims undermine inclusion by showing the lowest levels of modern anti-LGBTQ prejudice (Morrison & Morrison, 2011). Such pro-egalitarian outlooks were reflected when elaborating on

accountability and fostering equality through statements such as:

We have this beautiful centre of the city because really rich people back in the day, built their houses with money, partially from the colonies. And we wouldn't have this beautiful city centre, if not for the extortion of other ethnicities. […] I mean you do need to take accountability for that. (Chapter 2, Lucas)

I can never fail, even if it's just a millimeter to gain space in again daring to think wider and open up to the new […] I can't do otherwise, because I feel otherwise. (Chapter 3, Thea)

Acknowledging Difference in Shaping Structural Views of Inequality

Extending previous critiques within the discipline that contest equating prejudice with categorisation (Billig, 1985; Oakes, 2001; Park & Judd, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), acknowledgers' ideological correlates support the idea that acknowledging difference particularises people's experiences through categorisation—citing external, relatively stable factors that shape category members' characteristics (Vasilyeva & Lombrozo, 2020). While particularisation is typically seen as opposing categorisation by distinguishing individuals from categories (Billig, 1985), the notion that acknowledging difference reflects structural views of inequalities highlights categorisation as a means of particularising people's material, lived experiences.

At the same time, the findings from Chapter 4 caution against assuming that employing social categories inherently signals a pro-egalitarian acknowledgment of difference. In Study 1, individuals who employed SOGI categories and distanced from their cisgender status—under higher inequality—favoured individual-level policies over structural ones. Similarly, in Study 2, those who strongly evaded difference yet employed SOGI categories to describe the queer character—under higher inequality—also preferred individual-level policies. Rather than

inherently reflecting a pro-egalitarian acknowledgment, employing social categories under these conditions predicted opposition to structural change.

Social categories can thus also be mobilised in ways that deter structural change in liberal contexts. Arguably, those who attitudinally downplay the role of SOGI in shaping people's lives while employing SOGI categories may convey virtue-signalling—exhibiting cognisance while detaching from its implications. This virtue-signalling may facilitate moral credentialing (Mullen & Monin, 2016), reducing the perceived need for structural change and favouring individual-level policies instead.

Practical Implications

Anti-discrimination policies in countries with equalising laws often penalise the use of group categories to make decisions over individuals (e.g., by forbidding sexual orientation or ethnic-racial background to be registered) (European Commission, 2017, 2023; Guyan, 2022; Simon, 2017). Consequently, whether a law-binding decision favours or harms a disadvantaged group can be disregarded under the pretense of neutrality that the anti-discrimination principle enshrined (Spade, 2015). Formal equality approaches to minoritised groups, which centre on individuals, might thus legitimise structural inequalities by psychologically reflecting in people's social categorisation processes (Chow & Knowles, 2016; Knowles et al., 2009). Indeed, our results indicate that when members of advantaged groups evaded difference, they were prone to circumventing their own structural advantage and, in turn, to evade inequality.

Despite the universalist appeal of evading difference to prevent people from using categories to oppress, our results align with burgeoning research on ethnic-racial and SOGI contexts (Awad & Jackson, 2016; Brownfield et al., 2018; Cvetkovska et al., 2024). This work shows how antiegalitarians can strategically evade difference to endorse the humanistic principle of equal treatment. In doing so, they morally-license themselves to oppose policies aimed at achieving substantive intergroup equality (Chow & Knowles, 2016; Cipollina & Sanchez, 2025). By establishing formal equality as an end point, our results thus support the notion that a liberal framework in ethnic-racial and SOGI settings may, at best, consecrate tolerance as an attitudinal norm. At worst, it may reinforce indifference. Either way, this framework prevents societies from advancing toward substantive intergroup equality.

These findings thus concur with burgeoning calls on governments to shift their approach to minoritised groups (European Commission, 2017, 2023; Guyan, 2022; Simon, 2017). For instance, states could meaningfully improve minoritised people's living conditions by implementing participatory-binding programmes in collaboration with minoritised communities. These programmes could include voluntary registration of ethnic-racial background, sexual orientation, and gender identity, enabling the tracking of outcomes across various domains. This, in turn, would inform tailored policies that more effectively address minoritised people's needs and boost their resources. By being implemented, monitored, and guided by lay experts and researchers from minoritised groups, these registration practices would help ensure that benefits outweigh potential harms (Guyan, 2022).

In Chapter 4, increasing knowledge about inequality emerged as a crucial factor in sparking preference for comprehensive, structural-level policies. Indeed, acknowledging inequality consistently predicted preference for structural policy, uniquely and independently of political orientation. Fostering an appreciation of difference appeared equally important—as low difference evasion mitigated the link between low assessment of inequality and a preference for individual-level policies. Our results thus highlight the value of an identity-cognisant approach among advantaged group members in fostering structural thinking.

Identifying profiles of defenders and evaders helps address two key foundations of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice refers to the

unequal distribution of epistemic resources, preventing minoritised people from making sense of and asserting sovereignty over their place in the world. Epistemic injustice unfolds through the misrecognition of minoritised groups' knowledge and authority to articulate their experiences—echoing defenders—and/or by maintaining the structural conditions that deprive them of the means to do so—echoing evaders (Vasilyeva & Ayala-López, 2019). By citing external, relatively stable constraints that shape both advantaged and disadvantaged groups' positions, structural thinking challenges both misrecognition and inaction. As such, our findings are ripe to inform person-centred, targeted research-interventions tailored to defenders, evaders, and acknowledgers.

For defenders, interventions would first focus on examining their own experiences of disadvantage and equipping them with the knowledge to make sense of these experiences. The ability to recognise emotions in oneself is critical for recognising emotions in others (Israelashvili et al., 2019). Indeed, research has shown that working-class white men who attributed poverty to individual failings lacked structural explanations to draw from when reflecting on their own experiences of class-based dispossession (Hershberg & Johnson, 2019). Defenders appeal for normality as a source of entitlement—if not pride—arguably stems from having adapted by silencing grievances they lacked the means to articulate. Fostering structural thinking among defenders may thus require dismantling such an internalised demand to adapt—for instance, by sparking "creative maladjustment" (Allen & Leach, 2018). In the worst-case scenario, they may become less defensive and less reactionary. In a more optimistic note, they could develop key coalition-building skills by enhancing their empathetic repertoire—critical for fostering solidarity across lines of difference. Indeed, research suggests that individuals who simultaneously hold advantaged (e.g., white) and disadvantaged (e.g., working-class) identities may be particularly well-positioned to develop strong perspective-taking skills, ripe for politisation (Curtin et al., 2016). By providing intersectional lenses

to advantaged groups' own experiences, some defenders may become better positioned to dispense with equalising outlooks as they develop structural views of their own experiences of dispossession and privilege.

For evaders, interventions may harness that they can already pinpoint inequality at the individual, non-structural level. In light of our results, evaders would benefit from developing structural views on inequalities while safeguarding self-esteem to prevent them from evading difference. Self-affirming interventions (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) would imply elaborating on features they value about themselves while linking these with attitudes and behaviours akin to counter structural inequality. For instance, interventions could integrate value-relevant activities for evaders (e.g., fairness). In turn, they could be asked to reflect on how they would enact these in scenarios where structural factors limit access to housing or education to a minoritised person. To encourage perspective-taking, social role reflection could be used by prompting evaders consider how their social roles (e.g., as employees, parents, or voters), rather than themselves, shape their opportunities compared to minoritised groups playing out these same roles. To encourage behaviour, evaders could be prompted to take a concrete action aligned with their values while centring individuals, such as mentoring a student from a minoritised background. These activities would be framed as expressions of their personal commitment to values such as fairness or responsibility, offering opportunities to develop structural views in the mid- and long-term.

Interventions targeting both defenders and evaders would greatly benefit from prioritising simplicity while clearly conveying structural factors shaping inequality. One effective way to achieve this is by using generic language to frame structural accounts of inequality—instead of referring to all-encompassing concepts (i.e., capitalism). Generics refer to statements that attribute a property (e.g., earning less) to a social category (e.g., Black or trans people) without specifying individuals or quantifying the claim. Indeed, such statements (e.g., Black/trans people

earn less) can be interpreted either as an inherent feature of the group (i.e., internalist view) or as a consequence of structural constraints (i.e., structural view) (Vasilyeva & Lombrozo, 2020). As noted in the introduction, research shows that framing inequality through a structural view uniquely increased the likelihood that both children and adults rectified inequality and endorsed compensatory measures more often than perpetuating it (Vasil et al., 2024). A difference-cognisant approach in these interventions would, therefore, lean on generics in their structural form—for instance, stating: "Black/trans people earn less because of bias in hiring, pay gaps, and educational discrimination."

Generic language provides concrete, relatable examples while enabling room for further understanding. Simplicity is also key to preventing reactance, which may arise from claims that inequality is "too complex" to address. While structural approaches necessarily account for an entangled context, rhetoric invoking complexity is also often weaponised to deter structural change—obscuring straightforward causes of inequality as well as actionable solutions. For example, a politician might argue against wage transparency based on ethnic-racial membership across sectors by claiming that "pay disparities arise from a complex mix of personal ambition, cultural values, education levels, and industry-specific factors." Instead of addressing clear structural factors, complexity rhetoric frames inequality as too intricate to intervene in, effectively shifting responsibility away from institutions and onto individuals (see Petticrew et al., 2017; Savona et al., 2021). Moreover, the same politician may further argue that exposing wage disparities will most likely fuel internalist justifications of those, encouraging difference evasion in turn. Thus, developing and employing generics in their structural form (e.g., Black/trans people earn less because of bias in hiring, pay gaps, and educational discrimination) is not just an effective communication tool—it is a strategic necessity. It cuts through obfuscation, resists attempts to blur responsibility and forces structural factors to remain visible. Rather than allowing complexity rhetoric to diffuse accountability, structural generics anchor discussions in clear, generalisable mechanisms of inequality encompassing members of whole categories, ensuring that structural problems demand structural solutions.

Finally, for acknowledgers, providing concrete strategies to counter structural inequality would benefit them. A key focus would be on recognising and challenging tokenism, where symbolic gestures (e.g., hiring a single disadvantaged employee) replace structural policies (e.g., establishing a Diversity and Equity office to track inequalities and implement reforms). Without this tool of recognising and challenging tokenism, acknowledgers risk performative allyship—actions that signal virtue without addressing inequality, providing moral licensing for their social networks and further deflecting from structural change (Effron & Conway, 2015). Effective allyship thus requires shifting from reactive to proactive engagement. While reactive allyship responds to discrimination as it arises, proactive allyship works preemptively to change policies, redistribute resources, and foster inclusive environments (De Souza & Schmader, 2025).

Fostering self-reflection on motivation is key—advantaged group members may engage in allyship to protect their status rather than to support minoritised groups (Radke et al., 2020). Since civil courage is essential, acknowledgers must also build trust with minoritised communities and integrate into their networks to navigate resistance from their own advantaged peers (Williams et al., 2023). Interventions would thus benefit from equipping them with strategies to navigate backlash and feelings of alienation. Accordingly, equipping minoritised group members to include advantaged allies appears equally important. By highlighting the relevance of coalitions-building, effective allyship appears as more than participation—it requires structural engagement and community-based resilience. By reframing allyship as a long-term, systemic commitment grounded in meaningful relationships with minoritised groups, acknowledgers can move beyond tokenism and enact lasting, embodied pro-egalitarian change.

Limitations and Future Directions

In this thesis, I aimed to examine the ethnic-racial and the SOGI intergroup settings. However, difference evasion and inequality evasion arguably also vary as the history of intergroup relations shape distinct forms of advantage. For instance, beliefs about the extent to which ethnic-racial and SOGI categories are concealable may differ between white and cisheterosexual people, respectively (Le Forestier et al., 2023). Having anti-racist movements shed light on inequalities by underscoring colour (e.g., Black power), white people have been confronted with unconcealable racial markers of inequalities. Thus, white people who acknowledge difference (i.e., by rejecting racial colourblind tropes) are more likely prevented from evading inequalities in comparison to cisheterosexual people. By alleging SOGI concealability, in contrast, cisheterosexual people who acknowledge difference might still claim that LGBTQ people can choose whether they face discrimination by concealing their identity. Consequently, even those cisheterosexual individuals who acknowledge difference might still evade inequalities to some extent. Indeed, the latent profile approach applied in this dissertation captured such heterogeneity between the white and cisheterosexual acknowledgers' profiles. Future work could further interrogate the narrative of identity concealability in shaping advantaged people's construals of difference and inequality.

Building on prior manipulations of socioeconomic inequality (Peters et al., 2022), Chapter 4 experimentally tested key insights by developing an original manipulation of SOGI inequality. While the SOGI inequality manipulation relied on 'factual' information, it presented an uncommon experience rather than the everyday events that typically shape attitudes and behaviours. In this light, the current SOGI inequality manipulation could also be seen as an intervention aimed at countering difference and inequality evasion rather than assessing its occurrence. A promising avenue for future research is thus to experimentally manipulate whether participants witness inequality occurring, as seen in studies on witnessing prejudice (e.g., Szekeres et al., 2023). Examining how

difference evasion unfolds in naturalistic, ecologically valid settings would offer valuable insights.

As mentioned, Chapter 4's measure of policy preference, which contrasted structural- and individual-level policies, may have made the middle point of the scale susceptible to ambiguous interpretation. Future research could make a valuable contribution to the field by refining this measure and disaggregate the bipolar structural–individual policy contrast into separate unipolar measures. Developing robust, standardised scales of structural-level policy preferences across identity axes would meet the call for countering the discipline's prevailing theoretical and methodological individualistic approach (Chater & Loewenstein, 2023).

The non-representativeness of our samples limits generalisability. Online surveys also tend to underrepresent individuals with lower digital literacy, education, or survey engagement (Andrade, 2020). Consequently, our findings may reflect associations primarily among medium-to-highly educated, urban populations. Future research would thus benefit from employing nationally representative samples that track socioeconomic status, education, and city of residence. Longitudinal work also warrants further inquiry by offering the possibility to track attitudinal change as it unfolds. As social change occurs, research could assess causality between legislation and pro-egalitarian attitudes (see, for instance, Aksoy et al., 2020; Eisner et al., 2021). By measuring difference evasion alongside other established scales, this research could distinguish substantive pro-egalitarian attitudinal profiles (e.g., low difference evasion) from those that merely reflect equalising outlooks (e.g., high difference evasion). In doing so, longitudinal work could offer key insights into the mechanisms by which these profiles emerge and their nomological network, thereby informing timely person-centred interventions.

As previously suggested, developing person-centred interventions tailored to defenders, evaders, and acknowledgers invites further intervention-oriented research. For defenders, identifying their own disadvantaged social identities is crucial for designing strategies that help them make sense of group-based experiences of dispossession and build up the foundations for empathy. For evaders, research is key in assessing how self-affirmation strategies can expand valued personal features to encompass attitudes and behaviours akin to countering structural inequalities. For acknowledgers, studies could explore how to cultivate civil courage, such as through exposure to historical and contemporary examples of structural allyship (e.g., white abolitionists and current white anti-racist activists) or by practicing strategies to navigate backlash (e.g., seeking social support from both like-minded advantaged and minoritised people). Moreover, future research could examine how to address concerns about co-optation among minoritised communities, helping them to assess trustful allyship and ensuring that allyship efforts find fertile ground. Finally, across all profiles, interventions focusing on disrupting complexity rhetoric that obscure structural inequalities and discourage corrective action are pivotal

Conclusion

After WWII, efforts to equalise individuals across groups have coincided with widening inequalities in Western and global South contexts. More than half a century since the Holocaust—rooted in the persecution of people based on their group memberships—the aspirations of diminishing the prominence of divisive, group-based memberships conflated social categories with inequality. Addressing the intersection between equalising outlooks and widening inequalities, I examined how members of advantaged groups manage their structural standing through distinct uses of social categories and, in turn, legitimise or question inequality. Focusing on the ethnic-racial and SOGI contexts of the Netherlands—two settings where equalising efforts have taken deep root—I utilised qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, and survey experiments to address this question.

The findings confirm that difference and inequality represent two distinct, interrelated constructs in how advantaged group members navigate intergroup relations and their own social identity. Key person-centred distinctions emerged between those who endorsed high versus low levels of difference evasion while exhibiting similar levels of inequality evasion. On the one hand, advantaged group members who evaded difference were more likely to distance themselves from their advantaged status and, in turn, evade inequality. As such, evading difference was associated either with opposing attempts to counter inequality or with indifference (Chapters 2 and 3). In combination with inequality evasion, difference evasion increased support for individual-level policies to address inequality at the expense of structural change (Chapter 4).

On the other hand, those who acknowledged difference were inclined to recognise their structural advantage. Acknowledging difference was in turn linked to recognising historical and ongoing inequalities (Chapters 2 and 3), supporting efforts to counter inequality (Chapter 3), and rejecting hierarchy-enhancing (e.g., belief in inherent deservingness to rule over others) as well as system-justifying stances (e.g., meritocratic beliefs) (Chapters 2 and 3). In addressing the liberal inheritances in both politics and social psychology, I conclude that fostering knowledge about inequality and difference can promote structural thinking that embraces substantive equality because of difference, rather than despite it.