

(Un)equal Utopias

A Deliberative and Speculative Exercise in Inequality Beliefs

Master Thesis

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Engaging Public Issues

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Date: 20-06-2021

Wordcount: 10.000

Abstract

Taking a qualitative approach to the study of inequality beliefs, this research starts from the question: 'How do people make sense of inequality?' Extant research in the field has pointed at the seemingly paradoxical relationship between ever rising rates of inequality and low levels of concern, leaving people seemingly unbothered. However, research often has a weak understanding of how a sense of inequality comes into being and generally confronts the issue from a quantitative perspective. By combining a deliberative focus group design with an inventive speculation approach, this exploratory study offers a methodological innovation to the field of inequality beliefs research. The methodological approach allows for an examination of inequality-belief formation in a social context and provokes participants to explore utopian ideals of society through an adaptation of the sandbox.

Key words *deliberative focus group; inequality beliefs; inventive method; sandbox; speculation*

1. Introduction

Income and wealth inequality have been on the rise since the 1980s in many countries (Piketty, 2014). These rising levels of inequality have resulted in the exceptional situation of today: people in the top wealthiest decile of the world now possess 89% of all wealth, while the bottom half of the population together possesses less than 1% (Credit Suisse, 2016). Recent calculations of the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics show that wealth inequality between the rich and the poor in the Netherlands is even higher than previously assumed (Pouwels-Urlings, 2021). Furthermore, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, over the last year the rich have become wealthier, thereby risking greater levels of inequality (NOS, 2020).

These growing divisions between those at the top and the bottom of the wealth distribution can have far-reaching consequences. According to Drante et al. (2013) inequality has the power to undermine societies. Unequal societies are generally characterized by more health issues and lower life expectancy. In addition, inequality can lead to lower trust and social mobility (Drante et al., 2013). Moreover, inequality seems to harm social cohesion, through increasing stratification within society (Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012).

Curiously, extant social scientific research has pointed at the seemingly paradoxical relation between rising levels of inequality and relatively low levels of public concern (e.g. Mijs, 2019; Trump, 2017; Kim, 2019; Alesina, Stantcheva & Teso, 2018; García-Sánchez, Osborne, Willis & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2020). For example, people in countries with high levels of inequality do not necessarily show greater demand for government intervention than in more egalitarian societies (Lübker, 2007).

This lack of concern may partly stem from misperception of inequality levels (Mijs & Hoy, 2021). People generally misperceive inequality, often through an underestimation of the actual inequality levels within their society (Hauser & Norton, 2017). When inequality is not visible to people, their perceptions can be misplaced and they might be unaware of actual inequality levels (Mijs, 2019). Instead of unbothered, people might simply be uninformed.

However, scholars have shown that even learning about actual levels of inequality does not necessarily lead to greater concern. Trump (2017), for example, finds that new information is not always processed as expected. She argues that people adjust their idea of what constitutes an acceptable amount of inequality based on new information in a counter-intuitive way: learning about larger levels of inequality will lead to a greater legitimization of this inequality (Trump, 2017). Lack of concern can therefore not simply be seen as a reflection of a lack of information.

Possibly the way people are engaged with issues of inequality might not be reflected by the approaches used in extant research. Perceptions of inequality and social mobility are correlated with policy preferences (Alesina et al., 2018; Bullock, Williams & Limbert, 2003). Therefore, these policy preferences have often been used as measures for concern about inequality. When misperception hampers the call for policy intervention, the public seems to be unconcerned. According to Bottero (2020), however, people actually do often feel discontent towards rising inequality but do not feel like they are able to change the situation. Consequently, lack of support for redistributive policy measures does not have to be a direct indication of lack of concern but might, instead, be connected to feelings of powerlessness.

Likewise, McCall (2013) argues that people might have a different understanding of inequality than usually assumed in extant survey research. She argues that people understand inequality mostly in terms of opportunities. Instead of the absolute level of inequality, it is lack of opportunities that is troubling to people. This different understanding of inequality is often not reflected in extant survey research.

Thus, the process by which beliefs and perceptions of inequality are formed is complex and despite a lot of research on inequality, we have a thin and disconnected understanding of how inequality is perceived, interpreted and understood (Bottero, 2020). Therefore, I argue that it is too simple to conclude that people just do not care (enough) about inequality. Rather, we lack a coherent understanding of how people make sense of inequality in the first place.

Building on Bottero (2020) and McCall (2013), I argue for the importance of understanding *how* everyday perceptions of inequalities are formed. I want to examine how people come to understand inequality and, subsequently, take the practical and pragmatic consideration out of the equation. When there are no constraints, if you could create a utopian society from scratch, what place does inequality have? How are beliefs formed and negotiated and how do they crystalize in interaction?

Consequently, this study explores the question: *How do people make sense of inequality?* Within this broad research question I will focus my attention on two aspects of belief formation. First, I will focus on subjective understandings of inequality: how do people understand inequality within the constraints of everyday life? How do they form and negotiate beliefs about inequality in interactions? Bottero (2020) argues that we need to understand the situated character of people's sense of inequality.

Second, I will examine what normative judgements underlie these beliefs and how taking away the perceived restrictions of everyday reality influences inequality belief formation. "Viewpoints on inequality emerge within various kinds of practical engagements,

and people's knowledge is formed to navigate given situations and shaped by their practical capacities for action" (Bottero, 2020, ch1, par.6). Therefore, removing the everyday structural constraints and broadening the imaginative capacities for action offers an opportunity to gain insight into processes of belief formation and negotiation.

In addition, according to Bottero (2020) the restricted and misperceived sense of inequality often found in extant research might be a reflection of the restricted view of analysts. Therefore, this alternative focus on inequality beliefs and their formation offers opportunities for explorative research. To overcome the shortcomings of quantitative survey research, I will explore a new inventive methodology. The research design centres around deliberative focus groups in which a speculation exercise, mediated by a sandbox, will invoke participants to explore and negotiate their beliefs through their ideal of a utopian society.

2. Background

In what follows I will elaborate on some relevant insights from extant research that have informed this study. This background section consists of two parts. First I will elaborate on the methodological underpinnings of this study. Building on extant research, I will identify a new and qualitative approach to the study of inequality beliefs. In the second part of this section, existing theory on inequality beliefs will be used to formulate sub-questions to guide data collection and analysis.

2.1. A qualitative approach

2.1.1. Deliberative focus groups

Extant research on inequality beliefs often relies on social survey designs which presuppose existing coherent belief systems that can be unproblematically extracted from individuals by asking the right questions. However, as shown by McCall (2013) and Bottero (2020), people's perceptions do not always fit the predetermined categories of the researcher. Furthermore, these standardized survey or interview settings are not comparable to the everyday interactions that are constitutive of these perceptions and beliefs (Flick, 2009).

Therefore, this study starts from the assumption that beliefs do not exist independent of the social interactions, institutions and experiences that help to construct them. As articulated by Mannheim (1936, p.2): "It is indeed true that only the individual is capable of thinking (...) nevertheless it would be false to deduce from this that all the ideas and sentiments which

motivate an individual have their origin in him alone.” Beliefs are not just situated in individuals, but are both dependant on and formative of the social contexts in which they are expressed. Therefore, examination of beliefs is best situated in social and interactive settings such as focus groups. This is a research technique able to “lead beyond the answers of the single interviewee” (Flick, 2009, p. 196).

Deliberative research techniques do not consider social systems as an aggregate of different ideas and preferences. We cannot arrive at a complete understanding by simply adding individual perceptions. Therefore, debate is an essential and integral part of deliberative research (Burchardt, 2014). The deliberative approach gives participants an active role in shaping the research process. “Deliberators are assumed to be capable of sophisticated reasoning and judgement” (Burchardt, 2014, p. 359).

Deliberative focus-group-research is able to deliver data on three separate levels, that of the individual, the group and the interaction (Cyr, 2016). Although often neglected in focus group designs (Cyr, 2016), especially the group and interaction levels are central to the research approach presented here. The discussion generated in focus groups reveals more than the content of the expressions alone, it also reveals how meaning is negotiated in interaction (Flick, 2009) and how mutual understandings and ideas arise (Boeije, 2010). They allow for an examination of how people “determine and/or change their point of view in terms of sources, arguments and evidence” (Boeije, 2010, p. 64).

As argued by Cyr (2016, p. 235), “when the unit of analysis is the interaction, the deliberative process is privileged over the end result of the deliberation.” Thus, in trying to understand how people make sense of inequality, the way beliefs are formed and negotiated is of greater interest than the specific individual differences in perception. The research design is not intended to deliver a complete and generalizable understanding of *what* people think, but rather offers an opportunity to gain a more profound understanding of *how* a sense of inequality comes about and how these beliefs and perceptions are formed, negotiated and transformed in interaction.

2.1.2. A new path: Inventive methods and Utopian speculation

In addition to a qualitative approach based on deliberative focus groups, extant research offers possibilities for a new path in the field of inequality beliefs: speculation as an inventive method. Inventive methods are concerned with practices of disruption and provocation. These provocations have the capacity to uncover latent social realities and produce a different outlook on the issue (Wilkie, Michael & Plummer-Fernandez, 2015).

For example, in his well-known breaching experiments Garfinkel purposefully modified social encounters to break away from reality. He used these experiments to see how people tried to restore the normal social reality (Guggenheim, Kräftner & Kröll, 2017). However, breaking away from reality also has the potential to “allow people together to come up with *new* ideas about social reality” (Van Reekum, 2021). Confusion and rupture can thus initiate speculation (Guggenheim et al., 2017). Speculation on the future has been used in inventive methods to provoke and inspire new ways of thinking.

Application of this methodology to the field of inequality beliefs offers very promising new ways of engaging with the issue and the possibility of uncovering latent social realities that might stay untouched by more traditional approaches. Perceptions of inequality are not only concerned with the way things are, but also with the way things ought to be. Speculative design has the capacity to “inspire an audience to think not only about what they *do* want for their future selves but also what they *do not* want” (Auger, 2013, p. 32). Or, in other words, inventive methods can “develop new ways of deploying the imagination as a method” (Marres, Guggenheim & Wilkie, 2018, p. 30).

In order to remove constraints, break with reality and provoke speculation, I will incorporate a speculative exercise into my research design. This exercise is designed to provoke people to come up with new ideas about social reality: utopian ideas.

First used in his book ‘Utopia’, More (1516) used the term utopia to describe a fictive ideal of society. The term has since been incorporated in the English language to denote impracticable ideas and schemes as well as idealized notions of society. Mannheim (1936) has used the concept of utopia in his book ‘Ideology and Utopia’ to describe a will and force of historical change (Turner, 1991). According to Mannheim (1936, p. 173) “a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs.” Speculating about a utopian future forces people to explore the limits of their beliefs and perception, thereby offering the possibility to discern latent understandings and beliefs.

2.1.3. The sandbox

According to Auger (2013), speculative design can be defined by three characteristics: the removal of constraints, the incorporation of fiction to introduce alternative worlds or systems, and the use of models and devices. Guggenheim et al. (2017) designed such a device to allow anyone to speculate, thereby moving the practice of knowledge production away from the realm of experts. Imagining a utopian reality can be challenging. Therefore, a material infrastructure mediating the exercise is helpful, “to avoid creating the ever same stories (...), to think in

unusual ways” and “creatively resist the mere extension of the present into a likely future” (Guggenheim et al., 2017, p. 147).

The speculative device they created consists of a large sandbox and a collection of props. Such a device, they argue, allows us to slow down and think in unusual ways (Guggenheim et al. 2017). “A person becomes a speculator through the mediation of a technical infrastructure that allows her to speculate” (Guggenheim et al., 2017, p. 146).

The device itself is simple and, therefore, also leaves every option open and may confuse the prospective speculator. However, it is exactly because the device does not immediately make sense that the user is able to relate to it in unusual and unexpected ways (Wilkie et al., 2015). In addition, the sandbox does not only facilitate speculation, but also makes its process visible (Guggenheim et al., 2017), thereby giving valuable insights into the process of belief formation.

Based on the account of Guggenheim et al. (2017), I will incorporate a speculative exercise into my research design. To problematize the taken for granted and to open up thinking through new and embodied ways of engaging with ideas about inequality. The speculative exercise, like the general deliberation, should not be regarded as a method of extracting knowledge, but rather as processes of co-constructing knowledge and analysing the process of its formation.

2.2. Inequality Beliefs

To inform the focus group design and consequent data analysis, I will formulate a series of guiding sub-questions based on extant research. The small scope and exploratory nature of this study do not allow for a complete investigation of all elements of belief formation. Therefore, these questions will merely function as guiding principles for analysis.

2.2.1. Sources for belief formation

What can extant research tell us about the process of belief formation? How do we come to understand inequality in different ways?

According to Mijs (2018a), people construct a sense of inequality on the basis of a process of inference. He argues that people make sense of unequal outcomes in society by making inferences about the causal mechanisms that bring these inequalities about. The forces that bring about inequality are often not directly visible. Therefore, people draw on past experience and the information available to them (Mijs, 2018a). Likewise, Hauser and Norton

(2017) argue that people rely on experiences from their immediate surroundings to answer more complex questions pertaining to the level of inequality within the entire society.

The immediate environment can therefore have a large influence on how people perceive societal issues such as inequality (García-Castro, Rodríguez-Bailón & Willis, 2020; Hauser & Norton, 2017). However, because these surroundings are often not representative of the larger social structure, systematic differences can arise in perceptions of inequality (García-Castro et al., 2020).

In addition to direct personal experiences and relationships, people may use their direct physical surroundings to make inferences about inequality. That which is “immediately visible and salient in the environment” affects perceptions and beliefs (García-Castro et al., 2020). Seeing the stark differences between the big houses of rich people and the smaller places of low economic status neighbourhoods, for example, can function as a source of inference about inequality within the country (García-Castro et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, it should not be regarded as a strictly individual process happening in a social vacuum. Socializing institutions function as inferential spaces that shape the process of inference and thus people's sense of inequality (Mijs, 2018a). “They shape the development of a person’s inequality beliefs by exposing that person to a certain type and range of information, but not to their counterfactuals” (Mijs, 2018a, p. 7).

Moreover, whether or not we are exposed to people of other socio-economic positions influences how we perceive inequality. “We see inequality through the lens of our unique biography, explaining unequal outcomes in terms that resonate with our particular set of experiences” (Mijs, 2018a, p.12). Living in heterogeneous areas often leads people to be more perceptive of structural forces that influence the changes of success, while people who live in more homogenous surroundings tend to give individualistic explanations for the existence of inequality (Mijs, 2019).

In addition, dominant narratives can strongly influence how inequality is understood. This can lead to overestimation of progress and misperception of wealth gaps (Kraus et al., 2019). Media can be an important source of these narratives and has the potential to dramatically affect perceptions of inequality (Hauser & Norton, 2017). Thus, according to extant research, information has the potential to change people’s beliefs about the causes of inequality. However, how the new information is used depends on participants’ interests and their own position (Mijs & Hoy, 2021).

Sub-question 1: what sources do people draw on when making inferences about the nature and causes of inequality?

2.2.2. Hard work or privilege?

Alongside different sources of belief formation, extant research has identified a variety of ways in which the causes for inequality are understood. The main distinction can be drawn between structuralist and individualistic understandings of inequality.

Structuralist understandings attribute inequality to economic and social conditions such as privilege, family connections, sexism, racism and the structure of the economic system. Economic and social conditions are seen as the determining forces for economic hardship or success (Bullock et al., 2003). Thereby relocating responsibility for inequality to larger socio-economic infrastructures.

Individualistic explanations, on the other hand, attribute economic success or failure to individual capacities and effort. When individualistic explanations are used to address inequality, it is the individual that is responsible for their own hardship (Bullock et al., 2003). According to Bullock et al. (2003), the individualistic approach is prevalent in much of American society. However, a host of other western countries, among which the Netherlands, is also characterised by strengthening beliefs in individual attribution in the form of meritocratic beliefs (Mijs, 2018b).

Meritocracy is a form of individualistic attribution of inequality and refers to the idea of individual merit as the basis for social and economic success. According to Garcia-Sanchez et al. (2020, p. 113) “meritocracy assumes that success merely requires individual effort.” Meritocracy is based on the idea that income distribution is the result of a fair process in which merits determine our position in society and the rewards attributed to it (Mijs, 2018a).

Sub-question 2: What type of attributions do people rely on when explaining their idea of the causes of inequality?

2.2.3. Inequality: not just a question of poverty

Most research on inequality is concerned with conceptions of poverty and a focus on the lower segments of the ‘inequality spectrum’. However, a complete understanding of inequality beliefs should encompass the issue in its entirety. After all, poverty only exists relative to the wealth that contrasts it.

Bullock, Williams and Limbert (2003) emphasize the need to account for perceptions of wealth and the rich as well as the poor. Although inequality is reflected in both wealth and poverty, the former is rarely problematized. Expanding the focus by including perceptions of the rich enables a broader appreciation of inequality beliefs. According to McCall (2013), it is not the absolute level of inequality that is troubling, but whether or not opportunities are available and whether the rich secure opportunities for the rest of society (i.e. the deserving rich) or subvert them (i.e. the undeserving rich). Thus, she advocates for the need to separate conceptions of inequality from conceptions of poverty and include perceptions of wealth into the study of inequality beliefs.

Sub-question 3: How do people relate to poverty and wealth in their perceptions of inequality?

2.2.4. When is inequality a problem?

As we have seen thus far, people's sense of inequality can rest on a host of different orientations and beliefs. Causes of inequality are attributed to either individualistic or structuralist approaches. These beliefs can be formed through a process of inference built upon previous experiences and situated knowledge. But what does all this mean for the norms and preferences people have concerning inequality? When does inequality become problematic and why?

A sense of inequality does not only pertain to the way we understand existing levels of inequality and their causes, but also the normative judgements we attribute to inequality. Although inequality is generally perceived as a social problem in need of resolution, it is not always perceived as inherently problematic (García-Castro et al., 2020). Some see inequality as a driver of competition and economic growth. The economic 'trickle down' argument posits that this economic growth will eventually be beneficial to everyone, trickling down the benefits from the top to the bottom layers of the economy (Bottero, 2020).

Likewise, Kluegel and Smith (1986, in Bullock et al., 2003) find that inequality is perceived as beneficial in the United States because it results in efficient functioning of society. Furthermore, exposure to persistent high levels of inequality can lead to adjustment of how much inequality is deemed legitimate (Trump, 2017). When high levels of inequality are always present, unequal situations are less likely to invoke a call for redistribution or concern.

These alternative sentiments illustrate the need to look beyond a general perception of how inequality is understood. We need to link these perceptions to normative questions of desirability and imaginative understandings of what an idealised society would look like. As argued by Sen (2000, in Garcia-Sanchez et al., 2020, p.113): "Responses to inequality are

shaped both by people's perceptions of inequality and by normative ideas about the ideal size of the income gap.”

Sub-question 4: what normative judgements do people make about inequality and how do they formulate a utopian ideal?

3. Methods

To answer the research question, I collect data through a series of small-scale deliberative focus groups and a speculative utopian exercise. Before discussing the technical specificities of data collection, I will shortly elaborate on the conceptualisation of inequality beliefs that underlies the approach of this study.

3.1. Conceptualisation

The utopian exercise is constructed to allow people to elaborate on their sense of inequality outside of the restrictions of real world contexts. A restricted and narrow definition of inequality beliefs would therefore not be suitable and possibly foreclose important insights from the analysis. Extant research often relies on narrow conceptualisations such as beliefs, perceptions, ideologies and subjectivities. Although they all pertain to an understanding of inequality, they measure a narrow part of inequality beliefs. In addition, these concepts have been measured in a variety of ways. The lack of consensus concerning conceptualizations has been said to hamper scholarship (Mijs, 2018a). In order to overcome these challenges and gain a more profound understanding of inequality beliefs and the complex ways in which understandings, beliefs and preferences are connected, I use a broad conceptualisation of inequality beliefs that encloses all of these concepts.

The term inequality beliefs will be conceptualised following the broader definition of a 'sense of inequality' as formulated by Bottero (2020). Her definition includes “attitudes and perceptions, reflexive and self-conscious values and beliefs, expressions of injustice and indignity, struggles against inequality through organised protest, resistance and mundane noncompliance, but also (...) tacit, embodied and affective ways in which people 'know' and 'sense' the world.” (Bottero, 2020, ch.1, par.2). This broader definition includes all subjective ways of knowing and experiencing inequality and allows for a broader exploration of the concept that does not restrict participants' imaginative abilities.

3.2. Procedure and sampling

In order to gather data and answer the research question I host three focus groups with three to five Dutch participants per group. These groups vary in their composition and the extent to which participants are already familiar with each other. This differentiation allows for the possibility to explore different group dynamics and their consequences for deliberation. Dependent on the deliberative process, these focus groups last one to two hours. To allow for transcription and analysis I make an audio and video recording. See image 1.1 for an illustration of the setup of the focus groups.

Ethical and privacy considerations are elaborated on and participants each receive an information and informed consent form before the start of the focus group (see appendix A). Moreover, to ensure the privacy of participants their names are substituted by fictitious names.

To recruit participants I use a snowball sampling method. Messages are posted on a number of online platforms to recruit participants. These participants in turn, are asked to introduce new possible participants. A diversity of online platforms is chosen to reach a broad group of people. In addition to social media, a message is posted in neighbourhood WhatsApp-groups and the app ‘Nextdoor’ on which people from all parts of the city of Rotterdam are active. See appendix B for an overview of the sample and participant characteristics.

Although the online snowballing method clearly has its limitations with regards to generalizability, it does allow for participant recruitment within the COVID-19 regulations. Furthermore, this study does not aim to reach generalizable conclusions on *what* the dominant sentiment within the broader population is. Rather, it aims to contribute to the understanding of how people make sense of inequality. Therefore, “a small number of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample” (Blumer, 1969, in Flick, 2009, p. 196).

For data-analysis I rely on the principles of flexible coding as outlined by (Deterding & Waters, 2021) in which data is first explored with broad codes and memos whereafter a process of data reduction results in focused more fine-grained codes. However, instead of Qualitative Data Analysis software, data is organized in spreadsheets. See appendix C for a code overview.

3.3. Focus group design

Theory recommends a distinction between beliefs as broad cognitive concepts on the one hand and norms and preferences regarding inequality on the other (Mijs, 2018a). This distinction is reproduced through a division of the focus group process in three separate phases. See figure 1

for a schematic outline of the focus group structure and appendix D for a more detailed overview of the focus groups, including the questions constructed to stimulate deliberation between participants.

The first phase of deliberation will focus on a discussion of the cognitive sense of inequality of participants as it is situated in everyday experiences. This phase will revolve around participants' understanding of the current state of inequality. The conversation will be guided by questions such as: What is the current state of inequality in the Netherlands? Are you confronted with inequality in your everyday life? What are the causes of inequality? Do you worry about the level of inequality? And what does it mean to be rich or poor?

The second phase includes a discussion of norms and preferences; 'what do we want our world to look like?' This discussion will be mediated by the sandbox as a speculative device. Similar to the exercise by Guggenheim et al. (2017), participants will be asked to create a world in the sandbox. However, not just a world, but a utopian world or society. In addition, participants will be asked to think about the place inequality holds within this fictive society.

The instruction of the exercise that participants receive is purposely minimal and abstract. As argued by Guggenheim et al. (2017), turning people into speculators starts from confusion about the exercise. "For making the world speculate, it helps to create a heterogeneous context in which speculators are facing an assemblage of materials, ambivalent instructions and an unfamiliar setup, that all together allows creating unexpected solutions" (Guggenheim et al., 2017, p. 162).

Adapted from the original sandbox of Guggenheim et al. (2017), I will supply participants with a smaller sandbox of 79x57x18 cm. This enables me to provide every participant with their own sandbox to safeguard the 1.5-meter distance COVID-19 regulations, while still allowing enough space for creative expression of participants. Guggenheim et al. (2017, p. 155) chose to incorporate props into the speculative exercise that were "radically different from entities outside the sandbox". In a similar vein, the props available to the participants are abstract wooden forms in different colours and shapes (see image 1.2).

After the participants have finished creating their world, we will discuss each participant's utopia. Participants will be asked to show to the rest of the group what they created and to share the process that brought them to this final result. Participants will be encouraged to ask questions and discuss the outcomes of the exercise. This allows for a collective deliberation on the different utopias produced by the participants.

In the third phase of deliberation, these two distinct ways of looking at inequality beliefs – as a broad cognitive concept and a normative ideal – will be subsequently compared and

contrasted. This comparison enables insight into how and where understandings clash with norms and preferences. This might reveal the more tacit understandings of structural barriers or individualistic perspectives on inequality.

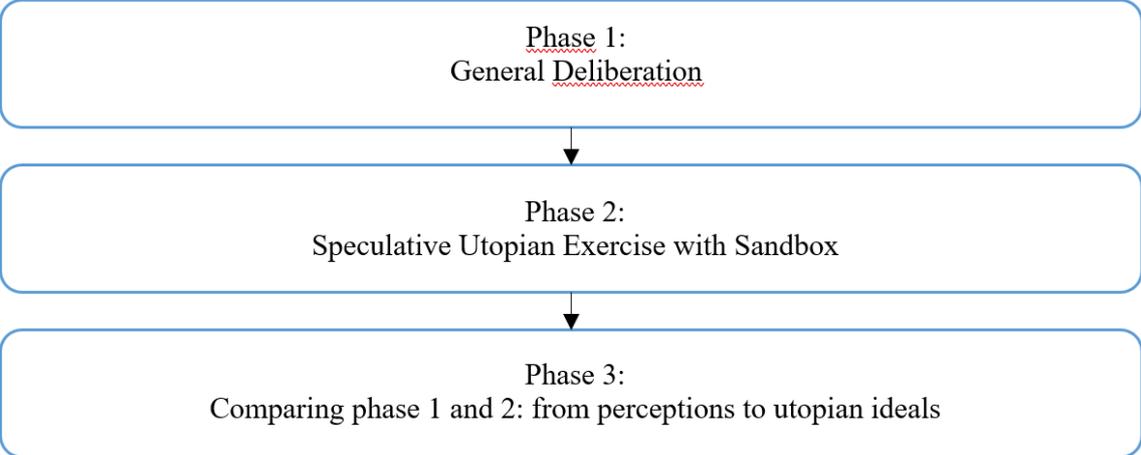


Figure 1: phases focus group

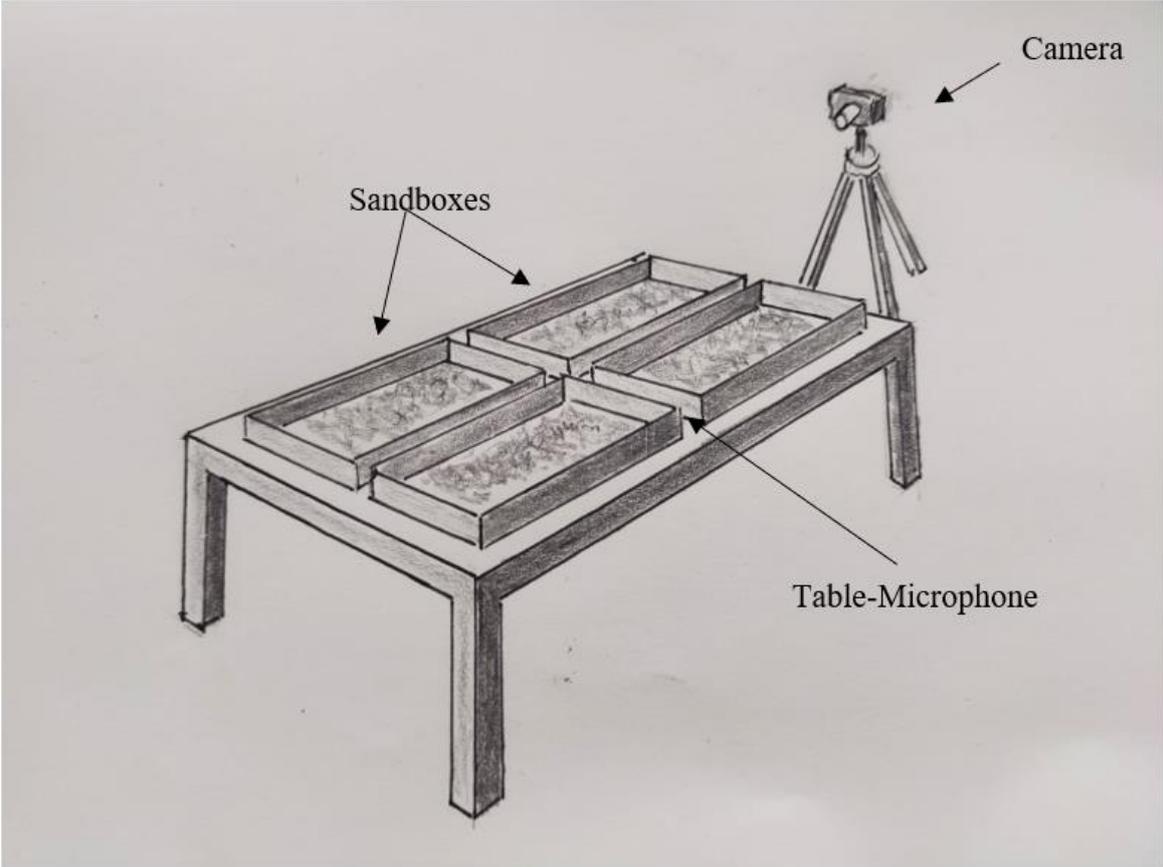


Image 1.1: research set-up



Image 1.2: props

4. Results

4.1 A Sense of inequality

Every discussion was initiated by asking the respondents: ‘What do you think of when I say inequality?’ The following excerpts from the three focus groups show how the concept of inequality is generally understood in broad and diverging terms.

Group 1:

Lisa: Unfairness

Julia: Unequal salaries, that is what I think of.

Thijs: Differences in power

Sophie: I immediately think about men and women

Lucas: Differences in opportunities

Group 2:

Kim: I think of poverty, immediately

Sanne: Me too, inequality between rich and poor families

Maaïke: That some are born with fewer means than others

Group 3:

Elin: I think of deprived areas and, despite how unfortunate I think it is, groups of people with a non-western background.

Tim: I also think of how neighbourhoods are divided, certain areas. And education, because that can have a severe influence.

Hidde: Education was the first thing that came to mind because I recently saw a documentary about it. And also the labour market. (...) And indeed, especially the non-western community on the labour market. But maybe also gender, I think that also plays a role.

Daniel: The role of education and neighbourhoods, for me, is the image of inequality.

The responses of the participants show that inequality has many dimensions. Participants highlight different facets of inequality, namely: economic (unequal salaries, poverty, available means), ethical (unfairness), geographical (deprived areas and neighbourhoods), racial (non-western communities), social and cultural capital, gender, power relations, opportunities and education. In addition, during deliberation the respondents employ the concept on different scales: inequality is discussed as unequal relationships between individuals, families, communities, neighbourhoods, regions and countries.

For example during the discussions all three groups note the geographical dimension of inequality, contrasting the city with rural areas and noting inequality within a city based on the stark contrast between different city neighbourhoods. Consider the following interaction from the first group:

Group 1:

Julia: You already notice when you're looking for a new house in Rotterdam. You already think "oh I don't want to go to the south of the city". I just realised I am saying this to you guys, you all live in the south of the city...

Thijs: Well, I didn't want to be here! [laughs]

Julia: West is also seen in a negative light. And well, the north of the city, that's where the mothers ride their cargobikes. Kralingen, that's where all the posh people ["kakkers"] live. In the centre of the city live all the rich people. It's a bit like that. That is already inequality, and that is only in one city. You're not even talking about the entire country yet, just one city!

In addition, respondents frequently comment on how these different dimensions intersect and reinforce each other. For example, Julia (group 1), notes “*All of these things are a little bit connected, I believe.*” Thus, inequality is not just understood as a purely economic issue of differences in income and wealth, but rather placed within a complex web of intersecting structural forces that operate on different levels.

4.2. Sub-question 1: Sources for inference

During the discussion, respondents often refer to personal experiences and observations to make sense of the issue and to communicate their ideas to others. These interactions highlight the importance of the personal frame of reference when discussing new information. When confronted with new insights by other participants, participants often relate these to either confirming or disproving evidence from their own experiences and observations.

These personal experiences and observations also function as sources for inference. Based on their situated knowledge, respondents formulate a perception of inequality on a national or even global scale. In group 2, Maaïke and Sanne had different perceptions of inequality and its visibility in cities relative to villages. Their perception of inequality in villages and cities is built upon their personal experiences.

Group 2:

Maaïke: I am from a small village and there you always meet all of the layers of society. But here, in the city, you can live in your own bubble. (...) You can go to theatre and violin lessons, while in a small village, everyone plays soccer, no matter if you're rich or poor.

Sanne: But still I do think that you're more exposed to inequality in the city. In the village where I am from, I didn't really know any poor families. While they probably exist, but I just don't see them. Here [in the city] I see them a lot more.

In addition to personal experiences, important sources for inference are the local social contexts, the physical environment, the media and encounters with others. Especially the media seem to form an important source for inference about inequality. Respondents refer to talk shows, documentaries, television shows, magazines, newspapers, social media, children's animations and sports programs. At the start of the discussion, Hidde (group 3) immediately relates his perception of inequality to a documentary. And in group 2, Sanne explains how a television show made her realize how much inequality is present in Dutch society.

Group 2:

Sanne: I recently saw this show on tv, a Dutch show, I forgot the name. (...) But it was about how inequality has risen in the last year and you just saw how much it had been rising. That really wasn't okay, you saw this graph going all the way like this [mimics a sharply rising line].

Furthermore, the discussion itself also functions as a source for belief formation. During deliberation respondents often build upon each other's responses, using the mentioned categories by others to make sense of the issue themselves, even if their initial account does not include these categories. In group 2, for example, Maaïke raised the issue of health inequality. Although the subject had not been brought forward before, this caused Sanne to remark on differences in retail prices of food and their contribution to health inequality as a consequence of economic inequality.

Group 2:

Maaïke: I recently ran into an old elementary school friend who works as a dental hygienist (...) and apparently you can just see from someone's teeth what their socioeconomic status is! How awful...

Sanne: Healthy food should be cheaper, otherwise you will still have health inequality because people with little money will buy unhealthy things which will make them even more unhealthy.

When we look at these results in light of the first sub-question – “What sources do people draw on when making inferences about the nature and causes of inequality?” – we can see how the respondents generally rely on a broad range of sources. Especially personal experiences,

observations from the immediate surroundings and media outlets are frequently used to explain perceptions or make sense of the arguments made by others. In addition, respondents use the information offered by others to subsequently formulate new ideas and argumentations for their sense of inequality.

4.3. Sub-question 2: Attributing the cause

When asked about the causes of inequality, respondents quickly note that the issue is too complex to speak of one cause of inequality. They are aware of the complexity surrounding issues of inequality. Respondents often remark how different dimensions influence each other and how structural factors can result in uneven outcomes throughout society. The following quote from Lucas, group 1, illustrates this general sentiment that is present in all three focus groups:

Lucas: I don't think there is one unique cause of inequality. It can have economic origins. So you might have had a poor family, a bad start. For example because your parents have fled from Syria, from the war. That immediately gives you unequal opportunities. But also the language barrier, so also social origins of inequality. (...) I think the cause of inequality is rooted in multiple areas.

A recurring theme within these discussions is the role of opportunities. The unequal distribution of opportunities is often discussed as central to economic inequality. Whether someone is able to reach a certain educational level and subsequent labour market position is related to income and thereby equated to broader levels of inequality within society. Equality of opportunities was the core of the understandings of inequality within all three focus groups. In group 3 Daniel explains:

Daniel: Opportunities are not distributed equally. For me, inequality of opportunity is the definition of inequality. It precedes all other forms of inequality.

This unequal distribution of opportunities is subsequently discussed as the result of different structural forces and the economic structure of society. For example, respondents refer to capitalism, racism and sexism to explain the different opportunities available to people. Thus,

economic inequality is generally not regarded as detached from other societal issues such as sexism and racism and often attributed to structural causes.

A term often used to describe inequality and its causes in this sense is the vicious cycle. Someone's place in society is discussed as the result of unequal opportunities that are the outcome of a complex vicious cycle of structural forces. Consider the following quote from group 1:

Lucas: It is the vicious cycle we talked about. Let's say there is racial inequality which prevents you from getting a job, then you fall behind economically, the inequality increases and the gap grows wider.

Interestingly, participants often rely on structural reasoning when articulating their sense of inequality. Meritocratic and individualistic understandings of inequality are often dismissed or critiqued.

Group 2:

Maaïke: I think it [inequality] also arises from the idea that you can achieve anything as long as you work hard enough, while I don't think that's true. I mean if your parents are lower educated, then you just have fewer opportunities. And then you can run as fast as you want, but you will never catch up (...) I just don't think that's right, the whole meritocratic ideal.

Although respondents emphasize the structural forces that cause and sustain inequality and emphasize how unrealistic the idea of meritocracy currently is, they often refer to ideas of individual merit in their utopian ideals. Thus meritocratic understandings are not absent from the discussions but rather function as desired futures instead of the causes of inequality.

Visibility

Often, when talking about the unfairness and structural constraints underlying inequality, participants base their arguments on the visibility of inequality. Those who encounter others from disadvantaged social and economic positions, use these encounters to illustrate the unfairness of the system that distributes opportunities unevenly.

In addition, within group 3, a discussion developed on the benefits of increasing visibility as a solution for inequality. The respondents note how inequality might be hard to

address because those who ended up on the ‘good side’ do not see inequality or as a result of the invisibility of inequality in their direct surroundings develop meritocratic perceptions.

Group 3:

Hidde: “They [rich people] live in those new-built neighbourhoods (‘Vinexwijken’) and they have never even met people from other groups in society”

Daniel: “The remedy for inequality is placing two different people in a room to talk. (...) Place a rich person who believes poor people are poor because they don’t work hard enough together with, for example, a single mother.

The sample probably has a large influence on the content of these beliefs. Therefore, respondents often note how their perception and the general agreement within the group diverges from what they hear in different settings. For example, when asked whether they think the Netherlands is characterized by a lot of inequality, Kim (group 2) notes: *“I think there is way more than people think”*, the other participants agree. Later in the discussion, the following interaction further illustrates this.

Group 2:

Moderator: Do you think our society is organized in a fair manner?

Maike: No, but I am happy you all agree on that, because some people really think the Netherlands is a really fair society.

Kim: You hear that so often: ‘Just work harder.’

On the basis of these insights we can consider the second sub-question: *“What type of attributions do people rely on when explaining their idea of the causes of inequality?”* Participants mainly relate to the causes of inequality in terms of opportunities. Inequality of opportunity is placed at the core of broader economic inequality within society. Although respondent’s focus on structural factors might be influenced by sample characteristics, these results do provide insight into the construction of these beliefs. Visibility of inequality, through heterogeneous surroundings and direct encounters with people from other socio-economic statuses, seems to function as a source for the belief in structural causes of inequality.

4.4. Sub-question 3: Poverty and wealth

Although respondents typically talk about wealth and social mobility as a factor that contributes to a good life, they also connect negative traits to the rich while attributing positive, almost romanticized traits to the less well off. Participants connect wealth to issues of social status and power. The rich are therefore judged on their humanity. The further someone is considered to be situated from ‘the normal people’, the less deserving they are considered to be.

Group 2:

Lisa: Don't you sometimes have negative associations with rich people? I do, sometimes I think like 'Oh they're those snobs who can afford anything.'

Another example can be found in a remark made by Daniel, from group 3. He describes two different interactions he had with rich people. One of them acknowledged how important it would be for him to work hard later in life. Daniel admired him for being modest and willing to work. The other encounter, on the contrary, was with a girl who also had rich parents, but acted like she deserved it. According to Daniel, the attitude of the rich was important in his determination of how deserving they are.

Group 3:

Daniel: I met a boy who was so rich, Fortune 500 rich, it was absurd. But I thought he had a really cool attitude towards his position. (...) He said 'It's normal for me, but of course it actually is absurd'. And he said 'I have to work so hard later, if I want to maintain this lifestyle'. (...) But another girl, who was also absurdly rich, didn't have such an attitude at all. She was behaving like 'I deserve this, I earned it'. No, you haven't.

These interactions show that the more economic inequality is connected to inequality of status and power, the more problematic it is considered to be. Thus, when considering sub-question 3 – “How do people relate to poverty and wealth in their perceptions of inequality? – we can see that it is not just the absolute level of inequality that is considered problematic per se. How the rich relate to those who are less well-off determines their deservingness and either justifies or condemns their wealth.

4.5. Sub-question 4: normative judgements and utopian ideals

During the second phase of the focus groups, respondents each received a sandbox and were asked to think about a utopian society: what does it look like? And what role does inequality play in this society? The explanation of the exercise resulted in a host of different reactions from respondents. The openness of the exercise forced respondents to engage with the issue in a different way, thereby causing confusion and even irritation among some of the respondents.

Respondents' approaches to the exercise differed. While some took the time to overthink a utopia carefully before even touching the sand, others immediately started digging or building. Some with a definite sense of purpose, others with the lost hope that the feeling of the sand might give them an idea. Elin (group 3) remarks: "*You immediately see the difference: he thinks first, I just start building.*"

Although all working in their own sandbox, the respondents were located at the same table and were therefore able to look at what the other respondents were doing. This sometimes resulted in inspiration for their own projects. Sometimes the work of others sparked a train of thought that, although it might not directly relate to what someone else is making, relates to a respondents own experiences. Consider the following segment in which Maaïke comments on two houses of different sizes that Sanne is building.

Group 2:

Maaïke: I think it is interesting what you build, Sanne. If you look in my village, the houses they build keep getting bigger and bigger. Because bigger seems to always be better. While I think, why would you need such a big house when you're retired?

Overall, the sandbox exercise allowed for different ways of engaging with the issue. During the first phase of deliberation, participants often agreed, despite the different personal understandings and sources for belief formation they brought to the discussion. In all three groups there was a general consensus on how inequality was to be understood. Participants showed their concern about inequality by relating it to the negative societal consequences of inequality and the general unfairness of the situation.

However, when individually speculating about possible utopian futures with the sandbox, the individual differences became clearer. Nuances in how inequality was understood surfaced and participants all highlighted different aspects when asked to visualise their ideas in the sand. Discussing the utopian sand works showed that participants still agreed on the general

understandings of inequality, but were also surprised to see that everyone's takeaway from the group deliberation was unique and often rooted in individual sources for belief formation.

Recurring themes in the utopias were: the need to limit inequality, the importance of equality of opportunities, the alleviation of poverty and the celebration of diversity. Although respondents agreed that people should have equal opportunities in life, they generally emphasized the need for diversity in how they use these opportunities and live their life. In other words, everyone should be able to meet basic human needs and live a comfortable life, but more money does not equate to a better life. Respondents often refer to the problematic nature of the idea that higher paying jobs – such as CEO – are inherently more valuable or 'better' than lower paying jobs – such as supermarket employees – because these jobs are also very important for the functioning of society.

Sub-question 4 relates to normative judgements and the formation of a utopian ideal. All in all, respondents are generally concerned about economic inequality and try to alleviate this in their utopias. Inequality is deemed problematic when the basis for its occurrence is deemed unfair, for example when opportunities are unfairly distributed. And they argue for the need to reconsider the relationship between social status and economic rewards. In an ideal world, structural forces would no longer contribute to inequality. Everyone would have the same opportunities and individual merit would determine your social and economic position. In what follows I further illustrate the use of the sandbox method and illustrate some of the utopias constructed by participants. These examples illustrate the arguments made in this section.

[4.6 The sandbox as a method](#)

The use of the sandbox is part of the exploratory nature of this study. Therefore, some insights into its use and benefits will be discussed here. This offers insight into the workings of the sandbox and its results. Broadly speaking, four different approaches can be distinguished with regard to how respondents use the sandbox to speculate about inequality in a utopian future.

Building a world

Some participants use the sandbox to literally build a world, a place filled with houses and people as we might encounter it in real life. These works are often a mirror of what our current society could look like if it was built on the utopian principles highlighted by the respondent. For example, Julia (group 1) built a set of houses in her sandbox, a community (see image 1.3).

She explains how everyone in her utopia has their own equally good house, or ‘small palace’ as she calls them. Everyone has a decent place to live and the basic means to provide for a good life without poverty. However, every house has a different colour, to show that there is still diversity in how people choose to live and express themselves.



Image 1.3: Utopia Julia Group 1

Symbolic interpretation

Others use the sandbox to symbolise the values underpinning their utopia. Lisa (group 1), for example, collected all of the sand in the centre of the box to create a heart-shape, symbolising the importance of respect and love within a society (see image 1.4). In the centre of this heart, she placed seven brightly coloured blocks, symbolising the importance of diversity, while positioning them all at the same height, symbolising their equal position within society.

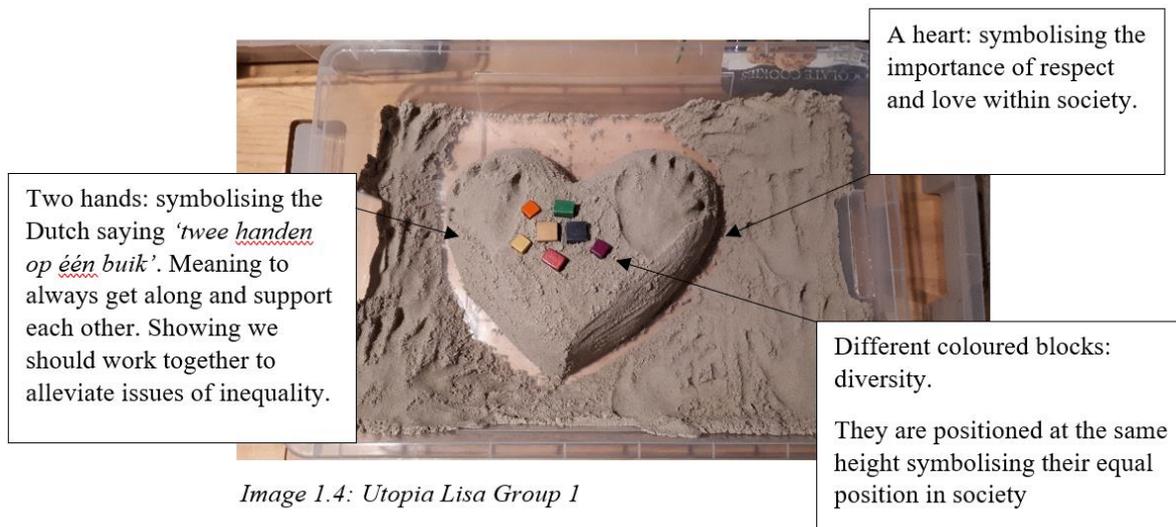


Image 1.4: Utopia Lisa Group 1

Tim (group 3) took a similar approach to the exercise. He explains: *“I made a mountain with different roads on it to reach the top, that is my symbolism. There are different coloured blocks on the mountain, so you can reach the top from different positions. (...) In an ideal society, you would be able to reach the top from every position, in every shape and every form.”* The pathway up the mountain symbolises the way up the socioeconomic ladder within society. But he emphasizes that reaching the top is not necessary (see image 1.5).

Earlier, the group discussed how higher education and higher earning job positions are generally perceived as ‘better’ and how this distinction between high and low contributes to inequality within society. He integrated these collectively discussed ideas into his own utopian society.



Image 1.5: Utopia Tim Group 3

A plan for action

A third way in which respondents can use the sandbox to engage with the issue is through a plan for action. Some respondents used the exercise to envision a way of changing from a prior to a future situation in which action and a temporal dimension are part of the design.

Thijs (group 1) split his sandbox in two sections (see image 1.6). The right side of the box was his utopian world in which everyone has equal opportunities. However, like the work by Julia everyone uses his or her life in a different way and this diversity is appreciated. On the left side of the box, he left the sand untouched. He announced how his utopia was going to involve ‘action’, grabbed two handfuls of blocks and with an enthusiastic movement threw them onto the left empty side of the box, creating a chaos. *“This is the past, so there has been inequality and it is still present in the sense that people look back at how unequal the world used to be.”*



Image 1.6: Utopia Thijs Group 1

Daniel (group 3) took a similar approach to the exercise. He drew a line in the sand representing a fair start (see image 1.7). Under this line he placed a variety of sticks, some longer than others. He describes: *“I think everyone should have a fair start in life.”* Some of the sticks are unable to reach the line on their own. While he explains his idea, he starts filling the gaps with extra blocks, helping everyone to reach a fair start with equal opportunities. *“We can combat inequality by offering personalised support.”* Some need more support than others but eventually his utopia is complete and everyone has equal opportunities and a fair start to life. He adds: *“although after that, it is everyone’s own responsibility.”*

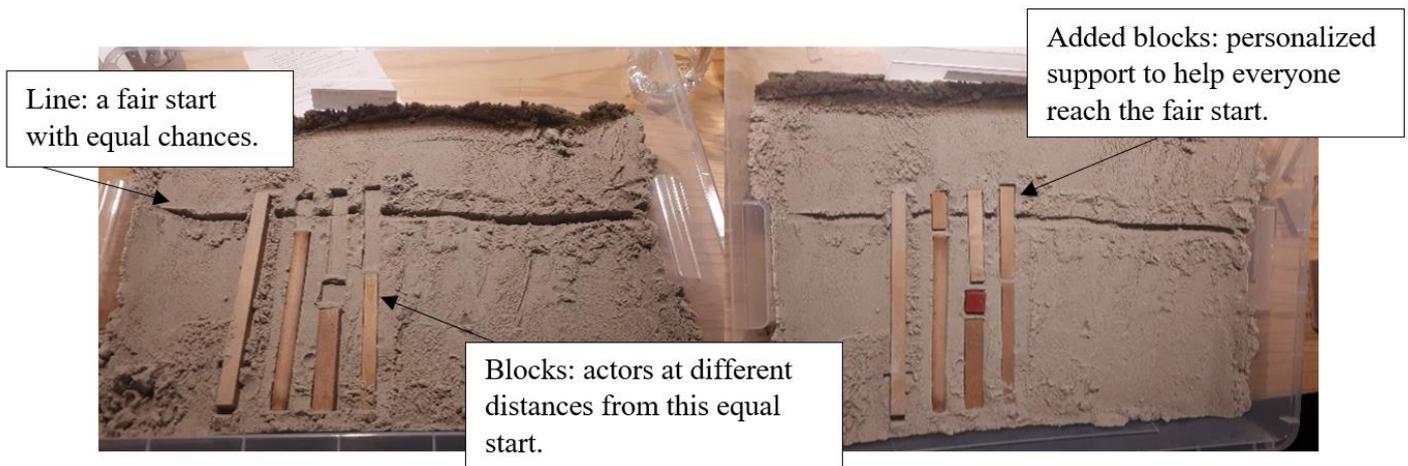


Image 1.7: Daniel Group 3

Embodied knowledge and the sand

Finally, some respondents used the sand to engage in more embodied ways of feeling and knowing. Sophie (group 1), for example, was running her hands through the sand and used it to do what “*feels good.*” Feeling her hands in the sand made her think of the freedom that the sandbox provides and consequently the need for freedom in her utopian society as a basis for living together. The freedom is visible in her utopia by random movements in the sand that have no other specific meaning than the freedom she felt while making it (see image 1.8). However, in the middle she placed a bridge-shaped block, representing the need to come closer together and somewhat bridge the gap, bridge the inequality.



Image 1.8: Utopia Sophie Group 1

In group 3, Hidde also used the sandbox to engage in a more embodied way of knowing. Starting on a smoothed-out surface that represents the need to create an equal starting point, he started “*randomly placing by feel*” differently shaped objects and composed them in a way that equalizes the distances between the objects and felt right (see image 1.9). While explaining how he created his utopia, he finds it difficult to put his process of ‘knowing’ in words. “*I’m struggling to explain my train of thought. (...) I mostly did it by feel, If I have to explain it, it’s suddenly so much more difficult.*”

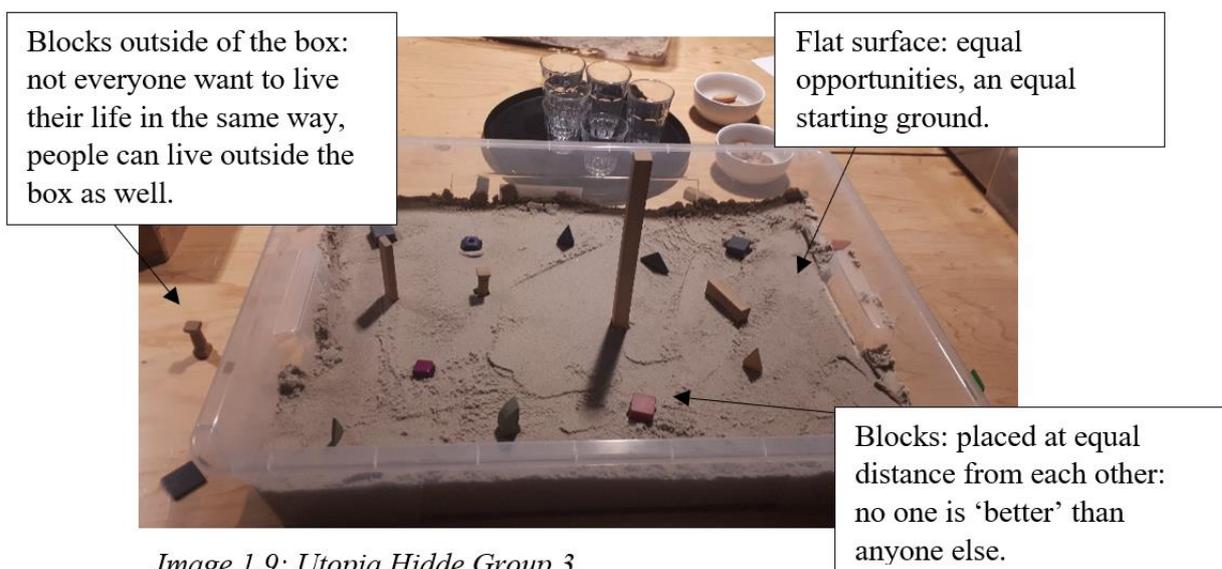


Image 1.9: Utopia Hidde Group 3

4.7 Group dynamics

As mentioned in the methods section, the three groups differed in the level of familiarity among participants to examine differences in interaction (see appendix B). The results, however, do not show any noticeable differences in the course or content of deliberation.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued for the importance of gaining a more profound understanding of how people make sense of inequality. In contrast to most extant research, I have taken an inventive and qualitative approach to explore the research question: '*How do people make sense of inequality?*'. The approach centred around deliberative focus groups and a speculation exercise with the sandbox invented by Guggenheim et al. (2017). In what follows, I will present some of the main findings and position them in relation to extant research. Thereafter, I will reflect on the implications of this study for future research and practice.

The results show that the respondents typically have a broad and situated understanding of inequality for which personal experiences and encounters are important sources. This corresponds to the account of Bottero (2020) who argued for the need to understand people's sense of inequality as essentially situated. Subsequently, these situated knowledges are often used to make inferences about inequality on a broader scale. Participants use their experiences as a basis for understanding national level mechanisms. This corresponds to the argument made by Mijs (2018a).

In addition, the interaction itself forms an important source for the formation and articulation of participant's beliefs. However, as became apparent during the sandbox exercise, respondents do not readily absorb new information, but instead incorporate it into their own situated understanding of the issue. This highlights the importance of studying inequality beliefs in a social and interactive setting.

In correspondence with the findings of McCall (2013), participants' main concern with inequality is the unfair and uneven distribution of opportunities, more so than the absolute level of inequality. Moreover, people's stance towards the rich is largely influenced by their attitude: the further someone's status and behaviour deviates from the 'average person', the more problematic their wealth and the corresponding income gap is considered to be. Although respondents do not directly relate these attitudes to the provision of opportunities, as argued by McCall (2013), these findings highlight a similar sentiment, in which actors assess the 'deservingness' of the rich based on their behaviour.

Furthermore, participants who draw on structural explanations to explain inequality of opportunity often base their argument on encounters with people from lower economic statuses. In line with the argument made by Mijs (2019), this finding indicates the possible influence of the visibility of inequality in the formation of either structural or individual explanations of inequality.

With this thesis I have tried to introduce a new methodological approach to the study of inequality beliefs. Speculation as an inventive method – mediated by the sandbox – has proven to be fruitful to explore how people make sense of inequality. The method allowed people to engage with the issue in a different way, thereby providing some first insights into the process of belief formation. Furthermore, the combination of deliberative focus groups and the utopian exercise enabled me to reflect on the way in which interaction and confrontation with new insights are incorporated into individual perceptions and ideas.

However, a number of limitations must be addressed. The sample of participants this study has analysed is both small in size and limited in diversity. Although a larger population has been addressed, respondents were relatively young. This age bias might be the result of both the online recruitment of participants and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which might make older people more reluctant to apply for an in-person gathering. Furthermore, despite snowballing, the eventual sample remained fairly close to my own personal network. As a result, the groups were relatively homogeneous, which might have contributed to the general consensus among participants. As such, future research would benefit from a similar exercise among a broader and more diverse group of respondents. This might allow for examination of different interactions and the influence of conflicting perspectives on processes of belief formation.

The findings of this study have implications for future research. First, because of the situated and broad ways in which respondents understand inequality, they usually struggle to give direct answers to questions pertaining the causes and desirability of inequality without adding nuance or elaboration. These nuances and elaborations get lost when respondents can only choose between predetermined categories in survey research.

Secondly, these findings highlight the importance of taking the social character of belief formation into account. Assuming the existence of coherent belief system within individuals overlooks the social nature of the formation of beliefs. Therefore, on the basis of these conclusions, I argue for further investigation of belief formation with the use of deliberative and speculative/inventive methods.

Furthermore, respondents typically understand economic inequality as an issue of inequality of opportunities. In order to effectively measure people's beliefs and perception, it is important for future research to take this into account.

However, this finding also has important implications for practice. Support for redistributive policy measures might be low because people are predominantly concerned with the importance of creating fair opportunities. In order for policy measures to match people's understanding of the issue, an increased focus on the promotion of equal opportunities might prove to be an important road for the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: ethics and privacy checklist & informed consent form



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Master Thesis Inequality Beliefs

Name, email of student: Anne-Lotte Groenewegen, 457505ag@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Jonathan Mijs, mijs@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 03-05-2021 - 20-06-2021

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES** - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES - NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - **NO**
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - **NO**
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - **NO**
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - **NO**
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - **NO**
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? **YES** - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - **NO**
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - **NO**
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - **NO**
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - **NO**

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Data could involve information on political opinions and philosophical beliefs. Although participants will not explicitly be asked to share their political opinions, they will be encouraged to think of the desirability of certain levels of inequality and their view on what, for example, government should do about this. These beliefs and opinions form the subject of the study and can thus not be avoided.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Before starting the focus groups I will discuss some ground rules with participants to ensure a safe space for discussion. Although people can disagree in their opinions, participants should be free to voice any opinion or belief and respect each other's contributions to the discussion. In addition, all data will be processed anonymously, data will not be retraceable to individual participants.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Possible unintended circumstances could involve heated arguments or verbal fights between participants which could have negative emotional consequences for the participants involved. When the discussion starts to develop in a negative manner I will either try to resolve the situation through my role as moderator, or end the focus group to prevent (emotional) harm to participants.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Data will be collected during a series of planned focus groups, in an office in Rotterdam. Data has the form of audio recordings of the discussion and a video recording in which participants are filmed from above, shielding their face's from the camera as much as possible. The video recording is only used to capture how the participants use the sandbox.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

The total anticipated size of my sample will include 9 to 20 people. I intend to host three or four focus groups which each consist of 3 to 5 participants.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

The sample is drawn from the Dutch population, which consists of approximately 17 million people.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Data will be stored on my computer which is password protected and a backup file will be kept on my personal hard drive. When the data is transcribed and the analysis is completed, the recordings will be deleted.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I, Anne-Lotte Groenewegen, am responsible for the day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

There will be one backup file available on my personal hard drive. When transcription and analysis are done, both the original and backup file will be deleted.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

Participants will be referred to by a participant number which will not be retraceable to the participants. Further personal data only consists of the age and occupation of participants. This information will not be linked to their individual data. Age and occupation will only be used to describe the composition of groups.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

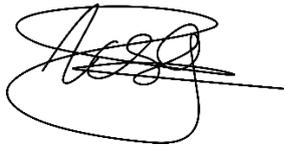
Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student:

Anne-Lotte Groenewegen

Date: 03-05-2021



Name (EUR) supervisor:

Jonathan Mijs

Date: May 3, 2021



APPENDIX I: Informed Consent Form (if applicable)

(informed consent form in language of the participants (Dutch))

Informatie- en toestemmingsformulier

Informatieformulier

Introductie

Mijn naam is Anne-Lotte Groenewegen en ik volg de master Engaging Public Issues (Sociologie) aan de Erasmus Universiteit te Rotterdam. Ter afronding van mijn master doe ik onderzoek naar de perceptie van mensen van ongelijkheid. In dit onderzoek kijk ik onder meer naar hoe mensen naar ongelijkheid kijken en hoe bepaalde overtuigingen worden gevormd. Voor dit onderzoek zal ik focusgroepen, oftewel groepsinterviews, afnemen. Voor vragen of meer informatie over mijn onderzoek kun je contact met mij opnemen.

Contactgegevens

Onderzoeker: Anne-Lotte Groenewegen (457505ag@eur.nl)

Begeleider: Dr. Jonathan Mijs (mijs@essb.eur.nl)

Dataverzameling

Dataverzameling zal plaatsvinden aan de hand van focusgroepen. Tijdens deze focusgroepen gaan we in een groep van 3 tot 5 mensen in gesprek over ongelijkheid en voeren we een korte opdracht uit aan de hand van een zandbak. Dit gesprek wordt opgenomen in de vorm van een geluidsopname zodat het uitgeschreven en geanalyseerd kan worden. Daarnaast wordt een videoopname gemaakt van de ‘zandbak-opdracht’. Deze opname wordt zoveel mogelijk van bovenaf gemaakt, waardoor uw gezicht zoveel mogelijk van de opname wordt afgeschermd. De beelden dienen hoofdzakelijk ter analyse van de focusgroepen. Beelden waarop uw als persoon identificeerbaar bent zullen nooit worden gepubliceerd of gedeeld met derden.

Potentiële ongemakken en risico's

Er zijn geen fysieke, rechtelijke of economische risico's verbonden aan uw deelname in dit onderzoek. Deelname is geheel vrijwillig en kan op ieder gewenst moment beëindigd worden. U bent niet verplicht om alle vragen te beantwoorden. Ik ben als moderator aanwezig om het gesprek in goede banen te leiden en emotionele belasting te voorkomen.

Vertrouwelijkheid en databescherming

De verzamelde data wordt geanonimiseerd en verwerkt voor data-analyse. De opname van het gesprek wordt na verwerking verwijderd, zodat alleen een geschreven transcript beschikbaar blijft. In dit transcript zijn alle persoonlijke gegevens geanonimiseerd waardoor uw uitspraken en deelname aan het onderzoek niet tot u herleidbaar zijn. Databescherming vanuit de Erasmus Universiteit wordt geregeld door de *data protection officer*, te bereiken via privacy@eur.nl.

Het delen van data

Ik deel de data uitsluitend met mijn scriptiebegeleider vanuit de Erasmus Universiteit, Jonathan Mijs. Data wordt uitsluitend gedeeld voor onderzoeksdoeleinde en data die niet geanonimiseerd is wordt na analyse verwijderd van alle apparaten.

Vrijwillige deelname en individuele rechten

Uw deelname is geheel vrijwillig en u heeft het recht uw deelname op ieder moment te stoppen. Tijdens uw deelname aan het onderzoek behoudt u het recht om meer informatie over de dataverzameling en analyse te vragen. Daarnaast heeft u het recht om uw toestemming in te trekken en te vragen naar verwijdering van uw data voordat de dataset is geanonimiseerd of het manuscript is ingeleverd om gepubliceerd te worden. Hiervoor en voor verdere opmerkingen of klachten kunt u contact met mij of mijn begeleider opnemen.

Toestemmingsformulier interview participatie-instrumenten

Door het tekenen van dit toestemmingsformulier bevestig ik dat:

- Ik geïnformeerd ben over het doel van het onderzoek, de dataverzameling en het opslaan van data zoals beschreven in het informatieformulier;
- Ik het informatieformulier heb gelezen, of dat het aan me is voorgelezen;
- Ik mogelijkheden heb gehad om vragen te stellen over het onderzoek; de vragen zijn voldoende beantwoord;
- Ik vrijwillig toestemming geef tot deelname aan dit onderzoek;
- Ik instem met het vragen naar en verwerken van informatie aangaande politieke standpunten en filosofische overtuigingen.
- Ik begrijp dat er vertrouwelijk wordt omgegaan met de informatie;
- Ik begrijp dat ik de deelname op ieder moment kan beëindigen of het beantwoorden van vragen kan weigeren zonder enige consequenties;
- Ik begrijp dat ik mijn toestemming kan intrekken voor de dataset is ingeleverd voor goedkeuring.

Bovendien geef ik toestemming om:

	Ja	Nee
Ik geef toestemming om audio en video van de focusgroep op te nemen		
Ik geef toestemming om citaten van de focusgroep te gebruiken		

Naam van de deelnemer aan het onderzoek: _____

Datum: _____

Handtekening: _____

Appendix B: sample characteristics

		Characteristics		
		Number of participants	Age category:	Did respondents know each other in advance?
Group	1	5	20-30	Mixed
	2	3	20-30	Yes
	3	4	20-30	No

Group	Respondent (fictious name)	ID
1	Lisa	1
	Thijs	2
	Lucas	3
	Sophie	4
	Julia	5
2	Sanne	6
	Kim	7
	Maaike	8
3	Hidde	9
	Elin	10
	Tim	11
	Daniel	12

Appendix C: Codes

Broad Code Group	Code	Sub-code
Inequality beliefs	Meaning	
	Causes	Structural
		Individual/meritocratic
	Poverty	
	Wealth	
	Mobility	
Relative inequality		
Formation of beliefs	Sources	Personal experience
		Encounters
		Other people's experience
		Physical surroundings
		Media
		The interaction
	Incorporation info	
	Expansion info	
	Resistance info	
	Visibility	
Norms and utopias	Concerned	
	Responsibility	
	Utopia	
	Solutions	
Interactions of interest	Interactions of interest	
Sandbox	Worldmaking	
	Symbolism	
	Action	
	Embodied	
	Reactions to the exercise	

Appendix D: detailed overview of the focus groups

Phase		Questions and instructions
1	General Deliberation	<p data-bbox="679 353 1362 387">What is the current state of inequality in the Netherlands?</p> <p data-bbox="679 405 1362 439">Are you confronted with inequality in your everyday life?</p> <p data-bbox="679 456 943 490">If so, how and where?</p> <p data-bbox="679 508 1086 542">What are the causes of inequality?</p> <p data-bbox="679 560 1198 593">Do you worry about the level of inequality?</p> <p data-bbox="679 611 1422 645">What do you think of, when you think of wealth / rich people?</p> <p data-bbox="679 680 1437 714">What do you think of, when you think of poverty / poor people?</p>
2	Utopian Speculation Exercise with the Sandbox	<p data-bbox="679 835 1437 1171"><i>Instructions:</i> Everyone has received a sandbox. You can both use the sand and the props that are laid out on the table. In this sandbox I want you to create a utopian society, an ideal world. When making this world, I want to ask you to think of the place that inequality holds in this utopia. After everyone has finished, we will discuss and everyone gets a chance to explain their utopia to the rest of the group.</p> <p data-bbox="679 1189 1398 1267"><i>Discussion after sandbox exercise:</i> Please show us what you have created. Take us with you into the process.</p>
3	Comparing Phase 1 and 2: From Perceptions to Utopian Ideals	<p data-bbox="679 1361 1302 1395">What stands out when looking at everyone's utopia?</p> <p data-bbox="679 1435 1150 1469">How do our utopias differ from reality?</p> <p data-bbox="679 1509 1382 1644">If these are the ideal worlds we were to strive for, then how could we start thinking about this in our own world? What would need to happen?</p> <p data-bbox="679 1662 1350 1695">Who should be responsible for these changes to happen?</p> <p data-bbox="679 1736 1398 1769">Is government intervention desirable and if so, in what way?</p>