

Network segregation, reference groups and redistributive preferences

Research Proposal

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Introduction

Rising economic inequality over the past few decades (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014) and the ongoing sanitary crisis have raised citizens' concerns about economic inequality pushing governments to enact redistributive policies, which has tested the capacity of welfare systems to provide sufficient risk protection for the population (Brezna, 2021). However, while the crisis has impacted societies, its consequences have been unequally distributed across the social structure. Therefore, the privileged access to resources held by the upper and intermediate classes has consolidated affluent groups' resilience capacity, allowing them to maintain a relatively stable standard of living, in contrast to the decline in the material conditions of working-class families (Moawad & Oesch, 2023). In addition, these transformations have been accompanied by a subjective corollary in which economic inequality experiences strengthen subjective economic deprivation and undermine perceived social status (Nolan & Weisstanner, 2022; Oesch & Vigna, 2022).

The research on individual preferences toward economic redistribution constitutes an interdisciplinary field in the social sciences (Alesina & Giuliano, 2010; Steele & Brezna, 2019). Across this body of literature, the common conceptual denominator is that individuals tend to hold different views about what should be the government's role in taking redistributive measures for providing welfare to their citizens. Likewise, different explanatory mechanisms for preference formation have been proposed, including explanations derived from the economic self-interest mechanism (Alesina et al., 2018; Meltzer & Richard, 1981) as well as the normative or value-driven motivations (Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Maldonado et al., 2019). Recently, the study of preferences towards redistribution has turned attention to the psychosocial processes involved in forming perceived economic inequality at the micro-level, focusing on (i) one's structural positions and (ii) the role of reference groups in social networks.

The idea that friends, family, or acquaintances influence how people experience social life has been previously addressed in the social network literature in sociology (McPherson et al., 2001). However, there has been no systematic dialogue regarding the role of social circles in subjective perceptions of economic inequality and preferences for redistribution from a social network perspective. In this regard, one theoretical claim of the Reference Group and Reality blend hypothesis (Evans, 2004; Kelley & Evans, 1995) suggests that structural positions imply a certain level of social closure which is reflected in the homophily of reference groups, making individuals embedded in more homogeneous and segregated networks hold inaccurate views about others' experiences regarding economic inequality, as well as their perceived position in the social hierarchy. Therefore, the level of segregation in social networks between different structural positions is not only a reflection of economic inequality but also represents the social distance between members of society, which can threaten social attachment and solidarity (Joye et al., 2019; Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022). Consequently, it is argued that redistributive preferences may be influenced by social networks, where the socioeconomic diversity of social

ties provides a broader window for learning about others' lifestyles, economic conditions, and worldviews, which in turn contributes to supporting more egalitarian policy measures to strive against inequality (J. Lee, 2023; Lindh et al., 2021; Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022)

This research aims to contribute to the literature on preferences toward redistribution from a social network approach, focusing on how the structural properties of networks can influence people's preferences toward economic redistribution. Therefore, the question this research aims to answer is *What is the role of social networks on the preferences for economic redistribution?* Therefore, the present research proposal presents three main sections in which the related literature has addressed the role of (i) reference groups in shaping views about inequality, (ii) the structure of association and networks, and (iii) the consequences of both in the study of redistributive preferences. Finally, a research plan composed of three independent studies is proposed to address the claimed research gap.

State of the field

2.1 Reference groups, personal networks, and perceived inequality

2.1.1 Reference groups and images about inequality

Building on the early work of Kluegel & Smith (1981), the study of economic inequality from a subjective approach has suggested that people's beliefs about economic affairs are stratified according to their position in the social hierarchy (Aalberg, 2003; Kluegel et al., 1995). In addition, the sociological distributive justice literature has contributed to explaining how people form their judgments based on how their structural position, as well as by their perceptions of economic inequality and social status (Jasso, 2001; Wegener, 1987). However, regardless of these contributions, there is still a gap knowledge gap between the formation of inequality perception and the study of redistributive preferences (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020b; García-Sánchez et al., 2019). For the material self-interest model (Meltzer & Richard, 1981), the position within the income distribution is crucial for explaining preferences for redistribution. Nevertheless, two propositions have been discussed in that regard. 1) individuals are *aware* of their income relative to others in society, and 2) their inference about the income of others is *accurate*. Recent research on perceived inequality has questioned these assumptions, suggesting that the claimed utilitarian motivation in the self-interest model could be confounded by the influence of reference groups on perception (Becker, 2021; Condon & Wichowsky, 2020b; Hvidberg et al., 2020; Trump, 2023). Consequently, further research on redistributive preferences should go beyond the rational self-interest model and value-driven explanations by focusing on the influence of reference groups.

Social psychology and sociology have previously addressed the role of reference groups on perception. For example, social comparison theory suggests self-evaluation is driven by comparison with reference groups conceived as similar regarding physical ability or opinions, but also about economic wealth or social prestige (Festinger, 1954). Likewise, Relative Deprivation Theory highlights the relevance of the perceived status of

reference groups, where inequality is crucial when evaluating the outcome of an exchange between perceived asymmetrical actors (Merton & Rossi, 1968). Moreover, the distributive justice literature has suggested that judgments about distributional outcomes are linked with previous perceptions of actual distribution (Wegener, 1990). It is argued that the observer's social status can lead to illusionary distributional perceptions that consequently could bias distributional judgments (Wegener, 1987). Hence, even if there is a relative consensus about the relevance of reference groups in social comparison and justice evaluations, little research has addressed the attributes of reference groups on perceived and preference inequality comprehensively.

Evans et al. (1992) have proposed two dimensions to study the role of reference groups on perceived images of stratification and social status. First, one aspect is to consider income or wealth, educational level, or occupation as the individual socioeconomic basis that shapes economic inequality experiences. Therefore, perceptions of economic inequality and status are partially explained by material conditions but do not explain the psychosocial processes involved with the images of social stratification (Evans et al., 1992). On the other hand, socioeconomic status entails social closure generated in personal networks homophily, arguing that the reference groups' socioeconomic composition influences images about stratification and social status via subjective sampling phenomenon, described as a type of availability heuristic that induce inaccurate perceptions (Evans, 2004). Therefore, society is perceived according to the distribution of status positions in the surrounding social circles (Evans et al., 1992, p. 465). For example, individuals in both high and low-status groups estimate the size of the lower and upper groups inaccurately, like a family doctor compared to a medical school professor, or a skilled worker compared to a garbage collector. Therefore, the overestimation of reference groups' size strengthens the tendency to rank themselves in the middle of the social hierarchy. Additionally, as economic prosperity rise, socioeconomic status increases at the individual level, but also at the status of relatives, friends, or co-workers. Consequently, people with higher subjective status reference groups do indeed perceive society as more egalitarian (Evans & Kelley, 2017, p. 33)

The study on subjective social status has contributed with three main remarks. First, it increases according to structural positions such as social class and education, particularly regarding wealth and income Castillo et al. (2013). Second, the subjective middle-class tendency is persistent across countries, where economic prosperity increases subjective status, while economic inequality diminishes it (Lindemann & Saar, 2014). Third, the combined influence of structural positions and reference groups in personal networks is conceptualised as the Reference Group and Reality (R&R) blend hypothesis (Kelley & Evans, 1995). It suggests that the joint forces of economic growth, economic inequality, and reference group homophily shape perceived economic inequality. These images have an anchor effect on how individuals perceive themselves in the social hierarchy as well. For example, if society is perceived as egalitarian, people perceive their network and themselves in higher structural positions, and vice versa (Evans & Kelley, 2017).

Given that interactions are not limited to the closest personal networks, it is reasonable to consider family and friends as the most significant ties but not the unique information source about economic inequality. Therefore, It is argued that the link between income inequality and preferences for redistribution should consider (1) how comparisons with reference groups are performed, (2) their attributes within personal networks, and

(3) to what extent experiencing socioeconomic diversity is associated to perceived economic inequality, which consequently operates as an explanatory mechanism of redistributive preferences.

2.1.2 Comparison and reference groups

Addressing the relevance of reference groups implies considering *who* are the target groups. Previously, it was suggested that the homophilic tendency of social ties formation influence perceived economic inequality. However, it is assumed that comparison focuses on individuals with similar attributes from the closest network, not specifying if this mechanism applies to diverse groups, implying that asymmetric comparison could lead to different outcomes. Consequently, analysing the role of reference groups in comparison processes should consider three dimensions: *direction* (e.g., upward, downward), *target* (e.g., friend, stranger), and *dimension* (e.g., status, appearance) (Arigo et al., 2020). For example, comparisons with a high-status reference group are expected to lead to higher relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, upward rather than downward comparison can trigger experiences of relative deprivation and increase perceived economic inequality (Jasso, 1990) and undermine life satisfaction (Schneider, 2019). Consequently, identifying the relevance and attributes of reference groups has yet to be clarified when addressing their influence on perceived and preferred economic inequality.

Studies have addressed how certain groups are preferred for evaluating economic conditions. For example, Clark & Senik (2010) examined the intensity and direction of income comparisons, finding that the greater the importance attributed to income comparison, the higher the chances of declaring work colleagues as the preferred reference group, followed by family and family friends. Furthermore, those in less risky labour market positions are less likely to compare, while almost all employees are likelier to compare with work colleagues than family or friends. Another study scrutinised the preferred reference groups for economic comparisons, showing that friends and neighbours are the most prevalent choice (Gugushvili, 2021, p. 12). Additionally, being active in the labour market in urban areas increases comparison preference with those groups, while highly educated and Downard mobile individuals prefer their family of origin as a reference group. However, the reference groups provided in the study are limited, excluding other relevant groups such as co-workers in economic comparisons (Clark & Senik, 2010).

Research on the influence of asymmetric reference groups on perceived inequality and preferences for redistribution has gained increasing attention recently. Clark & Senik (2010) found that individuals who prioritize social comparisons and choose family members as their reference group tend to demand higher levels of redistribution. Similarly, Cansunar (2021) reported that high-income individuals tend to support progressive taxation when they perceive themselves as occupying the highest rungs of the social hierarchy but also believe that others earn substantially more than them. Also, García-Castro et al. (2022) showed that frequent interaction with individuals considered “much richer (poorer)” has a positive effect on redistributive preferences when the reference group is deemed poorer, but no effect when it is considered richer. Experimental research has also provided supportive evidence. For example, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2015) conducted a study on an

online sample of American participants and found that redistributive preferences are likely to increase when individuals make upward social comparisons and perceive themselves to be worse than average in economic terms. Meanwhile, Condon & Wichowsky (2020a) analyzed a representative sample of American adults and discovered that upward social comparison diminishes subjective social status, but has no significant impact on general redistributive preferences. Instead, it increases demands for specific policies, such as poverty relief and unemployment insurance. Additionally, the upward comparison effect is more pronounced among upper-income individuals, suggesting that they imagine the advantaged others as individuals with outstanding amounts of wealth and power (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020b, p. 80 - 100).

The studies above shed light on the sociopsychological mechanisms regarding reference groups and redistributive preferences. Nevertheless, given that social, economic, and institutional factors often segregate individuals and groups (Mijs & Roe, 2021), less is known about how these interactions occur in everyday life. In this regard, nuances in social interactions, such as intensity and direction, provide a framework for inferring how economic resources are distributed in society. Furthermore, empirical research has partially supported their theoretical claims regarding the importance of family, friends, neighbours, and coworkers as relevant reference groups (Clark & Senik, 2010; Gugushvili, 2021). However, limitations of the reference group approach exist, such as (1) identifying their relevance to the individual and (2) accurately describing their socioeconomic or demographic characteristics. Despite this, a theoretical assumption is that network homophily serves as an inferential framework for inequality perception (Evans & Kelley, 2017), motivating higher support for redistributive policies. Consequently, the link between perceived and preferred economic inequality is revised in the following section, along with their main contributions and limitations.

2.1.3 Perceived inequality and redistributive preferences

The debate on the role of economic inequality demand for redistribution established by the self-interest approach through the median voter hypothesis has received partial empirical support, being consistent when addressing between-country differences in income inequality but absent in within-country variations (Franetovic & Castillo, 2022; Schmidt-Catran, 2016). Notwithstanding, an ongoing debate has focused on the sociopsychological processes in forming subjective appraisals of economic inequality and social status as an alternative explanatory mechanism for linking economic inequality to redistributive preferences (Castillo et al., 2022). Empirical efforts have been quite robust in establishing that among the different conceptualisations of perceived economic inequality, demand for redistribution increases when people perceive that economic inequality is higher (Bobzien, 2019; Evans & Kelley, 2018; García-Castro et al., 2022; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; García-Sánchez & De Carvalho Galvão, 2022). A recent study by Trump (2023) has simultaneously discussed two crucial elements of the rational self-interest model (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). First, she demonstrates that actual income inequality is not linked to perceived inequality (as salary gaps). Second, preferences for inequality and redistribution are associated with perceived inequality. Third, income inequality is not associated with either redistributive or inequality preferences. Hence, these results align with the theoretical idea

that the comparison process between perceived inequality and desired (lower) economic inequality is what increases demand for redistribution ([Trump, 2023](#)).

Part of the literature has argued that the divided results regarding the link between current inequality and demand for redistribution might be related to the lack of information about the distribution of economic resources in society, leading people to misperceive economic inequality ([Kelley & Evans, 1993](#); [Osberg & Smeeding, 2006](#)). However, this argument can be discussed in two aspects. First, survey instruments can cognitively challenge respondents when addressing quantiles, distributions, or numeric representations, such as wage inequality, in contrast to graphical representations, which can lead to substantial differences in the size of the claimed misperception ([Hadavand, 2018, p. 249](#)). Second, even when experimental studies have shown that providing accurate information about economic inequality can influence perceptions that align preferences with self-interest ([Hvidberg et al., 2020](#); [Karadja et al., 2017](#); [McCall et al., 2017](#); see [Stantcheva, 2021](#)), the inquiry about how this mechanism operates in everyday life social environments has yet to be further investigated.

The first relevant insight is that previous research leads us to assume that the perception of economic inequality motivates higher demand for redistributive policies. On the one hand, it has been shown that structural positions affect how inequality is perceived. On the other hand, it is generally assumed that an individual's experience and information about society are often limited by their network ties, such as family, friends, and acquaintances ([Mijs, 2018](#)). For example, the R&R blend hypothesis ([2004; 1995](#)) relies on the concept of reference group *homophily* without directly referring to the longstanding literature on social networks ([McPherson et al., 2001](#)). In this regard, a social network approach provides conceptual and empirical insights that allow one to describe social environments through social ties, as well as the motivational and macro-social fundamentals that shape the sociability structure of a society. Consequently, social networks constitute a valuable approach for connecting the role of social environments on perceived and preferred inequality.

2.2 Structure of association and social networks

2.2.1 Positions, association, and tie formation

The study of personal networks requires describing social structure as the basis for association patterns among individuals. The early work of Peter Blau ([1977b](#)) suggests that examining the nexus between people's positions and social relations implies paying attention to social differentiation, which is understood as the distribution of social position across the population. These positions are determined by the hierarchical status and group membership, representing two forms of differentiation: inequality and heterogeneity. However, the foundations of social structure analysis rely on observable patterns of social associations between these positions. The emphasis on differentiation processes relies on how they shape interpersonal relations in the social structure, often conceptualised as relational networks ([Blau, 1977b](#)). Given the distribution and intersection of nominal (groups) and graduated (status) parameters such as religious diversity or income distribution, these structural conditions shape social barriers, providing opportunities for contact and association ([Blau, 1977a, p. 51](#)). The strength of the intersection between graduated and nominal parameters reveals the degree of consolidation; for example, the correlation of education or income and their intersection with ethnicity or gender. Consequently,

consolidation influences social integration and mediates interaction opportunities between individuals from diverse groups and statuses (Blau, 1977a, p. 33).

Structural and individual conditions that allow associativity are at the core of social network analysis. One of the most significant findings in the field is homophily, which is understood as the tendency of higher contact frequency and tie formation between similar individuals (McPherson et al., 2001). These associations are structurally differentiated and tend to be segregated by hierarchical status and group membership (*status homophily*), such as education, gender, age, religious affiliation (Bargsted et al., 2020), social class (Wright & Cho, 1992), and ethnicity (Plaza et al., 2022). Furthermore, homophily is also affected by sociopsychological factors, where behaviour and individual preferences tend to reinforce in-group dynamics (*value homophily*), isolating individuals from others' worldviews and opinions (Diprete et al., 2011; P. S. Visser & Mirabile, 2004). However, these factors are assumed to depend mainly on structural constraints, such as group size and diversity (Blau, 1977b). Thus, contact opportunities and association preferences are expected to contribute to establishing relatively isolated social environments (McPherson & Smith, 2019). Furthermore, this homophilic tendency causes resources, information, and behaviour to be segregated, introducing a certain degree of social distance and establishing boundaries among people's social worlds (McPherson et al., 2001).

Associativity depends on people's similarities; however, contact in everyday social activities makes meeting opportunities possible. According to Feld (1981), the *foci* can be a social, psychological or physical entity around which joint activities are organised (e.g. places, families, organisations). Therefore, when people participate in activities around the same *foci*, they tend to be interpersonally tied, forming a dense cluster group. The focused organisation of social activities is considered more determinant than individual similarities. For example, even if two individuals are similar in their characteristics, the absence of a *foci* and the joint activities around it decrease their chances of association. This approach is critical of Homan's group balance theory (Homans, 1951), which proposes that attitudinal and value similarities foster association by paying less attention to status or group membership similarities in tie formation. Notwithstanding, the focus theory recognises the relevance of the psychological dimension. Still, it suggests that organised activity spaces constitute a dominant source of ties and represent a significant aspect of people's social environments.

Strength of ties depends on the nature of the association. As focus theory suggests (Feld, 1981), the multiplexity of social positions implies that certain activity spaces matter the most in forming social ties (Blau, 1977a). For example, the size of friendship networks tends to decrease through the transition to adulthood, while kinship ties such as family of origin or partner choices tend to be more stable (Gugushvili, 2021; Volker, 2020). Additionally, considering associativity is influenced by the degree of social differentiation, social ties that cross boundaries prompt dissolution in the absence of spaces that integrate people around a *foci* (Kossinets & Watts, 2009; McPherson et al., 2001). Hence, given that social integration entails the degree of intergroup relations through personal ties, segregation reflects social distance and availability of social resources embedded in social networks.

2.2.2 Social networks and resources

Social capital scholars have made insightful contributions to studying resource inequality through social networks (Lin, 2001). This approach suggests that a person's social environment can be studied through ego-centred networks in which the dyads between a person (*ego*) and their contacts (*alteri*) represent the tie that provides access to resources, arguing that it is possible to characterise the access to valued resources such as wealth, status, or power through social ties, which provides researchers with an image of how stratified social environments are according to personal and social resources embedded in the ego's social network (Lin & Dumin, 1986). From this perspective, personal resources are those an individual possesses that can be used and disposed of freely without compensation. On the other hand, social resources are temporary, borrowed, and can be accessed through direct and indirect ties (Lin, 1999).

According to social capital theory, the mobilisation of resources embedded in social networks is conceptualised in two types of outcomes: instrumental and expressive (Lin, 2001). First, instrumental actions are described as expected returns due to access to resources through social ties, such as the influence of acquaintances on the status attainment process (Contreras et al., 2019; Granovetter, 1973). In addition, it takes the form of three types of possible return: economic, political, and social (Lin, 2001). These forms of social capital are objects of exchange processes in which status, authority, and legitimacy can be mutually reinforced. For example, information held by high-status positions can trigger social influence processes within organisations when decisions must be made regarding including new members with certain attributes (Lin, 2001). Expressive actions are described as expected returns in social capital protection and consolidation, oriented to preserve and guarantee resource access (van der Gaag et al., 2008). Also, preserving pooled social resources incorporates all network members and their interests. Accordingly, there are three possible returns: life satisfaction, physical and mental health. Therefore, it is expected to ensure protection against any threat to physical or mental integrity and maintain satisfaction in the family, work, and community spheres (Lin, 2000).

Overall, as resources depend on social ties, inequality and heterogeneity in social environments can be observed through the structural properties of social networks according to ego's structural position as well as the demographic and socioeconomic composition of contacts.

2.2.3 Class-based inequality in social networks

Recent studies have focused on social capital formation processes (Volker, 2020), concentrating on structural processes, such as intergenerational social mobility and class inequalities, demonstrating how meeting opportunities and association preferences are stratified (Lin & Erickson, 2008). Consequently, access to higher and diverse resources through social ties follows a pattern of accumulation that reproduces pre-existing inequalities, in which class positions are vital in accounting for mechanisms of exclusion and segregation across the class structure.

According to Weber (1978), classes are a common basis for action, defined by the labour market position and access to opportunities and goods. Additionally, the degree of intergenerational exchange leads to the

development of social classes, characterised by the reproduction of socialisation patterns and lifestyles over time. Therefore, marriages, friendships, and social relationships between individuals of similar status groups represent class sociability practices. Similarly, two processes are described in class formation (Goldthorpe, 1992). First, demographic identity refers to when classes become identifiable as collectivities regarding how individuals and families retain their class positions across generations. Second, cultural identity is expressed in distinctive shared lifestyles along with preferred patterns of association, which class members perform. As Bourdieu (1984) suggested, cultural capital is the pivotal attribute of these distinctive practices in class *habitus*, in which educational credentials represent the most salient cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1984). Hence, the socialisation of common lifestyles and shared worldviews facilitates the consolidation of social classes. Moreover, upper classes also choose socially segregated environments, increasing their chances of establishing ties with similar others, maintaining privileged social positions, and excluding lower classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1981). Altogether, these processes further reinforce social distinctions between classes and contribute to the persistence of class structures.

Class-based research shows that class permeability is affected by property-based boundaries, in which owners are less likely to connect to the working class through friendship ties, whereas interactions between supervisors and workers might explain why the authority dimension is more permeable (Wright & Cho, 1992). Similarly, extended network diversity is lower in the upper-middle class than in the intermediate class, whereas friendship diversity increases for upwardly mobile individuals (Cepić & Tonković, 2020). However, the gain for this group is moderated by class background, where upward mobility cannot equalise access to social capital compared to those stable in the upper class (Carrascosa, 2023). Moreover, the distribution of ties between the two extremes of the class structure depicts the higher permeability of intermediate classes, in contrast to the higher exclusion of the working class and self-selected upper-class homogenous networks (Otero et al., 2021). Additionally, engagement in formal organisations increases the chances of the upper class bridging with diverse people, while the working class is homogeneous in their civic engagement behaviour, limiting its access to social capital (Pichler & Wallace, 2009). This tendency is strengthened over time, where social capital increases for those with higher education compared to those with less education (Volker, 2020).

2.2.4 The role of macro-social conditions

As the social capital theory suggests, access to certain positions in the social structure is influenced by the status position and individual preferences of association (Lin & Dumin, 1986). Consequently, studies on the macro social conditions that influence access to social capital have distinguished between conditions in the (i) political, (ii) normative, and (iii) economic domains (Pichler & Wallace, 2009; Son, 2012; van Oorschot & Arts, 2005). Therefore, these macro-social conditions can bolster or hinder meeting opportunities, stratifying access to social positions that, in the long run, reproduce social capital inequalities (Lin, 2000).

It has been argued that political institutions can influence the sociability structure of society, fostering

citizen participation in the public sphere (Son, 2012). For example, in democratic regimes where civil rights are developed, social services, living standards, and participation in voluntary organisations tend to increase. It has been suggested that social spending might boost social capital through the number of contacts (Scheepers et al., 2002) but not regarding their prestige (Otero, 2022, p. 115). Also, in industrialised capitalist societies, there are differences in market dependency and the universality of benefits, in which social democratic and liberal regimes constitute different degrees of welfare generosity (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Consequently, social spending could equalise opportunities and improve overall life chances in societies where political culture emphasises solidarity and egalitarianism. In liberal regimes, market dependency is higher, and social benefits are not extensive. Evidence has shown that access to social capital (e.g. prestige and diversity) is higher in social democratic regimes with higher social expenditures (Otero, 2022; M. Visser et al., 2018).

Cultural orientations, understood as social norms that structure sociability establishing rules regarding how certain status positions are less attractive or needed, have been considered as structuring macro-social factors for accessing social capital, in which two ideal-typical normative structures are discussed (Son, 2012). On the one hand, East Asian societies are described as collectivist according to the Confucian tradition that follows family oriented sociability as crucial for accessing social resources (see Kim & Lee, 2021). On the other hand, Western societies are characterised as *individualistic*, in which associativity is motivated toward developing extended networks outside the inner circle, mainly through organisational membership that might improve life chances (see Huang, 2021). Therefore, cross-national comparisons have shown that individualistic orientations are associated with higher contact prestige but not diversity (Otero, 2022, p. 116), suggesting that the openness of individualistic lifestyles tends to be oriented towards status-seeking rather than appreciation of diversity.

Economic inequality deserves special attention as a macro-social condition, because access to social positions and resources is strongly stratified. Consequently, access and accumulation of social resources, particularly in the upper classes, could be exacerbated by economic inequality. In other words, the rich become wealthier, and the poor maintain or worsen their living conditions. Thus, income inequality can strengthen current disparities in access to social resources between classes, increasing the chances of the upper classes engaging in voluntary associations and decreasing them for the working class (Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Additionally, it has been shown that unequal access to prestigious contacts is less pronounced in unequal societies. However, at the same time, this increases the gap regarding contact diversity, suggesting that income inequality increases the difficulty of meeting and establishing relationships with the higher class (Otero, 2022). In this regard, it has been shown that in an unequal context, the upper class is segregated into high-status social circles, increasing social distance and disconnection (Carrascosa, 2023; Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022). In addition, local settings can differentially influence social relations regarding the frequency of contact, density, and diversity of networks Lin (2000). Related research has demonstrated that spatial inequalities, such as urban segregation and residential choices, indicate that distance is not only social or subjective, but also physical, where the upper classes self-segregate themselves, inhabiting privileged and isolated neighbourhoods, avoiding interaction with lower classes, and reinforcing their privileged positions (see Méndez & Gayo, 2019; Otero, Volker, & Rozer, 2022).

2.3 Social networks, perceived and preferred inequality

2.3.1 Social segregation and inequality perceptions

The social network approach offers a meso-level standpoint linking the macro and micro levels for studying social perception and behaviour (Hedstrom & Ylikoski, 2010) through activities, friendships, or family ties (Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Consequently, it is assumed that the degree of embeddedness in social relationships provides certain information and life opportunities that ultimately shape the perception of the quantity and diversity of resources in society (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001). However, only a few studies have addressed the influence of social environment on perception.

How people infer the social world is linked to the degree of segregation in their immediate social environment, which determines the intensity and character of the information that ultimately shapes inequality perceptions (Mijs & Roe, 2021). Conversations with friends, family, and work colleagues shape the perception of inequality through experience sharing. The socioeconomic diversity of participants in everyday conversations contributes to the reconstruction of more accurate images of income and wealth inequality than isolated individuals (Summers et al., 2022). Persistent economic inequality leads to spatially segregated interactions and isolated lifeworlds that provide meaning to social inequality experiences, resulting in doubts about worthiness when the lower classes contrast themselves with extravagant lifestyles from the upper classes, undermining feelings of social inclusion and cohesion (Sachweh, 2012). Similarly, attachment to society weakens when diversity is undermined by class-homogenous networks, which represent a lack of knowledge about others' lifestyles and experiences (Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022). These ideas resonate with the concept of the "empathy gulf", understood as the social distance among groups widened by extreme inequality, increasing the barriers to imagining others' lifestyles and goods, which might diminish feelings of injustice and redistributive demands (Sachweh, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, the lives of others become more distant and might have consequences on empathy and solidarity toward others, potentially leading to perceiving fellow citizens as strangers (Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022, p. 758).

Complementary to pure motivational and cognitive processes, attention to the structural properties of networks on perception has increased. For example, E. Lee et al. (2019) demonstrate that, according to population group size, minority and majority groups overestimate their size when homophily is high, whereas both groups tend to underestimate size when network diversity is high. However, estimation accuracy improves when the perceptual biases of individuals and peers are combined, suggesting this as evidence of social learning and consensus mechanisms (p. 6). Similarly, Schulz et al. (2022) show that economic inequality increases and polarises income-based homophily. Therefore, discrepancies between actual and perceived inequality are associated with distance and selectivity among middle- and upper-income groups. Consequently, misperception is not driven purely by cognitive limitations for informational processing; instead, by the limited information set, individuals inductively estimate inequality given the available information in their network.

Studies on the relationship between social environments and economic perceptions have focused more on self-evaluations than on perceptions of the distribution of economic resources. For example, Buccioli et al.

(2019) showed that (1) contact closeness and frequency with friends and family, (2) access to supportive networks, (3) organisational membership, and (4) subjective community integration enhances the subjective social status of elderly Americans, but also found that social ties that are sources of distress and conflict decrease status perception. Similarly, Huang (2021) found that having a reference group, social engagement in organisations, subjective neighbourhood belonging, and resource access through network ties enhanced perceived status in Australia. Additionally, Kim & Lee (2021) showed that the three social capital dimensions analysed (bonding, cognitive, and bridging) increased perceived status. They also showed that the influence of each dimension varies in different cultural settings. Overall, social capital increased perceived status through contact frequency with family and friends (*bonding*), trust in close ties (*cognitive*), and higher network contacts (*bridging*). Nevertheless, social capital is less relevant than individual status positions in individualistic countries such as Japan and Korea, unlike collectivist societies such as China and Taiwan.

In theory, evidence suggests that social networks influence perceived economic inequality and subjective evaluations of individual status. Regarding the former, social networks seem to influence how people perceive themselves and their economic situations, suggesting that social ties perform a supportive welfare function as an expressive outcome of social capital (Lin, 2001). Additionally, as a consequence of homophily, social network homogeneity might not have the same influence on social perception, showing that isolated and homogenous environments might influence how people infer the size of groups (e.g. poor) as well as hold biased estimations about their position in the economic distribution; therefore, under- or over-estimating their social standing might have consequences in their feelings of social integration and well-being (Olivos et al., 2020; Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022; Schneider, 2019). However, evidence in this regard is scarce and requires further enquiry to clarify the claimed influence of network structure on perceived inequality and their interaction with structural factors that might affect their relationship (e.g. social class).

2.3.2 Social ties on the demand for redistribution and welfare

As mentioned above, social networks influence people's experience of social life, self-evaluations, and the surrounding social and economic conditions. Notably, it has been shown that social perceptions of economic inequality influence their preferences towards it. However, it is less known about how the composition and resources embedded in social networks influence what people prefer in terms of economic inequality, mainly what are their views regarding the role of government in terms of social policy measures, which in turn are expressed in demands for economic redistribution and social welfare. Despite this, some insights in the literature highlight the role of social networks on redistributive preferences by describing the impact of civic engagement in voluntary organisations, cross-class embeddedness through kinship and friendship ties, and socioeconomic network diversity.

As mentioned, the literature has previously addressed efforts to address the link between social networks and redistributive preferences. For example, a study in Japan by Yamamura (2012) argued that participation in community organisations boosts connections among different income groups. Consequently, contact might

trigger envy from the poorer groups toward the wealthy, suggesting that negative externalities like unhappiness and crime rates will motivate altruistic behaviour, showing that the highest community participation rates increase support for redistribution for those above the median income of each prefecture. Also, research has focused on class-based networks, particularly how embeddedness in cross-class relationships influences attitudes through a synthetic scope that entails class material interests, socio-cultural or normative views, and political preferences (Lindh & McCall, 2020). Hence, the discussion regarding how social class and network segregation intersect for explaining attitudes can be summarised in two mechanisms: (i) social influence and (ii) socialisation processes.

Lindh et al. (2021) scrutinised how social influence and class segregation affect redistributive and social welfare preferences in Sweden, arguing that people tend to assimilate their opinions and attitudes according to their surrounding peers (*influence*), which is reinforced by class homophily (*segregation*). Therefore, higher contacts in the managerial class negatively impact redistributive demands, while ties to the working class increase them. Additionally, contact with socio-cultural professionals that entail more inclusive and egalitarian attitudes lowers welfare chauvinism, while it rises with working-class ties that might perceive immigrants as a threat. Similarly, aside from the current class position, additional socialisation sources are cross-class ties through the family of origin and partners. For instance, J. Lee (2023) found that family of origin class position shapes economic redistributive and tax preferences, being crucial for political socialisation during childhood and early adulthood, where class interests and norms are nurtured. As a result, those with parents from the upper classes are less supportive of redistribution, while those having working-class origins hold favourable attitudes. Also, Paskov & Weisstanner (2022) found that the class position of family and partners shapes redistributive preferences, where kinship ties are considered a source of inter-group contact, suggesting that heterogeneity in class ties can reduce negative prejudices toward out groups as contact theory suggests (Pettigrew, 1998), what in turn might motivate changes in political attitudes (Nathan & Sands, 2023). As a result, homogeneity in ties polarises preferences between lower and upper classes. However, this gradient is blurred as heterogeneity increases according to the class position of the partner and family of origin.

Friendship ties are also relevant in preference formation. In this regard, Londoño-Vélez (2022) suggests that socioeconomic diversity at the school level introduces changes in friendship ties that influence (i) perceived inequality and (ii) support for redistribution in affluent students, claiming that homogeneous networks restrict economic inequality inferences. Therefore, exposure to diverse reference groups (e.g. friends) influences redistributive demands via self-interest, mobility prospects and distributive justice. On the one hand, contrary to self-interest, redistributive preferences increase when exposure to low-income peers improves accuracy in perceived inequality. On the other hand, heterogeneity has a null effect on mobility prospects. Finally, heterogeneity triggers concerns about the fairness of market-based life outcomes for low-income students, motivating higher support for government intervention. Similarly, Beck (2019) demonstrate that occupational network heterogeneity diminishes preferences for the marketisation of welfare provision in Chile, suggesting that contact diversity shortens the social distance between low and upper-status groups, providing them with broader images of inequality and the living conditions of others.

The literature on social networks and inequality preferences makes two major contributions. First, it comprises the social influence and socialisation processes in social networks, where segregation entails a certain degree of social closure regarding others' life experiences and living conditions. In addition, heterogeneity provides a broader image of society in terms of social and economic inequality, contributing to preference formation. Consequently, studying preferences toward economic inequality from a social network perspective goes beyond the individual perspective by including the relational dimension. Hence, considering the degree of embeddedness of people in a network provides a more explicit image of how social environments are composed and of the social distance between individuals and groups.

Overview

The literature reviewed above contributes to the research question in three ways. First, the perceptions of reference groups offer a synthesis of how structural positions and social relations with other members of society impact views on social inequality. In this sense, changes in social structure are accompanied by modifications in our social circles, which nurture perceptions of society at large and how individuals perceive their place in the social hierarchy. Second, the structural perspective of social networks offers an analytical approach to the processes that structure sociability, friendship, and kinship networks as well as the behaviour and attitudes of individuals toward groups that ultimately bring societies together. In this sense, structural analysis based on social positions, such as status hierarchies and group memberships, provides a conceptual and methodological framework for studying inequality and heterogeneity, which are the two fundamental concepts for social structure analysis. Third, the embeddedness of individuals in social relationships with their reference groups, such as family, friends, and acquaintances, offers insight into socialisation and social influence processes, within which individuals' perceptions and attitudes may change according to the composition of the social environments they inhabit. Consequently, the social distance generated by the network and spatial segregation isolated individuals from the lives of others, their experiences, and lifestyles. By contrast, more heterogeneous social networks imply broader and more accurate images of society that improve social bonding and solidarity. In sum, synthesising these three literature corpora provides the dissertation's theoretical framework, which will be empirically addressed in the following section.

Research plan

Considering the theoretical and empirical elements presented above, I would like to contribute to the redistributive preferences literature and discuss the role of social networks. As a result, my main research question is *What is the role of social networks on redistributive preferences?* and will be addressed in three independent studies. Figure 4.1 represents the theoretical framework of the research project.

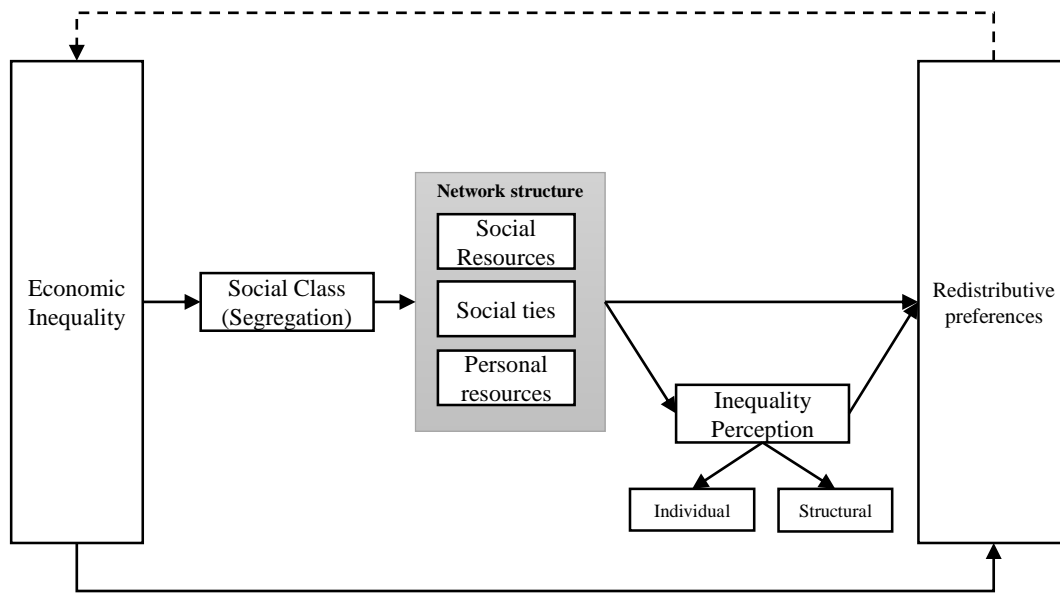


Figure 4.1: Theoretical framework of the dissertation

4.1 Study 1: “Economic inequality, social networks, and redistributive preferences: A cross-national study of 33 countries”

This study will focus on the relationship between social network segregation and redistributive preferences. On the one side, part of the literature suggests that social networks directly affect preferences for redistribution and welfare, arguing that access to diverse social positions through social ties explains changes in attitudes through social influence and socialisation mechanisms (Lindh et al., 2021; Paskov & Weisstanner, 2022). Therefore, it is expected that contact diversity in social networks increases support for redistribution (H1). On the other hand, part of the literature suggests that redistributive preferences are influenced by network diversity through perception, arguing that attributes of reference groups in social networks shape people’s views about economic inequality in homogenous reference groups via subjective sampling mechanism (Kelley & Evans, 1995; Londoño-Vélez, 2022) leading them to perceived society as more egalitarian and supporting less redistribution (García-Castro et al., 2022). Thus, a second inquiry is to clarify if the influence of network diversity on

redistributive preferences is mediated by perceived economic inequality (H2). Finally, comparative research on social capital has suggested that economic inequality strengthens the current spatial and social distance between the lower and upper classes in the social structure, decreasing their meeting opportunities as well as their chances of establishing more diverse social environments (Otero, 2022; Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Consequently, it is expected that the association between network diversity and redistributive preferences to be stronger in more unequal societies (H3).

It is expected to employ data from the “Social Networks and Social Resources” module from the International Social Survey Programme (Group, 2019), a large-scale nationally representative sample of 44,492 individuals in 33 countries. Regarding our main dependent variable, the survey includes a question regarding the extent that respondents agree that it is the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences between high and low-income people, measured through a 1 to 5 Likert scale. Concerning the network structure, the survey includes the position generator that includes 10 occupations (e.g. Manager, school teacher, or car mechanic), enough for representing the diversity of positions in the occupational structure (Joye et al., 2019). For perceived inequality, the survey includes a general measure of perceived economic inequality (‘Diff. in income are too large’), perceived household economic constraints (‘How difficult or easy is it currently to your household to make ends meet (monthly)’), as well as the 10-rung MacArthur scale of subjective status (‘top-bottom’)

Given the hierarchical structure of the data (individuals nested in countries), a multilevel regression model (Hox et al., 2010) will be used for testing the association of network heterogeneity on redistributive preferences (H1). Consequently, for testing the indirect effect of network diversity via perceived inequality (H2), mediation analysis will be used (Imai et al., 2010). Finally, the moderation of economic inequality on the association of network diversity (H3) will be modeled using cross-level interactions with random slopes (Aguinis et al., 2013).

4.2 Study 2 : “Residential segregation, social networks and market distribution of social services: longitudinal evidence”

The study seeks to understand the influence of social networks on support for the market provision of social services (Lindh, 2015). Consequently, it is suggested that network segregation increases the social distance between social classes and diminishes the sense of attachment to society (Otero, Volker, Rözer, et al., 2022). This lack of common experiences between people increases the social distance between groups and diminishes the chances of being integrated into social life, which in turn threatens social integration and cohesion (Sachweh, 2012). Therefore, social solidarity can be eroded in societies where the sense of belonging weakens and the support for universalistic welfare schemes might not be strong among citizens, which leads to expect that network segregation fosters support for welfare marketisation (H1). Additionally, societies that prosper economically in an unequal way imply higher network homogeneity which has a corollary in terms of urban residential segregation (Méndez & Gayo, 2019). Thus, the upper class can choose to develop their life plan in exclusive and isolated communities while the lower class is displaced to less advantaged neighborhoods and

deprived from proper social services, which has consequences in the access to social resources (Otero, Volker, & Rozer, 2022). Consequently, living in more segregated communities will nurture isolated life experiences that are expected to increase support for welfare marketization (H2). Additionally, given that network homogeneity is higher in spatially segregated communities, it is expected that the influence of network segregation on welfare marketisation preferences is stronger when spatial segregation is high (H3).

It is planned to use data from the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey (ELSOC) (COES, 2018). First, on the substantive side, Chile has been recognised among Latin American countries for its economic and social development model since the 1980s, characterised as a prosperous society in terms of economic growth and also for introducing a strongly market-oriented welfare scheme (Arrizabalo, 1995). In this context, during the 1990s, the expansion of tertiary education boosted social mobility, contributing to the size of the intermediate classes and the relevance of the service sector (Torche, 2005). Additionally, the transformation of the class structure has not necessarily been associated with an equal distribution of salaries (Espinoza & Núñez, 2014), considering that income distribution has remained relatively stable during the past decades (Rodríguez Weber, 2017). Moreover, jointly with the transformation of the social structure, public concerns about social and economic inequality have increased in Chilean society (PNUD, 2017), and the public debate on how to address the connection between redistribution and inequality through policy-making (see Atria & Otero, 2022). Second, on the empirical side, ELSOC is an individual longitudinal panel survey representative of the urban areas of Chile (2016–2022, N = 2,927) that has repeatedly interviewed a sample of individuals on conflict and social cohesion-related topics, including social networks and economic inequality¹. Additionally, the sample has been designed to include a sufficient number of territorial units, as well as a sufficient number of cases within each one, to allow multilevel models grouped by city or municipality (Snijders & Bosker, 2011).

The marketisation of welfare provision can be measured by employing three questions regarding the level of agreement with the statement that “people with higher income can have access to better [social services]” (e.g. education, health, or pensions). Also, ELSOC includes a version of the position generator with 16 occupations that allows one to describe the number of accessed social positions in an ego-centred network. Finally, regarding the structure of spatial segregation, recent work has established a synthetic measure of the spatial structure of urban areas by drawing georeferenced administrative data at the *Commune*² level (see Otero, Volker, & Rozer (2022)). Therefore, the available administration allows one to observe territorial units’ variations and time trends regarding segregation.

Regarding empirical strategy, it is crucial to consider that individuals have common variances with themselves when analyzing data over time. It is also important to recognize that individuals are nested within communes, and if this is not considered, they will be assumed to be independent. Therefore, a longitudinal multilevel approach is adopted to obtain a better estimation of standard errors, which includes a random term to define this variance (random effects) in the regression estimation (see Singer & Willett (2009)).

¹For more details on the sampling and questionnaire design, visit: <https://coes.cl/encuesta-panel/>

²The Political Constitution divides state powers into hierarchical territorial units, in which the Executive Power is divided into Regions, Provinces, and Communes. Therefore, Communes are the lowest local-level units. For more details at <https://www.bcn.cl/siit/nuestropais/division.htm> (in Spanish).

4.3 Study 3: “Reference groups similarity and social solidarity: A vignette study.”

The literature on reference groups has suggested that the characteristics of these groups influence perceptions and evaluations of economic inequality (Evans et al., 1992). Also, the tendency to prefer similar people has been described extensively in social network research (McPherson et al., 2001). In this line, it has been demonstrated that both demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of individuals and their reference groups influence the evaluations of social policies such as pensions or taxes (Castillo et al., 2019; Sachweh & Eicher, 2023). Furthermore, the literature on social cohesion has suggested that norms and social values play a crucial role in the support and legitimacy of welfare policies as an expression of social solidarity (Esping-Andersen, 1990), understood as the degree to which people bond and have a shared purpose, including how willing they are to collaborate and strive for shared objectives and the degree of trust and support they give to one another within their community (Green & Janmaat, 2011). It has been demonstrated that cross-class diversity influence support for egalitarian welfare policies (Lindh et al., 2021), but nuances in social solidarity appear when diversity is perceived as a threat (Castillo et al., 2023). Consequently, the inquiry related to what extent similar or diverse reference groups can impact one’s attitudes toward social solidarity, including being willing to assist others even if it may come at a personal cost, as well as expectations for social reciprocity. Thus, the guiding question in this regard would be *what is the role of reference groups’ similarity in attitudes toward social solidarity?*

A factorial vignette study will be implemented to address the questions presented above. This method allows the researcher to understand the role of the observed characteristic of a fictitious subject or vignette in the external observer evaluation (Jasso, 1990). Therefore, the evaluations are adjusted according to the attributes of the vignettes (Dülmer, 2016). Also, each vignette is described in terms of specific demographic or socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. gender, occupation), which the survey participants consequently evaluate. For efficiency reasons, each respondent evaluates only a limited number of vignettes to guarantee between and within-subject in the expected responses (e.g. ten vignettes).

Regarding the target population, it would be possible to implement the study in Chile, employing the current sample of the ELSOC survey in Chile ($N \approx 1500$) (ELSOC, 2018), as well as the online sample of the Cohesion Panel of the Research Institute for Social Cohesion ($N \approx 4000$) in Germany³. Also, given that the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics are already registered, it will be possible to match this data to the responses to the survey. It expected to implement the questionnaire using an online survey designed for this purpose. Therefore, the survey flow will include two main sections: (1) introduction and (2) vignette evaluation. Two sets of questions will be asked regarding the measures for social solidarity. First, *Concerning this person, you would be willing to:* (1) “Lend him/her money”, (2) “Help him/her get a job”, and (3) “Talk to him/her to offer emotional support”. Second, *Now, you would expect this person to be willing to:* (1) “Lend you money”, (2) “Help you get a job”, and (3) “Talk to you to offer emotional support”. The responses will be measured using an 11-point scale where 0 is “not willing at all”, and 10 is “completely willing”.

³For more details see: <https://www.fgz-risc.de/forschung/datenzentrum>

The working plan of the dissertation is specified in Table 4.1, considering the three independent studies for the following months.

Table 4.1: Working plan

Task	Month									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Study 1										
Pre-registration	X									
Data processing and analysis		X	X						X	X
Writing				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Divulagation									X	X
Meeting with advisor		X		X				X		X
Study 2										
Pre-registration	X									
Data processing and analysis		X	X						X	X
Writing				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Divulagation									X	X
Meeting with advisor		X		X				X		X
Study 3										
Study Design	X									
Pilot Study		X								
Pre-registration		X								
Field work			X							
Data processing and analysis				X	X				X	X
Writing						X	X	X	X	X
Divulagation									X	X
Meeting with advisor		X		X				X		X

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