

Income inequality and solidarity in Europe

Marii Paskov^{a,*}, Caroline Dewilde^b

^a Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, Netherlands

^b Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, OZ Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper studies the relationship between income inequality, a macro-level characteristic, and solidarity of Europeans. To this aim, solidarity is defined as the ‘willingness to contribute to the welfare of other people’. We rely on a theoretical idea according to which feelings of solidarity are derived from both affective and calculating considerations – we derive competing hypotheses relating the extent of income inequality to these ‘underlying’ motivations for solidarity. Using data from the 1999 European Values Study (EVS), we apply multilevel analysis for 26 European countries. Controlling for household income and a range of macro-level characteristics, we find evidence that in more unequal countries people are less willing to take action to improve the living conditions of their fellow-countrymen. This is true for respondents living in both low- and high-income households. According to our theoretical framework, this finding suggests that, at least when measured in terms of ‘willingness to contribute to the welfare of other people’, feelings of solidarity seem to be influenced more strongly by affective, rather than by calculating considerations. © 2012 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study how inequality within countries, in particular economic inequality, is related to solidarity in Europe. For this purpose, we use a measure that directly captures the core of solidarity – willingness to promote the welfare of other people. In the literature, this core element of solidarity is often poorly captured. Solidarity has, for instance, been confused with concepts like social cohesion, social trust, and social capital, or has been equated with ‘institutionalized’ or ‘formal’ solidarity – i.e. support for welfare state intervention. Although all these concepts refer to social relations and

are in some way related to solidarity, they do not provide ‘direct’ information on what *motivates* people to support informal or ‘institutionalized’ forms of solidarity. For instance, in studies looking into popular support for welfare state intervention, it is difficult to disentangle to what extent respondents are willing to actively promote the well-being of other people based on feelings of solidarity, or whether support for the welfare state is rather motivated by self-interest. Our first contribution to the literature is hence to bring conceptual clarity and look at a measure, which captures more closely the general idea of solidarity – ‘willingness to contribute to the welfare of others’. More specifically, we look at solidarity in terms of support for the welfare of fellow countrymen: neighbors, older people, the sick and disabled, and immigrants. We hence look at feelings of solidarity as a determinant (among other determinants) of support for ‘institutionalized’ arrangements of solidarity.

* Corresponding author at: Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, Netherlands. Tel.: +31 0 205252414.

E-mail addresses: M.Paskov@uva.nl (M. Paskov), C.L.Dewilde@uva.nl (C. Dewilde).

The concept of solidarity has been discussed ever since the origins of social theory. Durkheim (1893/1964) already emphasized the functional necessity of solidarity for the existence and survival of social systems. Solidarity binds a society together and is a foundation for realizing collective interests (van Oorschot & Komter, 1998). Classical social theorists not only recognized the importance of solidarity for society, but also worried about how to sustain solidarity in times of rapid social change. An important theme running through Durkheim's work is how to ensure collective morality, cohesion and solidarity as societies become more strongly characterized by an organic division of labor, resulting in specialization and anomie.

More recently, it has been suggested that solidarity is threatened by individualism, the expansion of markets and market liberalism, and ethnic diversity (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Stjernø, 2004). In recent years, a great deal of research has focused on the reversal of the long-term declining trend in economic inequality, a social fact that seems to characterize many welfare states since the late 1970s. According to the *Growing Unequal*-report (OECD, 2008, p. 15), this upswing in income inequality is 'widespread and significant, but moderate'. Explanations have focused on large-scale trends on different levels, such as technological change, globalization and the internationalization of market economies, flexibilization of labor markets (which might or might not follow from the pressures of globalization), the declining impact of unions, welfare state restructuring, and changes in household size and structure. These changes are supposed to affect either the relative sizes of population groups with a lower and higher wage or (household) income – which makes for a 'compositional' effect – or the relative earnings received by these groups, and more specifically the high- and the low-skilled, in return for their labor (for overviews, see Alderson & Nielsen, 2002; Atkinson, 2008; Neckerman & Torche, 2007).

Recently, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have argued that growing inequalities may have important societal consequences. Their central argument is that the negative impact of income inequality on societal outcomes not only runs through absolute incomes. What matters is that people are *relatively more unequal* to each other. In more unequal societies comparing one's own situation to other people's, results in anxiety, and lower levels of security and self-esteem. Larger differences between people trigger status competition and rising aspirations, resulting in a range of undesirable outcomes, such as higher crime and violence rates, harsher criminal justice, worse physical and mental health, declining social trust, lower educational performance, and halted social mobility.

Although their methodological approach is not uncontested (e.g. Saunders, 2010), several of Wilkinson and Pickett's results have been substantiated. Examples are Lancee and van de Werfhorst (2012) on social participation and Babones (2008) on population health. Overview articles are provided by Neckerman and Torche (2007) and Thorbecke and Charumilind (2002). Although there is an abundance of research on the impact of inequality on many outcomes, it is much more difficult to test which underlying mechanisms could be responsible for these outcomes (psychological effects, level of available resources and services in a society, and social distance). In fact, more research is needed here, and we believe that for the more 'social' outcomes, solidarity might play a mediating role. For instance, segregated lives and larger social distance might mean that both rich and poor have less feelings of solidarity, and hence care less about how visible and invisible crimes (e.g. tax fraud) affect the community and its members. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) also suggest, for instance, that more imprisonment combined with harsher criminal justice regimes indicate less humane attitudes and less empathy toward fellow-countrymen in unequal societies. Such micro-mechanisms, however, are often not empirically tested. We thus argue that exploring the impact of inequality on solidarity (care for fellow countrymen) is actually part of the research into causal mechanisms. This is, however, a much broader research program, while in this paper we focus on solidarity as an outcome in the first place.

A second aim of this paper is hence to find out how economic inequality – in particular within-country inequality of disposable household incomes – impacts on solidarity, operationalized in terms of the willingness to contribute to the welfare of other people. Durkheim (1893/1964) suggested that large social inequities compromise solidarity, while social justice and equality (of opportunity) are important conditions sustaining solidarity. The main foundation of solidarity is the feeling of a 'shared fate' (Mayhew, 1971; van Oorschot & Komter, 1998). We thus argue that income inequality increases social distance and feelings of animosity between social groups, and hence erodes feelings of identification and a shared fate with fellow-countrymen.

Thirdly, starting from the different motives of solidarity identified in the literature – affective and calculating considerations – we formulate competing hypotheses concerning the impact of inequality on solidarity. Willingness to help others is not only dependent on affective considerations but also on more rational motivations – people might support the welfare of others because they realize that this will benefit themselves, or society at large. The negative externalities of income inequality,

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