REPORT ON THE FIRST ISSP USER CONFERENCE "SOCIAL INEQUALITY"

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The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Secretariat and the editors of a forthcoming special issue of the International Journal of Sociology (IJS) organised an online conference on the ISSP "Social Inequality V" module on 12 December 2022. The conference was opened by Stephanie Steinmetz with a short introduction to the ISSP. ISSP is an ongoing annual cross-national collaboration programme of surveys covering topics important for social research. The Social Inequality module investigates issues such as attitudes towards income inequality, perceptions of earnings and legitimate earnings in different occupations, the legitimation of inequality, attitudes towards career advancement, social cleavages and conflict among groups. The survey has been fielded five times since 1987, with the most recent survey taking place in 2019.

In the first session, presentations concentrated on the topic of subjective social status (SSS) and how this is connected to different aspects of well-being and economic outcomes. Nathalie Vigna (and her co-author Daniel Oesch) focused on the predictive power of different class measures, drawing attention to the fact that although objective measures are commonly regarded as more suitable for predicting life chances, subjective class can also be a relevant and, in some cases, even better measure. Using data from ISSP 2009 and 2019 from fifty-five countries, they contrasted subjective and objective class to explain variance in household income, personal income and wealth. Their results indicate that the single question used to measure subjective class accounts for more variance in household income than the three indicators of objective class, and the difference in explanatory power is even larger in the case of wealth. However, they noted that these disparities only exist at the household level. In the case of personal income, subjective and objective measures do about as well as predictors.

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When explaining what can impact self-perceived social status, apart from objective inequality, Gábor Hajdu explained that perceived income inequality also has an effect. Using data from four waves of ISSP and twenty-eight European countries, he tested the hypothesis via a subjective measure of inequality based on asking respondents to estimate how much people in various occupations earn. Indeed, he found that even after controlling for objective income inequality, preferences regarding the level of inequality, as well as objective measures of social status, the higher the level of perceived income inequality, the lower the respondent's subjective social status. He attributes this association to two underlying mechanisms: an increase in the feeling of relative deprivation and in the frequency and importance awarded to social comparison.

Subjective social status is especially widely used for explaining the relationship between inequality and mental well-being, as Atefeh Bagherianziarat explained in her presentation. However, while previous studies have mainly claimed that SSS mediates between inequality and different aspects of well-being, the latter (Atefeh and colleagues) examined it as a moderating effect. They used data from the 2019 wave of ISSP, constructing a linear regression model to test their hypothesis that the effect of people's economic status on their level of happiness decreases if they consider themselves to be of lower social status. Their results indicate that this is indeed the case, which signals that social evaluation and comparison are important factors when it comes to happiness. Nonetheless, she noted that even so, economic status has a stronger effect on happiness than SSS.

Focusing more on objective social status and inequality of opportunity, Peng Wang presented a study (conducted with co-author Tony Tam) that contrasted the role of family origin and individual effort in educational attainment. Based on data from the 2009 ISSP wave for China and the 2008 wave of the Chinese General Social Survey, the researchers developed a measure for academic work ethic consisting of three dimensions: consistency, dependability, and deferred gratification. Regarding family origin, Wang described that in China, due to the hukou system that differentiates persons with an urban and rural origin, there practically exist two worlds of social mobility. This duality was reflected in their results. Using 2009 ISSP data, the former showed that compared to post-communist Eastern European and miracle growth economy Eastern Asian societies, in China, the effect of family origin on educational attainment is very strong – much stronger than that of individual effort. However, when they focused only on persons with an urban hukou origin in China, and effort mattered to about the same extent, the association between family origin and educational outcome was much weaker. Thus, he explained that while China is a non-meritocratic society in cross-national comparative terms, if we rule out the impact of hukou origin, the country is neither meritocratic nor non-meritocratic.

The topics of income inequality, different notions of fairness, and perceptions of these were addressed in Session 2. The first presentation, held by Sonja Zmerli, compared two measures of perceptions of income inequalities: the perception of the size of inequality ("inequalities are too large") and the opinion about the fairness of the income distribution. This was made possible by the fact that the 2019 wave of ISSP differentiates between these two dimensions of perceived inequality by including separate questions on them. Her preliminary findings indicate that in more unequal societies, the link between the two dimensions seems to be weaker: in these countries, people are more inclined to subscribe to a meritocratic narrative which legitimizes existing inequalities. Furthermore, even though fairness attribution is an important predictor, it does not replace the perceived size of inequality but complements it. However, a key difference between the two items is that fairness perceptions are strongly associated with social trust, while the perceived size of differences is not.

Kristýna Bašná talked about the relationship between the level of corruption in a country and the perception of income fairness. Her hypothesis, which she examined via analyzing ISSP data from 2019 and taking the World Bank's 'Control of Corruption' as the corruption measure, was that countries with higher corruption levels have lower levels of perceived income fairness. She explained that the mechanism behind this is that high corruption leads to income not being distributed fairly but instead based on connections and bribes. Using multilevel modelling, she confirmed this hypothesis while also drawing attention to the fact that there are significant regional differences in this regard – the effect is stronger in European than in Asian countries. Furthermore, Asian countries exhibit lower perceptions of income fairness.

Another presentation that addressed the issue of perceived versus tolerated inequality was given by Carmen Le Foulon, who (with colleagues Ariadna Chuaqui, María José Abud, and Benjamín Oteíza) used ISSP data from 2019 to examine the variation in the latter among twenty-seven countries, as well as their relationship with individuals' perceived status mobility. She gave an overview of their preliminary results, which show that perceived inequality and accepted inequality are positively associated, but there seems to be no association between perceptions of mobility and perceived inequality at the country level.

Attempting to explain cross-country and within-country differences in attitudes towards inequality, Insa Bechert (and co-author Lars Osberg) focused on fair pay differentials in seven countries – Germany, Italy, Hungary, Norway, Great Britain, the USA, and Russia. Because fair pay ratios are quite small, as are differences within and between countries (everywhere, about 80% of people favour small differences), they concentrated on the few who have an inegalitarian

attitude. According to their results, gender, age, education, income, and social class are the factors which predict inegalitarian attitudes.

The final session of the conference focused on methodological challenges related to the Social Inequality Modules. First, Renzo Carriero's study assessed to what extent critiques related to measuring attitudes towards income inequality via fair pay ratios are justified. Using 2019 ISSP data from eight countries, he examined whether fair pay ratios can be used to accurately measure individuals' attitudes and how these items perform compared to word-based income inequality attitude measures. He concluded that while (adjusted) fair pay ratios can be used to investigate differences across party preferences, they are unsuitable for analyzing class differences. Moreover, he warned that cross-country comparisons in this regard may not deliver accurate results. All in all, while word-based measures were found to be more strongly associated with party preference and class belonging and thus seem to have more explanatory power, his conclusion was that pay ratios do not necessarily have to be cast aside completely, as word-based items do not show the magnitude of inequality which respondents are willing to accept.

Gonzalo Franetovic (based on work with co-author Arturo Bertero) introduced a novel approach to examining inequality beliefs in surveys. He explained that while pre-existing research usually distinguishes between individualist and structuralist assumptions when explaining why inequality exists, this dual approach is based on factor analysis techniques that may underestimate the number of factors. Therefore, using data from the 2019 wave of ISSP, they employed exploratory graph analysis (EGA) to test their first hypothesis that there exist more than two underlying dimensions when it comes to inequality-related beliefs. EGA shows that with the exception of three countries, there are indeed more than two underlying dimensions – in addition to the individualist and structuralist items, a political dimension can also be observed. The researchers also constructed a causal attitude network model, which gave insight into the interplay between inequality belief items. Connected to this, their second hypothesis was that individualist belief items would be more centrally situated in the attitude networks of countries with a high GINI than structuralist items. This, however, did not prove to be the case.

The issue of low-quality and low-effort responding was specifically addressed by Miloslav Bahna in his presentation about a study he implemented with co-author Ondrej Buchel. Looking at data from five waves of the social inequality module of ISSP (from 1987 to 2019), they predicted that there would be an increase in low-effort responding over time and that this increase would be greater in Eastern European than in Western European countries. The reasoning behind this was that after the democratic transition, following the initial

optimism regarding democracy, its institutions, and surveys, there was a wave of disillusionment and loss of trust which is also reflected in to what extent people think surveys are useful instruments, and that their opinions will be heard if they answer questions thoroughly. Their preliminary findings confirmed their hypothesis – the incidence of low-effort responding did increase over time, with education and mode of survey administration (face-to-face or self-completion) being important individual-level predictors. However, to provide sufficient evidence of the mechanism they call the 'post-transition efficacy boost', adding further ISSP modules and data from different surveys will be needed. Also, they plan on looking at other possible country-level predictors, such as the level of corruption and perceived political efficacy.

The last conference presentation was given by Harry Ganzeboom, who presented a study (conducted with Tamira E. Sno) on the validity and reliability of detailed and crude measurements of occupation in the ISSP. He argued that the crude indicator (that uses only ten categories as opposed to the detailed ISCO coding) can be just as effective at measuring occupation as the detailed one. In order to prove this, the latter estimated validity and reliability coefficients for intergenerational status attainment models (which include respondents' and their parents' occupations, first occupation, current occupation, as well as personal income). Their results confirmed their hypothesis – in terms of validity (looked at via systematic measurement error), both measures do about equally well. However, in the case of reliability (random measurement error), the detailed occupational measure performs worse than the crude one. Finally, both indicators are associated with a high total measurement error, which can be corrected if they are both included in a latent variable model – thus, this model provides a more accurate picture.