

Higher Inequality Increases the Gap in the Perceived Merit of the Rich and Poor

Nicholas Heiserman¹ and Brent Simpson¹

Abstract

The rewards people receive are often taken as indirect evidence of their merit. We outline an argument that addresses how the magnitude of macrolevel income inequalities affects perceptions of the distribution of merit in a society. We propose that higher levels of economic inequality will lead to perceptions of greater differences in merit such that societies with higher inequality will be characterized by a larger “merit gap,” namely, larger differences in the perceived merit of the rich and poor. We test these arguments using an online experiment that manipulated the level of inequality (high vs. low) in an anonymized society. Participants perceived a larger merit gap in high versus low inequality societies. Our arguments and findings have implications for attitudes about inequality and redistributive policies.

Keywords

inequality, merit, income, perceptions, legitimacy, justice, reward expectations

Why do people tolerate high levels of inequality, particularly given that high inequality disadvantages more people than it advantages (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009)? A common explanation is that people tolerate inequality because they believe it is just, fair, or legitimate (Benabou and Tirole 2006; Hegtvedt and Isom 2014; Jost and Hunyady 2002). Indeed, despite the rise in American economic inequality, we have not seen a commensurate rise in concerns about economic fairness among the public (Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2015; Osberg and Smeeding 2006).

We propose one reason why higher levels of inequality are not necessarily met with greater perceptions of unfairness: people use the level of inequality as a sign of how merit is distributed in

society. If so, the more inequality one perceives, the less meritorious the poor will seem and/or the more meritorious the rich will seem. Prior work shows that those who are rewarded more are seen as more competent than those rewarded less (Berger et al. 1998; Fiske et al. 2002) but not whether this “merit gap” between the rich and poor tends to be larger for societies with higher inequality (e.g., the United States) than those with lower inequality (e.g., Sweden); we predict that it is.

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We argue that prevalent assumptions about merit lead people to assume that income inequality correlates strongly with inequality of merit. Higher levels of income inequality will therefore result in a larger perceived merit gap between the rich and poor. This argument has important implications for how and why high levels of inequality are accepted. After outlining our argument, we test its key predictions with results from a new web-based experiment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our argument is informed by several streams of research. First, we draw on the justice literature, which finds that people frequently base their judgments of pay justice on the norm of *equity* (Hegtvedt and Isom 2014). Other distribution principles exist, but we focus on equity because of its pervasiveness in the United States (Reynolds and Xian 2014) and abroad (Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007). The equity principle states that a person's rewards should be proportional to their merit, namely, their competence, skill, and work ethic (Hegtvedt 1992).

When a society distributes reward equitably, it is said to be a *meritocracy*. In a meritocracy, rewards (like income) are a direct result of a person's competence and hard work rather than luck, the status of his or her parents, or social connections. A pure meritocracy would distribute greater material rewards to those with more merit (Hegtvedt 1992). Thus, a proponent of meritocracy would presumably be less concerned with the extent of inequality per se than the degree to which that inequality stems from variation in merit rather than structural barriers like discrimination (Hegtvedt and Isom 2014; Schneider and Castillo 2015).

We focus on one mechanism through which inequality can affect perceptions

of merit. Reward expectations theory (Berger et al. 1998) states that people generally assume that ability leads to rewards. Because merit is often difficult to observe, people (often erroneously) deduce information about others' merit from more visible signifiers like wealth or rewards. This "reverse process" leads people to conclude that group members who have received more rewards must have greater ability than others in the group (Cook 1975; Harrod 1980; Stewart and Moore 1992).

Reward expectations theory has primarily been applied in small-group contexts. Here we deploy it to address perceptions of merit at the macro level. Just as importantly, we extend the theory to explain how *variation* in inequality (vs. whether or not inequality exists) leads to perceptions of a larger merit gap between a society's rich and poor.

Research outside the group processes tradition suggests how macrolevel inequality may shape perceptions of a society's citizens and attitudes about inequality. For example, stereotypes of a social group's competence are strongly linked with beliefs about that group's socioeconomic standing (Brezina and Winder 2003; Fiske et al. 2002). More generally, wealth and poverty are often attributed to "internal" factors like laziness, intelligence, and drive, especially when such attributions are in the perceiver's self-interest (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler 2001; Lepianka, Gelissen, and van Oorschot 2010; Reynolds and Xian 2014). These attributions—of the poor as "lazy" and the rich as "driven"—have been linked to higher tolerance of inequality (Robinson 2009; Schneider and Castillo 2015).

This prior work leaves several important questions unanswered. Primarily, does the magnitude of a society's inequality affect the magnitude of the merit gap between the rich and poor? That is, all

else equal, is there a larger perceived merit gap between the rich and poor in more unequal versus less unequal societies? If so, is this effect driven by a tendency to view the rich in more unequal societies as especially worthy, to view the poor in more unequal societies as especially unworthy, or both? Our study aims to answer these questions.

We propose that people will assume that greater inequality is an indication of a larger merit gap between the rich and poor in a given society. We therefore test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the perceived inequality in a given society, the larger the difference in expected merit between top and bottom earners.

This hypothesis will be supported if perceiving higher inequality leads people to evaluate those with lower incomes as less meritorious (Hypothesis 1a), those with higher incomes as more meritorious (Hypothesis 1b), or both (Hypothesis 1c).

METHOD

We used an online experiment ($N = 101$) to test whether perceived levels of societal inequality influence perceptions of merit in that society. In doing so, we sought to isolate our key independent variable from other factors that affect perceptions of merit and deservingness, including one's own or others' socioeconomic status, education, and ideology (Lepianka et al. 2010; Robinson 2009).

We recruited participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), an online labor market that allows requesters to post tasks that users (or "workers") can complete for monetary rewards. A variety of studies have shown that mTurk yields reliable, high-quality data (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Paolacci et al.

2014; Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014). While mTurk samples are not representative of the general population, they are substantially more diverse than most other types of convenience samples, perhaps especially those typically used in laboratory experiments.

We restricted our sample to American respondents to control for international differences in attitudes about inequality and merit. For example, Americans tend to be less concerned about the incomes of the poor than citizens of other advanced economies (Osberg and Smeeding 2006). We sought to control for this variation and investigate our mechanism in the American context since it is the focus of much recent research on attitudes about inequality (Ashok et al. 2015; Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2014; Dawtry, Sutton, and Sibley 2015).

Manipulation of Inequality

We did not present participants with information about the United States (or any other named society) because beliefs about the propriety of American inequality are highly polarized along ideological and demographic lines (Reynolds and Xian 2014; Shepelak 1989). Instead, they read information about three anonymous countries with different levels of inequality and answered questions about either the *high* or *low* inequality country, depending on the experimental condition.

We told participants that we were interested in how people form impressions about countries, people, and events with limited information. They were told that they would judge real countries but without information identifying the countries. The three countries (Countries "K," "L," and "M") varied in their income inequality. To prevent participants from assuming that different levels of inequality were based on differences in social or economic systems, they were told that

all countries were democratic and capitalist and had similar standards of living.

We described the income distribution as the ratio of the income of the ninetieth percentile to the income of the tenth percentile within each country. We used the 90:10 ratio because it is more familiar and comprehensible to participants than other measures like the Gini coefficient, and recent research shows that research participants exhibit poor comprehension of more complex measures or representations of inequality (Eriksson and Simpson 2012).

Participants were told that they would be asked to answer questions about one of the (three) countries. All participants were asked about Country M, which, depending on condition, was either described as having high or low income inequality relative to the other two. In the high inequality condition, Country M had the highest income ratio of the three (16.4:1), while Country L had the lowest (3.0:1). In the low inequality condition, Country M had the lowest ratio (3.0:1), while Country L had the highest (16.4:1). The medium inequality country was included to provide more context for the high and low inequality countries. It was always described as having an income ratio of 6.3:1. Note that the high inequality ratio is similar to the income distribution in the United States, whereas the lower income inequality country is comparable to Sweden.¹

As a manipulation and comprehension check, participants were asked to name which country's ninetieth percentile was best off compared to that country's tenth percentile and were given three chances to answer correctly before continuing, which gave us clearer insight into how much participants read and understood the information. Next, they answered

additional questions about Country M, including comprehension checks requiring them to provide the correct income ratio of Country M and whether it had the highest, lowest, or middle level of inequality compared to the other two.²

Dependent Measures

After the manipulation and comprehension checks, we asked participants to imagine a typical member of the ninetieth or tenth percentile in Country M and to rate this person's general merit. We expected that many participants may be reluctant to explicitly rate a person from the lower social class as less deserving, which might make it difficult to detect true differences in merit estimates. As a way around socially desirable responding in this first set of measures, we asked participants to predict how most other citizens of the target country would rate the target's merit. More specifically, participants responded to the following items, each on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to very much so: "How (*confident, competent, hardworking, deserving*) do people in Country M think this person is?" This scale was adapted from one used to measure perceptions of competence (Fiske et al. 2002). We added *deserving* to more adequately measure merit since a person with greater merit deserves greater reward. The scale was embedded in several filler items. Participants completed the scale twice—once for a person from the ninetieth percentile and again for a person from the tenth percentile, with the presentation order randomized.

²These questions read "In which country did the ninetieth percentile earn the most compared to the tenth percentile?"; "In Country M, people in the ninetieth percentile make on average _____ times more than those in the tenth percentile"; and "Out of the three countries described, Country M has (the lowest, moderate, the highest) differences in earnings."

¹This ratio was 17:1 in the United States in 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016) and 4.2:1 in Sweden in 2012 (World Bank 2016).

Our hypothesis predicts that participants in the higher inequality condition will perceive a larger merit gap between ninetieth and tenth percenters compared to participants in the lower inequality condition.

We also administered a second set of dependent measures to more directly assess participant's personal perceptions of how merit varies with inequality between countries. Participants were again presented with all three countries: one high, one medium, and one low inequality. We asked them to imagine three people, one person from each of the three countries' ninetieth (or tenth) percentile, and asked them "Which of these three people from the ninetieth (tenth) percentile is likely to be the most (least) competent, compared to the other two?" Thus, four items assessed participants' perceptions of which country would have the (a) most competent ninetieth percenters, (b) least competent ninetieth percenters, (c) most competent tenth percenters, and (d) least competent tenth percenters.

We predict that participants will expect higher inequality countries to exhibit a wider merit gap, namely, more competent rich and/or less competent poor. Said differently, participants will tend to expect that (a) those in the ninetieth percentile of more unequal countries are *more* competent than those from less unequal countries, (b) those in the tenth percentile of more unequal countries are *less* competent than those from less unequal countries, or (c) both.

After completing the dependent measures, participants filled out a demographics questionnaire indicating their age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, education, social and economic political orientation, and subjective socioeconomic status (SSES).³ SSES was measured using a picture of a 10-rung

ladder, with the best off at the top and worst off at the bottom, and asking participants to place themselves on the ladder (Brown-Ianuzzi et al. 2014). Finally, participants were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and paid \$1.00, a payment at the higher end of typical mTurk rates. The study lasted just under 10 minutes on average.

RESULTS

Of the 101 participants who completed the study, 95 answered all three comprehension checks correctly on the first attempt; 5 answered at least one incorrectly but answered correctly on the second try. Only one person answered a question incorrectly on all three attempts and was therefore excluded from the analysis, leaving 100 participants. The high accuracy rate strongly suggests that participants read and clearly understood the procedures. Table 1 gives a demographic breakdown of our sample. While obviously not fully representative of the American population, participants varied substantially in their background characteristics.

First, we examine the results of the merit ratings. Recall that participants rated the overall merit of target persons from the ninetieth and tenth percentiles. The scales for these merit ratings were reliable. Cronbach's alpha was .86 for the scale used for ratings of the ninetieth percentile, .94 for the scale used for ratings of the tenth percentile, and .91 for the scale overall.⁴ To gauge the overall difference in the perceived merit gap, we constructed a difference score by subtracting each participant's merit ratings of the tenth percentile from their merit ratings of the ninetieth percentile. This

³Participants also completed several exploratory measures for a separate study of perceptions of economic mobility.

⁴Descriptive statistics and additional analyses of the scale are given in Tables S1–S3, available with the online version of the paper (available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/spq>)

Table 1. Sample Demographics, $N = 100$

	Range	Mean, Median, or Percentage
Race		
White		70
Black		5
Hispanic/Latino		12
Asian		12
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander		1
Female		45
Age	21–60	33.3
Education	1 = less than high school, 7 = doctorate	Associate's degree
Income range	1 = \$0–\$15,000, 7 = >\$120,000	\$45,001–\$60,000
Subjective socioeconomic status	1 = bottom rung, 10 = top rung	4.9
Political orientation (economic)	1 = very liberal, 9 = very conservative	4.7
Political orientation (social)	1 = very liberal, 9 = very conservative	4.0

merit gap score was also reliable, $\alpha = .90$.

Table 2 details merit ratings by condition. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the merit gap differed significantly between the high and low inequality conditions ($t = -3.39, p < .001$). On average, the difference in merit ratings of the ninetieth and tenth percentiles was 1.54 points larger in the high inequality condition (2.08) than the low inequality condition (.54).

As noted earlier, larger merit gaps in high inequality countries could result from lower merit estimates of the poor (Hypothesis 1a), higher estimates of the rich (Hypothesis 1b), or both (Hypothesis 1c). To assess the source of the perceived merit gap, we separately compared mean ratings of ninetieth percentile targets and tenth percentile targets. Ratings of the ninetieth percentile did not differ between conditions (6.46 vs. 6.82; $t = -1.39, p = .12$). There was, however, a substantial effect of condition on ratings of the tenth percentile target ($t = -5.31,$

$p < .001$). On average, participants in the high inequality condition rated the tenth percentile target about 2 points lower in merit on the 9-point scale (4.37 vs. 6.28). This supports the hypothesis that greater inequality leads to greater perceived merit gaps and suggests that this effect is driven by differences in perceptions of the poor (Hypothesis 1a) rather than the rich (Hypothesis 1b).

We assessed whether any of the demographic measures moderated any of these effects by entering each measure into a regression along with condition and the interaction term. We did not find any interactions with the inequality manipulation.⁵ Although this suggests that the main effects are robust across the sociodemographics we measured, it is possible that a larger and/or more diverse sample would have yielded either

⁵See Tables S4 and S5, available with the online version of the paper.

Table 2. Two-Tailed *t* Tests of Mean Merit Ratings on a Four-Item, 9-Point Scale, *N* = 100

	Condition		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Low Inequality (<i>N</i> = 53)	High Inequality (<i>N</i> = 47)		
Ninetieth percentile	6.82 (1.35)	6.46 (1.74)	1.18	.12
Tenth percentile	6.28 (1.56)	4.37 (2.07)	5.23	<.001
Merit gap (ninetieth percentile – tenth percentile)	.54 (2.87)	2.08 (1.56)	-3.39	<.001

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

main or moderating effects, something that could be explored in future work.

We now turn to our second set of dependent measures. These measures assessed which societies participants expected would be characterized by larger or narrower merit gaps between the rich and poor. Recall that in these items, participants were asked to predict which of the three countries likely had the most competent ninetieth percenter, the least competent ninetieth percenter, the most competent tenth percenter, and the least competent tenth percenter.

The results, given in Tables 3 and 4, support the hypothesis that greater inequality leads to expectations of greater differences in competence between the rich and poor. First, as predicted, participants tended to expect that the most competent ninetieth percenters would come from the high inequality country while the least competent ninetieth percenters would come from the low inequality country (Table 3; $\chi^2 = 65.62$, $p < .001$). Likewise, participants expected that the most competent tenth percenters would come from the low inequality country, while the least competent tenth percenters would come from the high inequality country (Table 4; $\chi^2 = 66.65$, $p < .001$).

In other words, participants expected that citizens of the low inequality country would be characterized by a relatively

narrow merit gap, with the poor more closely resembling the rich in terms of competence, while the high inequality country would be characterized by a wider merit gap, with the rich being especially competent and the poor being exceptionally incompetent. As with the first set of measures, these results support our key hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). In this case, however, the results are consistent with the hypothesis that the merit gap is driven by altered perceptions of both the rich and the poor (Hypothesis 1c).

DISCUSSION

We addressed whether the magnitude of a society's inequality affects the perceived merit gap between that society's citizens. Two different measures yielded an affirmative answer: the merit gap was higher when participants judged a high inequality society than when they judged a low inequality society.

Our second question was whether the merit gap effect stems from greater expectations of the rich, lower expectations of the poor, or both. On balance, our results suggest that the merit gap is driven by lower evaluations of the poor in more unequal societies: participants in the high inequality condition expected significantly lower merit from the poor than those in the low inequality condition, supporting Hypothesis 1a. That

Table 3. Which Country Will Produce the Most/Least Competent Ninetieth Percenters?

		Least Competent Ninetieth Percenters			Total
		Low Inequality	Medium Inequality	High Inequality	
Most competent ninetieth percenters	Low inequality	1	7	27	35
	Medium inequality	4	1	6	11
	High inequality	47	5	2	54
	Total	52	13	35	100

Note: Because N = 100, raw totals are equal to percentages.

Table 4. Which Country Will Produce the Most/Least Competent Tenth Percenters?

		Least Competent Tenth Percenters			Total
		Low Inequality	Medium Inequality	High Inequality	
Most competent tenth percenters	Low inequality	1	2	43	46
	Medium inequality	6	2	7	15
	High inequality	33	3	3	39
	Total	40	7	53	100

Note: Because N = 100, raw totals are equal to percentages. $p < .001$.

said, in our second test of our hypothesis, participants thought not only that the higher inequality society would produce the least competent poor people but also that the higher inequality society would produce the most competent rich people, consistent with Hypothesis 1c.

There are several possible explanations for why we observed effects of higher inequality on lower merit ratings of the poor in both sets of measures but only found higher merit perceptions of the rich in higher inequality societies in the second measure. First, it may be that our first measure was limited by a ceiling effect such that merit ratings of the rich were already so high in the low inequality condition, the high inequality information did not have an added impact. Our second measure effectively forced participants to choose which of three nations (low, medium, or high

inequality) would produce the most competent rich person. This forced choice response might have circumvented any ceiling effects present in the first measure. More substantively, and perhaps more worryingly from a policy perspective, it may be that people tend to draw stronger inferences from inequality to the merit of the poor compared to the rich. For instance, perhaps the rich in higher versus lower inequality countries are seen as relatively more similar, at least with respect to merit, compared to the poor in higher inequality countries. These are important questions for future work. For now, we tentatively conclude that the overall tendency for higher inequality to lead to greater perceived merit gaps is driven by tendencies to view the rich as worth more and the poor as worth less in higher inequality countries but that the latter tendency

toward lower estimates of the poor is stronger.

The logic of meritocracy states that people who deserve more get more and vice versa. But our participants inferred that those who have less must deserve less. One implication of this finding is that paradoxically, people may perceive the poor as less deserving of efforts to reduce poverty in precisely those societies where poverty tends to be most dire, namely, in higher inequality systems. This parallel's Osberg and Smeeding's (2006) finding that Americans are less concerned about the incomes of the poor than citizens of countries characterized by lower inequality, including much of Europe. Future work should explore how inequality impacts attitudes about poverty reduction.

More generally, future research should investigate how the arguments and findings presented here are moderated by other key factors known to impact judgments of merit and attitudes about inequality. As a first step, although we could not find any evidence that our inequality manipulation was moderated by demographics factors, prior work has found variation in meritocratic thinking by demographics like socioeconomic status, political orientation, and education (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014; Reynolds and Xian 2014; Shepelak 1989). Future work should therefore explore how our inequality manipulation is moderated by these sociodemographics using a larger sample.

We also think it is important to examine how people (Americans and non-Americans) judge merit in specific, known countries. For instance, when judging the merit of citizens of a specific country, it is possible that people are more apt to draw on knowledge of—or beliefs about—structural barriers to mobility as well as entrenched political beliefs about the causes and desirability of inequality.

Those beliefs may vary based on both the country being judged and the native country of the judge, and this will obviously have important effects on judgments of merit and inequality attitudes. For instance, those who attribute economic outcomes to structural factors show greater concern about inequality (Bullock, Williams, and Limbert 2003; Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Schneider and Castillo 2015). Even so, beliefs about whether success is driven by merit or structure are not mutually exclusive but can exist simultaneously (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Reynolds and Xian 2014), and the nuances of these beliefs may not have entirely straightforward consequences for attitudes about inequality.

Further research might also examine how merit perceptions are affected by misperceptions of inequality. Much recent work has examined the accuracy of Americans' perceptions of inequality (Eriksson and Simpson 2012, 2013; Norton and Ariely 2011). These (mis)perceptions are shaped by ideology (Chambers et al. 2014), socioeconomic status, and neighborhood status and homogeneity (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, and Tetaz 2013; Dawtry et al. 2015), among other factors. If the level of inequality one perceives affects one's perception of merit, then biased perceptions of inequality, whether rooted in cognition or the varieties and degrees of inequality one is exposed to, will also further bias perceptions of merit in society.

Summing up, this study contributes to the growing social psychological and sociological literature on the roots and consequences of beliefs and attitudes about inequality. It also contributes to recent multidisciplinary efforts to use experimental methods to test causal arguments about how inequality shapes social perceptions and preferences (e.g., Cruces et al. 2013). Controlled investigation into the microlevel processes through

which inequalities are transmitted and sustained can complement traditional sociological work on the macrolevel processes governing inequality.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material can be found with the online version of the paper.

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