

The Perception of Social Inequality

The Individualistic Turn

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Abstract

Nowadays it is almost common knowledge that social inequality is widespread and constitutes an everyday experience of many people in western societies. In order to investigate which thought patterns accompany perceptions of social inequality, 516 inhabitants of Cologne have been interviewed. Most of these think that social inequality in Germany is great or very great. Nearly 90% assume a hierarchical stratification of German society. These results are independent from sociodemographic variables like age, sex, education, income, and occupation. In addition, it turned out that social inequality is perceived as closely linked to disadvantageous circumstances like an unfortunate economic situation, unemployment, single parenthood or need of income support. Furthermore, characteristics typical for marginal groups play an important role, for example homelessness, drug addiction, low prestige occupations, and foreign nationality. To conclude, social inequality is perceived as great and related with various disadvantages as well as hierarchical stratification of society. Another part of the study asks which categories or characteristics are considered to be fair in relation to the position of people within the hierarchical stratification of society. It turned out that ascriptive categories like sex, social background, and cultural environment are judged as unfair by most of the respondents. By contrast, individual characteristics like hard work, industriousness, and further education were mostly evaluated as fair characteristics. These results indicate an individualistic turn in the perception of social inequality, especially when the position within stratified society is considered.

1. Introduction

Great social inequalities are typical for industrial and service societies. The unequal distribution of wealth and income, the unequal access to education, and disadvantages because of sex or gender are only a few examples of many unequally distributed resources constituting social inequalities in western societies. The description and analysis of social structures and social inequalities are classical topics of social science. Not only social are scientist investigating and perceiving social structures and social inequalities but also *John Doe* is perceiving social inequalities as an everyday experience. This study investigates the perception of social inequalities of the people living in Germany. The main questions of the study are:

- Do people perceive social inequalities and how do they perceive the social structure of German society?
- Which categories constitute the patterns of thought which accompany the perception of social inequalities?
- Which characteristics are judged as fair in relation to the position of people within the hierarchical stratification of society?

2. Data & Methods

This study has been conceptualized as a secondary analysis of data collected in the context of the project „Perception and Legitimation of Social Inequality in a large western City“ which was conducted by Karl Wilhelm Grümer (Institute of Applied Social Research, University Cologne, IfAS) and Maria Rohlinger (Central Archive for Empirical Social Research, University Cologne).

During the summer of 1998 516 Cologne adult inhabitants were interviewed. The questionnaire was predominantly standardized but also contains a lot of open questions especially included to investigate the patterns of thought which accompany the social inequalities. Basically the questionnaire was divided into six parts: First was questions about demographic characteristics (especially in order to investigate abortion behavior) (1), perception of social inequalities (2) relationship between perception and legitimation of social inequalities (3) the role of the welfare state (4) social background (demographic variables of e.g. parents and partners) (5) and household characteristics (6).

The interviews were realized using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CAPI) at the telephone studio of the Institute of Applied Social Research (IfAS) in Cologne. The questionnaire contains 70 questions. The average length of the interviews was 29 min.

The cross tabs and chi - square test of goodness of fit were used to investigate differences, especially within the thought patterns. To investigate the last question logistic regressions were processed. Statistical analysis were processed with SPSS.

Some demographic characteristics of the sample compared with official census of Cologne are shown in the following table:

		Sample	Cologne Census
sex	male	42,1%	46,7%
	female	57,9%	53,3%
age	18-24	9,6%	8,1%
	25-34	28,8%	22,5%
	35-44	18,7%	18,5%
	45-54	14,0%	14,3%
	55-60	9,6%	8,7%
	61-65	8,0%	7,5%
	66-74	8,0%	11,4%
75 plus	3,3%	8,9%	
marital status	single	42,6%	30,9%
	married	39,9%	53,4%
	divorced	9,9%	7,5%
	widowed	8,0%	8,2%
education	elementary school	29,5%	32,1%
	junior high	21,6%	22,3%
	university-entrance diploma	48,9%	45,6%

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

The table shows that the sample represents the inhabitants of Cologne in most of the compared characteristics. Greater differences only have been found within the marital status.

3. Results

First we have to consider if social inequality is perceived by the Cologne inhabitants. Most of them think that social inequality in Germany is great or very great. This estimation is independent from socio demographic variables, except sex. Women estimate social inequality significantly more great than men (Biester, 2005). Nearly 90% assume an hierarchical stratification of German society. This result has been asserted also for Austria (Hörl, 1999) and Switzerland (Stamm et al., 2003). So we can conclude social inequalities are perceived by most of the Cologne inhabitants as great and the independency from any demographic variable shows that social inequality is a „basic experience of living in a society“ (Klingemann, 1989, S. 317).

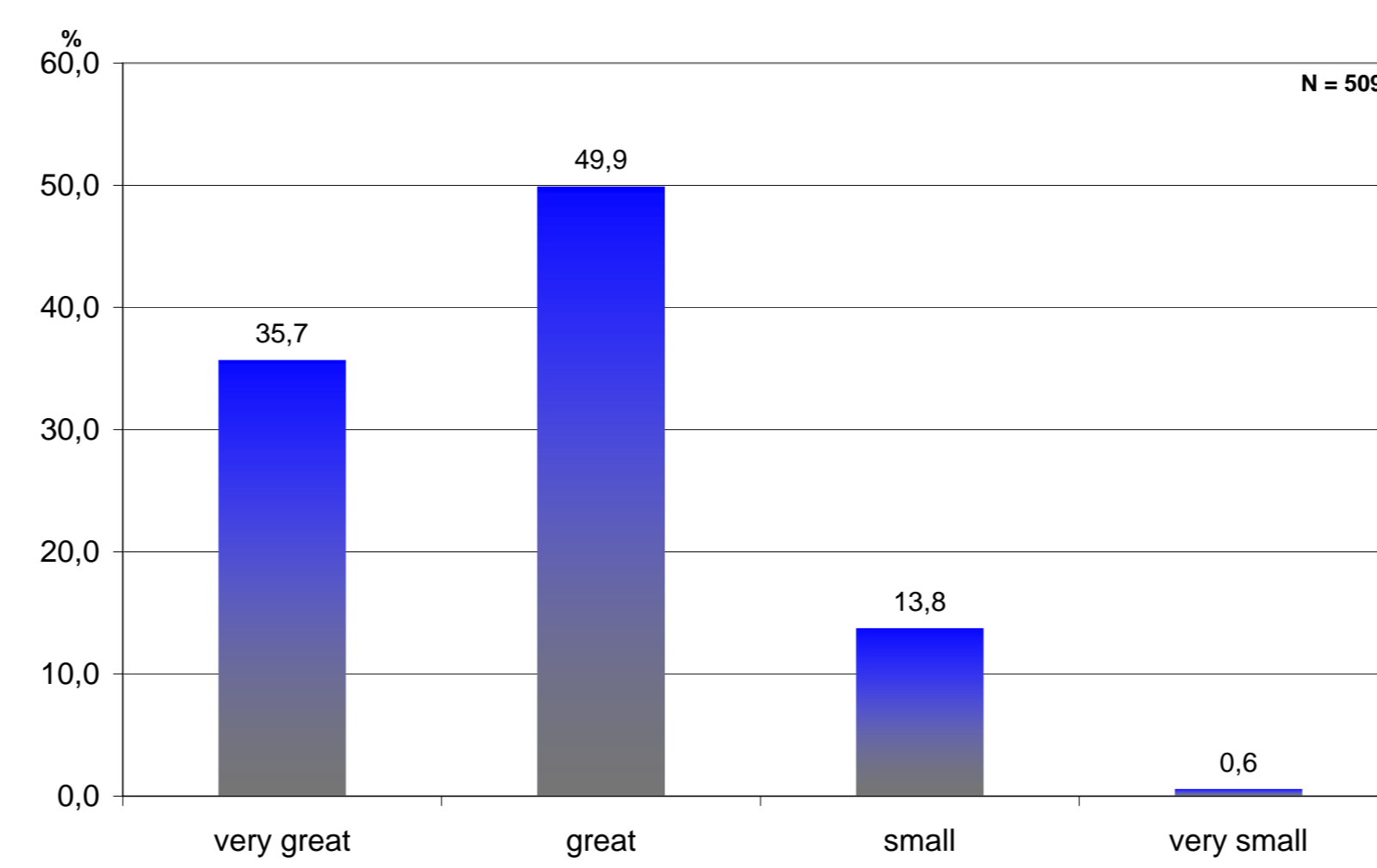


Figure 1: Perceived social inequality

To investigate the thought patterns of social inequality the Cologne inhabitants were asked to describe people or groups of people they consider to be associated with social inequality. First we have to consider that most of the descriptions are dominated by statements of disadvantages (59,8%), only 4,3% of the descriptions contain statements of privilege. About 30% are mixed statements. Focusing only on the descriptions that contain exclusive characteristics of disadvantages the following result appear: Nearly 75% of the Cologne inhabitants using the category *disadvantages* e.g. single parenthood, foreign workers, disabled people, the divorced or families with many children. Furthermore 25% use the category fringe group and only 12% use the category disadvantaged occupation. Interestingly only 13% use the category class. These descriptions are overall independent from any demographic variables, except some slight educational effects. So concluding we can say that social inequality is perceived as great with an hierarchical stratification society and imagined especially with disadvantages in every respect. The thought patterns of social inequality are dominated by categories of disadvantages.

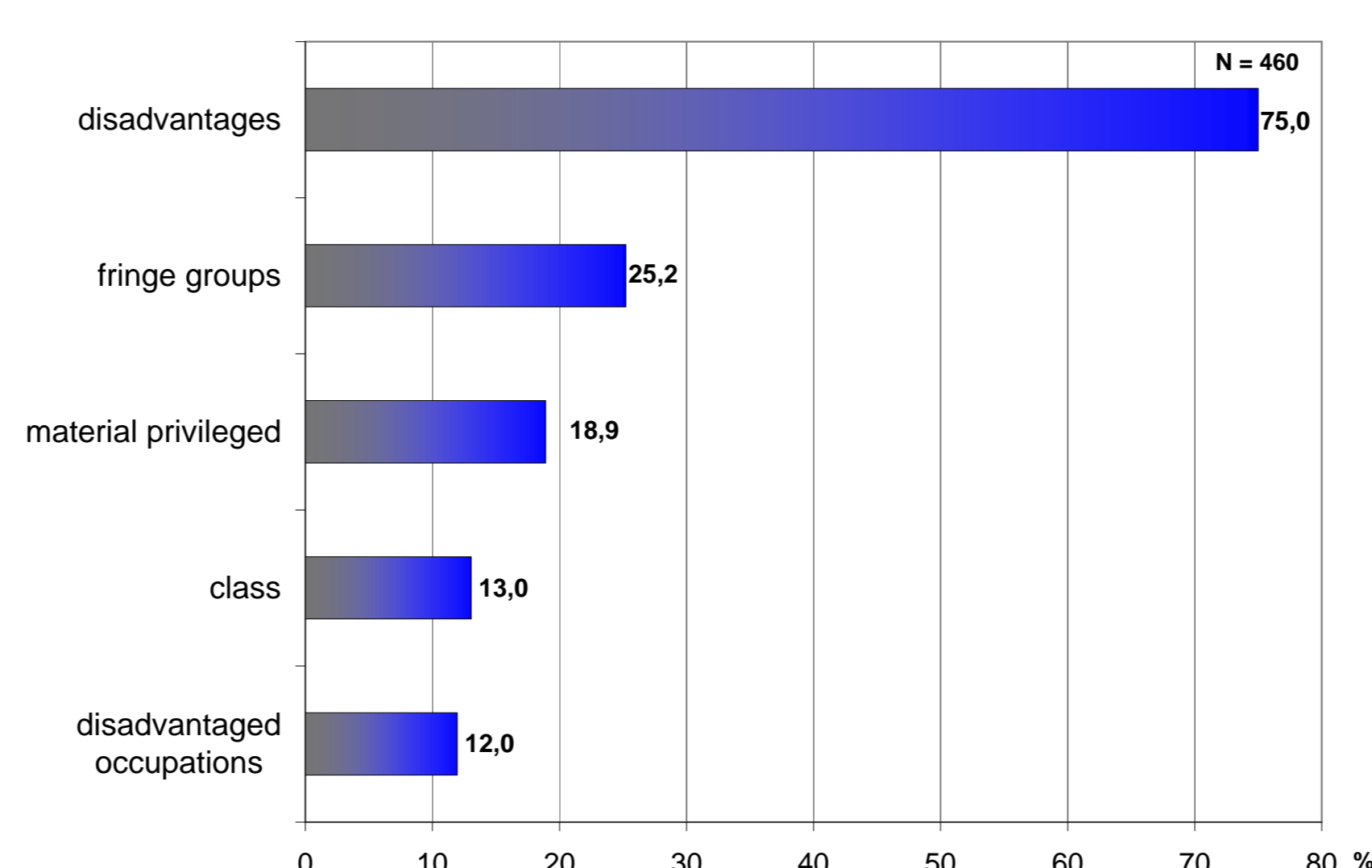


Figure 2: Thought patterns of social inequality

To investigate which characteristics are judged as fair in relation to the position of people within the hierarchical stratification of society people were asked to judge several categories from fair to unfair.

The categories sex (90,8%), social background (84,7%), cultural environment (82,0%), and wealth (74,7%) were judged very unfair. On the other hand the categories position of responsibility (89,0%), purposefulness (90,2%), industriousness (90,3%), good in solving problems (90,5%), and further education (90,9%) were judged as very fair.

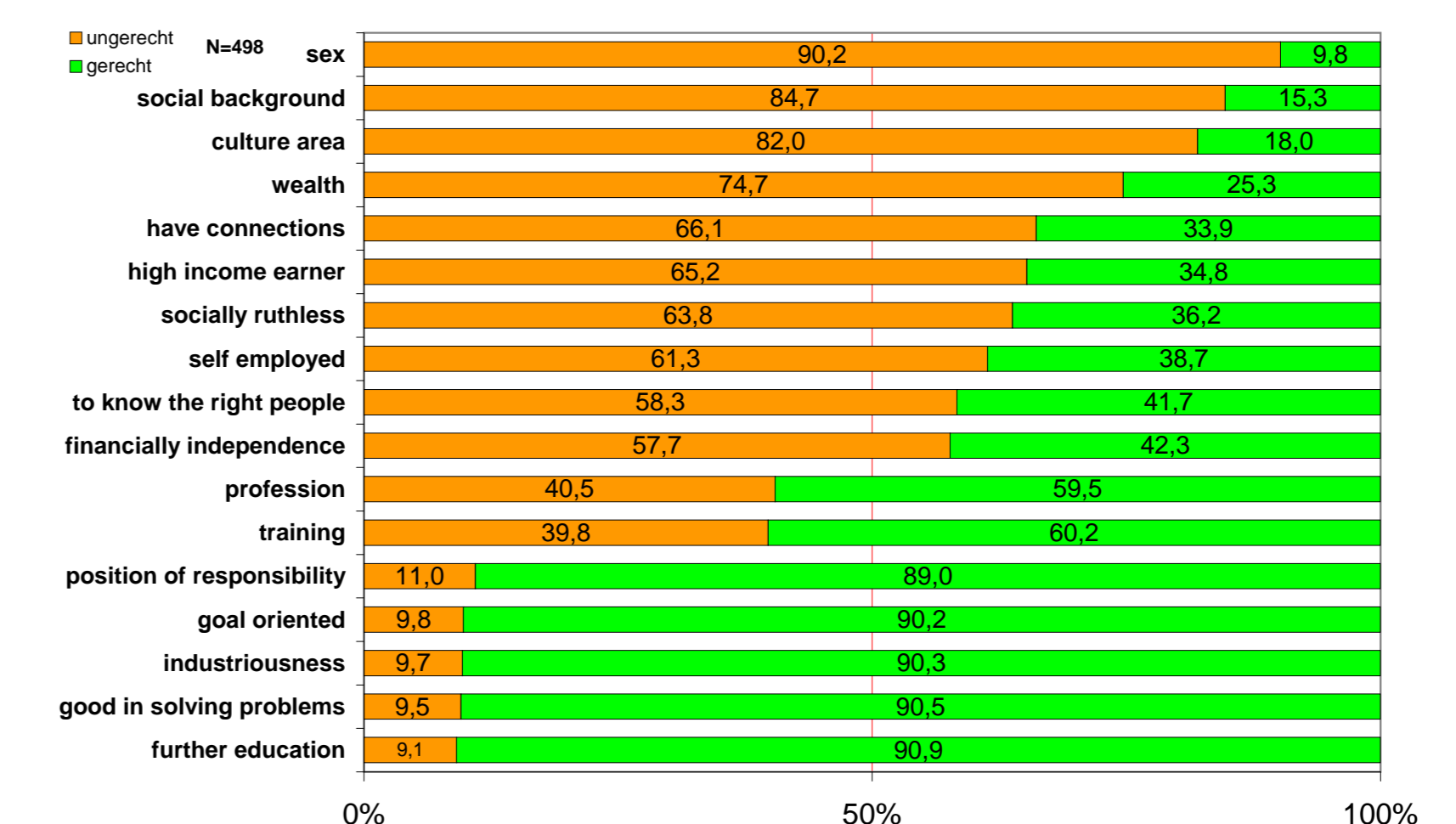


Figure 3: Which categories are fair?

Evaluating this distribution it turned out that ascriptive categories like sex, background, cultural environment, and wealth are judged as unfair by most of the respondents. By contrast, individual characteristics like hard work, purposefulness and further education were mostly evaluated as fair characteristics. These results indicate an individualistic turn in the perception of social inequality, especially when the position within stratified society is considered. As a result of this facts we can conclude that individual characteristics and individual behavior is evaluated as responsible for ones own position within the stratified society.

Furthermore these results indicates the existence of especially individualistic ideology typical described as *performance ideology*. And within this performance ideology especially individualistic characteristics, attitudes, and behavior are an important part.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion is divided into two parts: points out the main results and presents some further questions that have been appeared during research.

First we can conclude that social inequality as a typical characteristic of modern and industrial western societies is perceived as great or very great and this perception is associated with an image of a hierarchical stratified society. The thought patterns of social inequality are dominated by disadvantaged categories e.g. single parenthood, foreign workers, disabled people, the divorced or families with many children. Interestingly privileged categories e.g. elite or privileged occupations are rarely used, the same fact we asserted with the use of the category class. The perception and the described thought patterns are independent from socio - demographic characteristics therefore I assume that social inequality is a basic experience of scientists and John Doe's everyday life.

According to the question which characteristics are judged as fair in relation to the position of people within the hierarchical stratification of society the results indicate the existence of an *performance ideology* within a strong estimation of the own behavior especially concerning individualistic characteristics e.g. industriousness, further education, and purposefulness.

During the research there appear two further questions that have to be mentioned: status inconsistency that is expressed by e.g. working women or husbands who are raising children perhaps contain less social inequality as is described and perceived by the sociology of social inequality. So the question for sociology of social inequality is do the terms usually used for describing and explaining social inequalities fit.

Another question I want to mention is about the performance ideology and especially the aspect of individualistic characteristics and behavior. The question is who brings up this ideology, which power sanctions it, and how it comes into peoples minds.

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