What we want and what we see: Preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy

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CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

6. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has set out to contribute to our understanding of how people think about inequality and meritocracy and how these preferences, perceptions and judgments relate to other attitudes about society, such as generalized trust and corruption perceptions. For the purposes of this dissertation, meritocracy was understood as the general ideal that people should be rewarded on the basis of their merits rather than on the basis of less noble or irrelevant characteristics. The first part of the dissertation consisted of an in-depth study that sought to consider and identify such merits, and that analyzed (non-) meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments on the basis of newly gathered Dutch survey. The second part of the dissertation presented two cross-national studies: one on the relationship between actual inequality and corruption perceptions and one on the relationship between perceived inequality and general trust. This concluding chapter discusses how this dissertation has contributed to our understanding of preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy and their relation to other attitudes about society. It concludes by giving some general and specific recommendations for further research on this important issue.
6.1 MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

6.1.1 A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ATTITUDES ABOUT INEQUALITY THAT REFLECTS THEIR COMPARATIVE ESSENCE

A major set of contributions that this study has hopefully made involve the very conception of how people think about inequality. Chapters two and three engaged with the literature on such attitudes about inequality. While this field has provided relevant insights into how people think about inequality, some relevant research questions have remained difficult to tackle. For example, this dissertation has argued that existing research has been unable to accurately assess how people think about the meritocratic functioning of their society. Do they want their society to be more or less meritocratic? And on what grounds do they base this attitude? To enable better analyses of these sort of questions and to thus improve our understanding of how people think about the distribution of inequalities in their society, a new conceptualization of attitudes about inequality was developed. It was argued that in essence attitudes about inequality consist of a comparison between how people would like the distribution of inequalities to occur and how they presently perceive it to occur. An important strength of the new conceptualization is that it reflects exactly the aforementioned comparison that occurs when people give their opinion about the distribution of inequalities in their society. As such, the conceptualization allows for a more in-depth study of (the respective elements of) the comparison that people make when they give their opinion.

The new conceptualization of attitudes about inequality is based on the conviction that it is important to assess two aspects of individual attitudes about inequality. The first aspect is to what extent people are content with the current distribution of inequalities in their society. The second aspect is on what moral grounds people base their content with the distribution of inequalities in their society. In order to capture this second aspect, it was argued that an accurate conceptualization of attitudes about the distribution of inequalities need to consider both what people find a fair way of distributing inequalities and on what grounds people perceive inequalities are actually distributed. Therefore, the new conceptualization of attitudes about inequality considers these attitudes fundamentally as the comparison between preferences for (non-) meritocratic rewards and perceptions of (non-) meritocratic rewards was formulated.

This dissertation has treated what people see as characteristics that should be rewarded, and what people perceive as characteristics that are actually rewarded as decisively empirical questions. The selection of meritocratic and non-meritocratic characteristics that was presented to respondents in the survey instrument that was developed on the basis of the new conceptualization was informed by the sociological literature on the actual meritocratic functioning of society. The new conceptualization provides a substantial improvement over existing approaches to measuring attitudes
about inequality that only examined either (non-) meritocratic preferences or (non-) meritocratic perceptions, because analyses of these data are unable to examine how people evaluate the meritocratic functioning of society. In the same way that the perception that (non-) meritocratic characteristics are rewarded does not necessarily indicate a preference for the reward of these characteristics, neither does a preference for the rewards for (non-) meritocratic characteristics necessarily indicate that these rewards are also perceived. Only the comparison of (non-) meritocratic preferences and perceptions tells the entire story on how people think about the meritocratic functioning of their society.

6.1.2 Empirical Findings Based on the New Conceptualization

A second set of contributions that this study has hopefully made involve thinking through and actually measuring empirically some of the political and economic consequences of the improved conceptualization of inequality attitudes. Analyses on newly gathered survey data from the Netherlands in chapters two and three illustrated the rich insights that simultaneous measurement of (non-) meritocratic preferences and perceptions provide. In this survey, respondents were asked about their preferred and perceived importance of a list of characteristics in determining how economically successful people become. While some caution needs to be taken in generalizing these survey data to the Dutch population, our results indicate that in general, people in the Netherlands are relatively content with the meritocratic functioning of their society. On average, large support for rewarding meritocratic characteristics (Ambition, Hard Work, High Education, Intelligence and Social Skills) was found alongside with low average support among respondents for the reward of non-meritocratic characteristics (Chance, Ethnicity, Gender, Greed and Lying). On average respondents also perceived that meritocratic characteristics are actually rewarded more than non-meritocratic characteristics. The most discontent was found with regards to non-meritocratic characteristics, on average respondents would like these characteristics to be substantially less important than they perceive them to actually be. With regard to meritocratic characteristics, the results were more nuanced, but on average these characteristics were seen to be actually rewarded somewhat too much.

An important contribution to the existing literature was made with regards to the question if people from different socio-economic backgrounds tend to think differently about the meritocratic functioning of their society. Specifically, it was studied if Dutch respondents of different incomes and people of different educational backgrounds displayed different (non-)meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments. The results from these analyses suggest that it is primarily education, rather than income, that is associated with different ways in which people think about meritocracy in the Netherlands. Substantially, we found that the meritocratic ideal is re-
flected more in the way in which people of higher education think about the distribution of inequalities, compared to how people of lower education think. Not only do people of higher education display higher preferences for rewarding meritocratic characteristics, but they also tend to have higher perceptions that these meritocratic characteristics are actually rewarded in their society. Furthermore, people of higher education are especially concerned with non-meritocratic rewards. They show a much lower preference for the rewards of non-meritocratic characteristics and a much higher perception that these characteristics are actually rewarded. This raises the interesting question if people of high education are also more supportive of meritocracy in other context, or if this finding is specific to the Dutch case.

Apart from the analyses on the possible origins of how people think about the distribution of inequalities in their society, we also examined how these thoughts related to other attitudes. Specifically, the relationship between meritocratic judgments and demand for redistribution was examined. It was argued that the commonly hypothesized relation between normative judgments about the origins of inequality and demand for redistribution of incomes by government would benefit from the more detailed conceptualization of meritocratic judgments as the comparison between meritocratic preferences and meritocratic judgments. The analyses indicate that judgments about meritocracy and demand for redistributed are indeed related: the more people think that general discontent with actual rewards for meritocratic characteristics and specifically wanting to reduce meritocratic rewards are associated with more demand for redistribution of incomes by government. In line with existing theoretical arguments, the analyses were explicitly focused on meritocratic judgments, as opposed to non-meritocratic judgments. Analyses of the relationship between non-meritocratic judgments and demand for redistribution could provide interesting additional insights.

6.1.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INEQUALITY AND (STRATIFICATION IN) CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS

A third set of this dissertation’s contributions involves clarifying and analyzing the way inequality relates to perceptions of clear departures from meritocracy – that is, the perceived existence of corruption in one’s society. In chapter four, it was argued that corruption perceptions are an important object of study, because they provide a clear example of a violation of the meritocratic ideal. When people perceive corruption in their society, they indicate that at least some aspect of their society does not function in accordance with the meritocratic ideal. Based on the literature on the relationship between actual inequality and actual corruption, it was hypothesized that increases in inequality would be accompanied by increases with in corruption perceptions. Repeated cross-sectional survey data allowed for an unprecedented longitudinal analysis of this hypothesis (albeit bases on a relatively short time-span), which seems to confirm this hypothesis. This
finding suggests that increases in inequality might very well influence the social legitimacy of said inequality: higher inequality is empirically associated with the perception that inequality is distributed on non-meritocratic grounds rises. Further analyses on survey-data over a longer time-period on this relationship are however very much needed.

An additional contribution to the existing literature was made by the study of how socio-economic stratification in corruption perceptions varies among countries with different levels of actual income inequality. Earlier research (You and Khagram, 2005; Melgar et al. 2010) suggested that people of higher socio-economic status were less likely to perceive corruption. The influence of contextual inequality on this association had however not been examined. Chapter four argued that having a particular socio-economic status in a very unequal country, might be very different from having the same socio-economic status in a very equal country and thus might result in different corruption perceptions. Results from different data-sources suggest that this indeed the case. In countries with higher income inequality, the gap in corruption perceptions between people of high and low socio-economic status was much smaller. It was argued that these results were likely driven by people of high-economic status. Because they are by definition worse off, people with low socio-economic status are likely to perceive corruption, even when inequality is relatively low. Only when the income differences become very substantial are people of higher socio-economic status likely to agree that these differences are not only based on merits, but also on the explicitly non-meritocratic factor of corruption.

6.1.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED INEQUALITY AND GENERALIZED TRUST

A final contribution offered by this dissertation concerns the ongoing debate about the relationship between inequality and generalized trust – again an issue that has tended to be conceptualized and studied in cross-national relief rather than in single-country analyses. In chapter five it was argued that many of the existing studies linking high levels of inequality to low trust implied, either implicitly or explicitly, that perceptions of inequality (rather than or accompanied by actual inequality) would be of influence on social trust. Based on the argument that when people perceive more inequality they might find it more difficult to identify themselves with others or find themselves competing for social status a hypothesis was formulated that predicted that perceived inequality is negatively associated with generalized trust, even when controlling for relevant material resources. Empirical analyses on survey-data with a perceived-inequality indicator from the literature (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006) do not confirm this hypothesis. Country-aggregated perceived inequality is found to be negatively associated with lower trust in some models, but this effect is not significant when controlling for national wealth. On the individual level, based on survey data from Germany, we find no statistical association between perceived
inequality and generalized trust. Three potential explanations for this null-finding were discussed. First, limitations of the design—particularly, the crude measurement of perceived inequality and the unavailability of cross-national simultaneous individual level measurement of both perceived inequality and generalized trust—might have influenced the results. Second, some research on the relation between material resources and generalized trust (e.g. Allesina and Ferrera, 2000, 2002; Letki, 2008) suggests that it is in fact the availability of resources, rather than perceptions of the inequality in the distribution of these resources, that affects generalized trust. Third and most controversially, the lack of a relationship between actual inequality and generalized trust in recent longitudinal research on the basis of repeated cross-national survey-data by Oliviera (2015) might indicate that the existing studies linking inequality to generalized trust have been particularly vulnerable to omitted variable bias.

6.2. CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

For every question about preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy that this dissertation has addressed, many new interesting questions have emerged. The remainder of this chapter discusses some of these questions and recommends some pathways future research on this important topic might take.

6.2.1 QUALITATIVE STUDIES INTO WHAT IS UNDERSTOOD AS MERITOCRATIC

Chapters two and three have set out to provide a broad outlook of how people in the Netherlands generally think about the meritocratic functioning of their society. The characteristics in the Dutch survey that respondents were asked about were selected on their face-validity: particularly items that are specifically seen as typically non-meritocratic or typically meritocratic were included. This was also reflected in the preferences and perceptions that Dutch respondents displayed about these characteristics: both averages perceptions and average perceptions were substantially different for non-meritocratic characteristics than they were for meritocratic characteristics.

While the design of this survey is well suited for examining the broad (non-) meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments that people have, it is less suited for examining why people prefer and perceive some characteristics to be important. In other words, the specific design of the survey allows for less insight into the more nuanced reflections that people might have about merits.

For example, chapter two found that on average, the preferred importance of respondents for rewarding education was substantively lower than the preferred importance of the other meritocratic characteristics. One pos-
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An alternative explanation for this finding might be that some people believe that the education system in the Netherlands is not completely meritocratic, but one can imagine many other explanations. To examine what factors people consider when they prefer, perceive and judge about societal rewards for specific characteristics, a more qualitative approach is necessary. Inspired by the work of Sennett (2003) and de Botton (2004) a qualitative literature on the (psycho-social) consequences of living under a perceived meritocracy (e.g. Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008; Kampen et al., 2013) has already made valuable contributions to our understanding of how people think about meritocracy. Further qualitative research on what characteristics people consider worthy of rewarding, what characteristics people do not like to see rewarded and how this relates to their beliefs about current rewards in their society would greatly benefit our understanding of this issue. In open interviews, focus-groups or cognitive testing the considerations that people have about meritocracy might be explored more thoroughly. This type of qualitative studies does not only help to validate the findings of this study, but also provides interesting additional nuanced insight into how people think about the distribution of inequalities. 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 the concept of meritocracy.

6.2.2 DIFFERENCES IN PREFERENCES, PERCEPTIONS AND JUDGMENTS ABOUT INEQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY WITHIN COUNTRIES

While chapter five found inconclusive results with regards to the relationship between perceived inequality and generalized trust, chapter three showed that judgments about meritocracy are related to demand for redistribution. One can well imagine that preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy are related to many other outlooks at life or societally relevant behavior, such as voting, protesting or political trust. This strengthens the need for improved scientific understanding of what factors might influence how people prefer, perceive and judge about inequality and meritocracy.

On various occasions, this dissertation has examined which individual-level factors are related to preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy. Chapter two showed that in the Netherlands primarily people of different levels of education, rather than people of different income levels display different (non-) meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments. Chapter four showed that particularly non-meritocratic perceptions of corruption can -in varying amounts in different countries- be very different for people of different socio-economic status.
Many questions about the individual level factors that influence (or are related to) preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy remain. For example, are these preferences, perceptions and judgments formed at an early stage in life, or are they influenced by factors throughout the life-course? Are some socio-economic factors more important than others? Is the relationship with socio-economic status the same for people of different cohorts? To what extent do factors like religion, ethnicity, gender and other socio-cultural factors influence how people think about inequality? Future research on these questions can greatly improve our understanding of what factors influence the social legitimacy of inequalities.

6.2.3 DIFFERENCES IN PREFERENCES, PERCEPTIONS AND JUDGMENTS ABOUT INEQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY BETWEEN COUNTRIES

Also on the national-level, many factors can be of influence for preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy. The existing literature clearly shows that the national context matters for how people think about inequalities. Chapter four, where increases of actual inequality were found to be associated with increases in perceived corruption is also in line with this argument. As the analyses of (non-) meritocratic preferences, perceptions and judgments were based on cross-sectional survey data, the influence of national context on them could not be examined. Future research could use our conceptualization of attitudes about inequality to examine how factors like (wealth and income) inequality, national wealth, political culture, ethnic fractionalization, religious culture, etc. influence or are related to how people think about the distribution of inequalities in their country.

An important aspect of these studies should be the possible interactions between the national context and the individual level factors that influence how people prefer, perceive and judge about inequality and meritocracy. Chapter four already showed that socio-economic status is a more important predictor for corruption when inequality is low, then when it is high. Future research should examine how inequality and other national contextual variables influence the relationship between individual level factors and preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy.
6.3 A CLOSING NOTE ON THE NEED FOR ACCURATE MEASUREMENT OF PREFERENCES, PERCEPTIONS AND JUDGMENTS ABOUT INEQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY.

In order to accurately address the research questions from the previous section, accurate measurement of preferences, perceptions and judgments about inequality and meritocracy, along with accurate measurement of the individual-level and national-level factors that they are related to is necessary. To allow comparisons between countries, cross-national data needs to be collected. Ideally, this data should be collected at multiple point in time, to allow for the examination of longitudinal trends and effects. Admittedly, collecting these data will be a challenging task. However, this dissertation has argued and hopefully shown that studying of how people prefer, perceive and judge about inequality and meritocracy can lead to valuable insights. Such an approach can greatly benefit the investigation of the public legitimacy of existing distributional principles.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


