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URPP Equality of Opportunity

Inequality Perceptions: A research agenda

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September 25, 2023

Abstract

Many recent studies have underlined the importance of inequality perceptions as determinants of political demands and behavior. Yet, this literature often focuses on the public perception of one single, often economic, dimension of inequality. This study aims to broaden our perspective and provides a comprehensive assessment of public perceptions of socioeconomic (income, education, and class inequality) and sociocultural inequalities (gender, sexual orientation, and migration background inequality). Furthermore, we disentangle different components of inequality perceptions: the assessed importance of differences, as how problematic they are judged, and who thinks that these inequalities are central to political debates nowadays. We find that highly educated respondents attribute more importance and mostly judge inequalities across the board as more important than the less educated. While information on the extent of inequality can move the assessment of how important inequality is in society, the judgment of these divides remains unchanged, hinting to more deep-seated beliefs that are not as easily changed.

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1 Introduction

Differences between the rich and the poor, men and women, those with different sexual orientations, people with and without a migration background, children from academic and working class families, the highly educated and those with lower education backgrounds – these inequalities are decisive for people’s well-being and standing in our societies. Inequality broadly speaking indicates that resources and opportunities are unequally distributed among members of a society. In recent years, public and academic debates have picked up on rising levels of economic inequality and the demise of social mobility in many countries. At the same time, women’s representation in the legislature of many democratic countries has increased, but the wage and wealth gender gap are still considerable. And while legal rights of LGBTQI+ people have improved in some countries, the rights of sexual minorities are threatened and curtailed in many others at the same time. Overall, the (un)equal distribution of economic, social and political resources and opportunities along different dividing lines remains a public concern even in countries committed to human rights, democracy and high levels of public welfare.

Although inequality is a persistent and in some aspects even growing feature of many societies, the public often underestimates its extent (Hauser and Norton, 2017). Studies analyzing if and why people (mis)perceive of inequality mainly focus on a single, often economic dimension of inequality (McCall, 2013; Trump, 2017, 2020). We know that perceptions of income inequality often differ from the objective distribution of income, that educational differences are sometimes perceived to be more dire than they actually are, and that claims of unequal political representation of groups can correspond or differ from their objective representation in politics. Thus, we need to distinguish between objective inequality and subjective perceptions and evaluations thereof, not only with regards to income differences, but also with respect to other types of inequality. After all, differences due to acquired aspects, such as income or education, and those related to ascribed factors, such as gender, sexuality or migration background,

can all be threatening for people's status as equal members of society. We add to the literature on inequality perceptions in two different ways: First, we move beyond assessing a potential mismatch of objective and subjective inequality and suggest three distinct dimensions of public inequality perceptions, which we assess with new, original survey questions: individual's subjective assessment of the importance of inequality, whether they think that these disparities are problematic, and their perception of how politicized these inequalities are. A detailed mapping of public perceptions of inequalities is vital as political demands and behavior are based on subjective assessments of these societal challenges (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). Understanding who perceives of which differences and whether people deem these differences acceptable or not might help us to understand the public demand for inequality-reducing policies (or the lack thereof) (Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008). Second, we extend the understanding of inequality perceptions beyond the realm of economic inequalities and measure public perception of socioeconomic, predominantly acquired factors - mainly through personal efforts and competitive abilities (e.g. education) and sociocultural, often ascribed markers, where roles are determined based on inherent characteristics that are (often) beyond the control of individuals (e.g. gender) (Foner, 1979; Grusky, 2001).

We map the public's awareness and evaluation of income, education and social origin inequality as well as perceptions of inequality regarding gender, sexuality, and migration background. Measuring perceptions of different types of inequality allows us to compare the importance ascribed by the public to both sociocultural and socioeconomic divides in society. We further add to the inequality perception debate by untangling the significance people assign to inequalities from their assessment of these disparities as either more or less tolerable. This approach enables a more nuanced comprehension of individuals' perceptions of inequality. This is crucial because individuals may recognize certain divisions in society as influential for life opportunities and resource allocation, yet find the unequal distribution of advantages accept-

able. Distinguishing between the perception of importance and the evaluation of inequalities as more or less acceptable can aid in understanding which segments of the population could potentially be mobilized: this might reveal that a combination of perceived importance and recognition of the problem is necessary for people to become active and demand political action to address these issues. In addition, by analyzing who thinks that these inequalities are important, contested topics in current political debates, we tap yet into another dimension of inequality perceptions. Relating individual perceptions of the importance of these differences to how central people think these inequalities are in political debates, allows us to flag important discrepancies between perceived societal and political importance of inequality. The potential to mobilize voters might be most pronounced for those types of inequality where such discrepancies are sizeable and thus untapped by political entrepreneurs.

We assess the link between the perception and evaluation of inequalities and one's objective position within that inequality dimension, which yields important information about the overlap of objective differences and subjective perceptions of their importance. While the objective position of individuals is decisive for inequality perceptions, individuals in disadvantaged positions are often less likely to acknowledge the importance of this structuring factors in society. Similarly, the privileged are less critical regarding the evaluation of differences. These phenomena may be attributed to a lack of awareness about the extent and effects of inequality, and several studies suggest that we might address this through information on inequality to garner support for addressing disparities. We therefore conducted a survey experiment to test the impact of information on education/income and gender inequality, framed as either disadvantages or privileges, on public perceptions and evaluations. Our results show that information influenced the recognition of the importance of these dimensions but had no effect on evaluating the acceptability of differences. Awareness of inequality is crucial for recognizing privileges and disadvantages, but addressing its root causes may require more than just information provision,

as people need to reconcile inequality with a sense of justice or fairness.

The nuanced measurement of public inequality perceptions proposed in this research agenda and the experiment testing how malleable these perceptions are contribute to a more holistic understanding of the public awareness and evaluation of societal divides and provide the grounds to understand who exactly might be mobilized politically around issues of societal difference.

2 Data Collection

We conduct an original online survey with 5.108 respondents in Germany to map public perceptions of inequality. As an advanced knowledge economy with a conservative welfare state, Germany is characterized by relatively high levels of economic inequality compared to other Western European countries. Crucially, this pertains to multiple aspects of inequality. The conservative elements in the labor market and social welfare system persistently put women at a disadvantage while favoring native Germans, rendering Germany a notable example of conservative social stratification (Manow, 2018). The institutionalization of a polarized conflict on cultural issues is more recent in the German party system, while the radical right party AfD has become more established, the polarization on sociocultural issues is still ongoing. All respondents are recruited from an online panel within ten weeks between May and July 2022.

We implement representative quotas for region, gender and age, but restrict the age range of respondents between 18 and 57. We focus on three generations (Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z) that are active in the labor market and more likely to be exposed to different types of inequalities directly. We oversample high and less educated respondents as our main interest are the inequality perceptions of (highly educated) winners and (less educated) losers in modern knowledge economies, where the objective divide between these two groups regarding their income and status has been growing and contested (Powell and Snellman, 2004). The

TABLE 1
Sample characteristics

		N	Percent
Age	18-27	1069	20.93
	28-37	1274	24.94
	38-47	1181	23.12
	48-57	1584	31.01
Gender	nonbinary	35	0.69
	women	2610	51.10
	men	2463	48.22
Education	high education	2011	39.37
	middle education	1071	20.97
	low education	2026	39.66
Employed	without employment	1308	25.61
	employed	3800	74.39
Migration Background	no	4916	96.24
	yes	192	3.76
Sexual Orientation	heterosexual	4261	83.42
	homosexual or other	506	9.91
Residence	rural	1233	24.14
	urban	3867	75.70
Household Income	high income	1495	29.27
	medium income	2088	40.88
	low income	1428	27.96
Social Origin	low	3728	72.98
	high	1380	27.02
	All	5108	100.00

low educated group includes all respondents without any formal education, those with primary education and unfinished high school degree (Grund-, Haupt-, and Realschulabschluss), as well as respondents with a high school diploma. The highly educated category includes everyone with a Bachelors or any other higher University degree.

Table 1 shows that the share of respondents in the four age brackets and the share of men, women and nonbinary respondents is representative of the distribution in the German population. We have almost twice as many high or low educated respondents than those with medium education. In contrast to a sample which would be representative of educational achievements in Germany, the groups of low and high educated respondents are double their actual size in society. Almost three quarters of our sample are working full or part-time or report that they are self-employed, while slightly more than a quarter is either retired, unemployed, or still study-

ing. A very small share of our sample has a migration background and almost 10% identify as homosexual or indicate another sexual orientation than heterosexual.

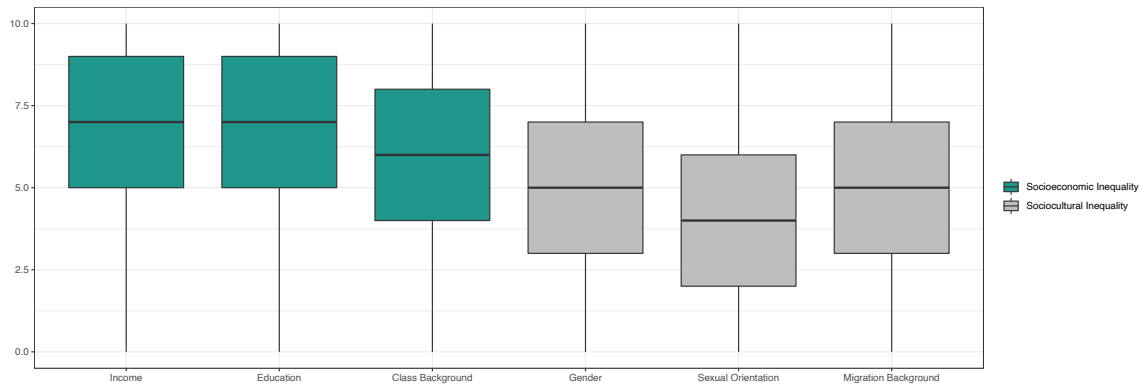
3 Inequality Perceptions

Our main interest in this study are *public perceptions* of inequality. We measure these perceptions by asking respondents to indicate how important they think income, education, class of origin, gender, sexuality and migration background are for having advantages or disadvantages in our society. We loosely categorize the first three dimensions as "socioeconomic" and the last three as "sociocultural", although of course the latter inequalities have a clear material component, and the former are also tied to cultural resources. We chose this wording to make the abstract concept "inequality" more accessible for respondents. In addition, mentioning both advantages and disadvantages in the item should allow respondents to not only express their perception of the more often discussed downside of these inequality dimensions. Last, avoiding the term "inequality" itself might help to prevent conveying any preconceived notions of judgement regarding the differences queried here. Answers are recorded on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero indicates that the aspect is perceived as not important at all for having advantages or disadvantages in society, while 10 means that this facet is very important. Figure 1 shows the distributions for the three socioeconomic inequalities, income, education and social origin, as well as the sociocultural inequalities related to gender, sexual orientation, and migration background.

All socioeconomic inequalities, including differences due to income, education, or social origin are on average perceived as more important than the three sociocultural inequalities included in the survey. Respondents indicate that income and education are most important when it comes to having (dis)advantages in our society. While sociocultural inequalities, related to gender, sexual orientation and migration background are also recognized as contributing to being better or worse off in society, their perceived importance is comparatively lower. The least

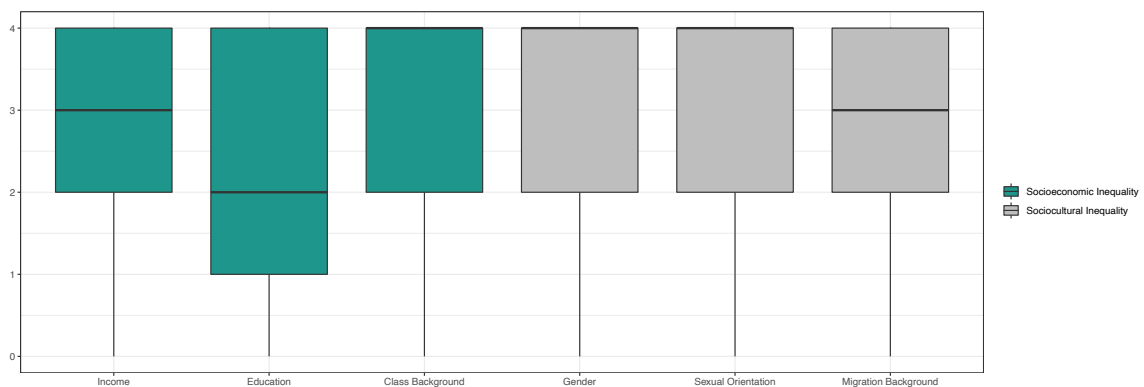
important factor contributing to (dis)advantages in German society is, according to our sample, one's sexual orientation.

FIGURE 1
Inequality Perceptions



We are also interested in how people *evaluate* inequalities. Are existing differences seen as problematic or are they deemed acceptable? While we do not ask about the criteria underlying the evaluation of the respective dimension, respondents indicate whether they think that having (dis)advantages due to income, education, class of origin, gender, sexual orientation and migration background is acceptable or not. The scale for this item ranges from 0 (“perfectly fine”) to 4 (“not at all in order”).

FIGURE 2
Problematization of Inequality



Respondents indicate that they deem ascribed differences due to social origin, gender and sexual orientation as most problematic and evaluate (dis)advantages due to sexual orientation

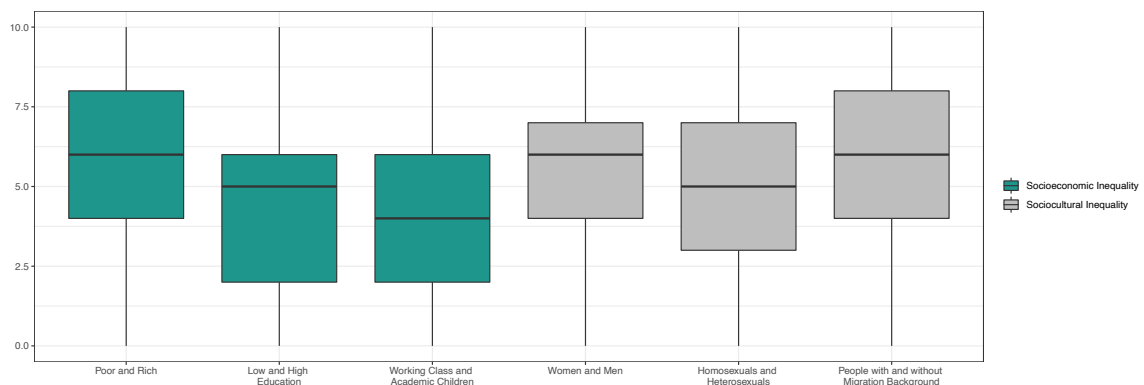
as most problematic (average 3.18). Of the sociocultural inequalities, having (dis)advantages related to a migration background is judged as slightly more acceptable than differences due to gender or sexual orientation. Amongst the different types of inequalities respondents are most accepting of differences due to education (average 2.36). Judging differences due to education as the least problematic might be in line with the deeply ingrained notion that educational differences are reflective of people's merit. Educational inequality would then be evaluated against the backdrop that everyone rightly earns and deserves advantages or disadvantages from their educational achievements (Sandel, 2020).

The significance and severity of societal divides are shaped by political discourses that may resonate to varying degrees with the general public. Consequently, our assessment of inequality perceptions also considers which of these inequalities are currently perceived as pivotal within the realm of politics. Arguably, the perception of the importance of a specific inequality in determining (dis)advantages in society can significantly differ from perceptions of the contestation of this factors in the political arena: For instance, one person may believe that education is the most crucial factor for one's social standing, yet perceive a low level of political debate surrounding education. On the other hand, one may consider sexual orientation negligible in determining (dis)advantages, but perceive it as a highly debated and contentious topic in politics. These differences highlight the nuanced relationship between perceptions of the societal importance of inequalities and the public perception of the political discourse surrounding these issues.

Regarding the perceived politicization of inequalities, we specifically want to understand "which differences between people in our society (...) are a hot topic in politics?". Answers range again from "not contested at all" (0) to "heavily contested" (10). Figure 3 shows perceived politicization for sociocultural and socioeconomic inequalities. On average, sociocultural differences are perceived as more politically contested, especially inequalities due to a migration

background. Nonetheless, differences between rich and poor are also perceived as a relatively hot topic in politics, while differences due to education or social origin are less visibly contested in the political arena. At first sight this figure reveals considerable differences between what people themselves judge as problematic (Figure 1) and what they think politics is mostly concerned about.

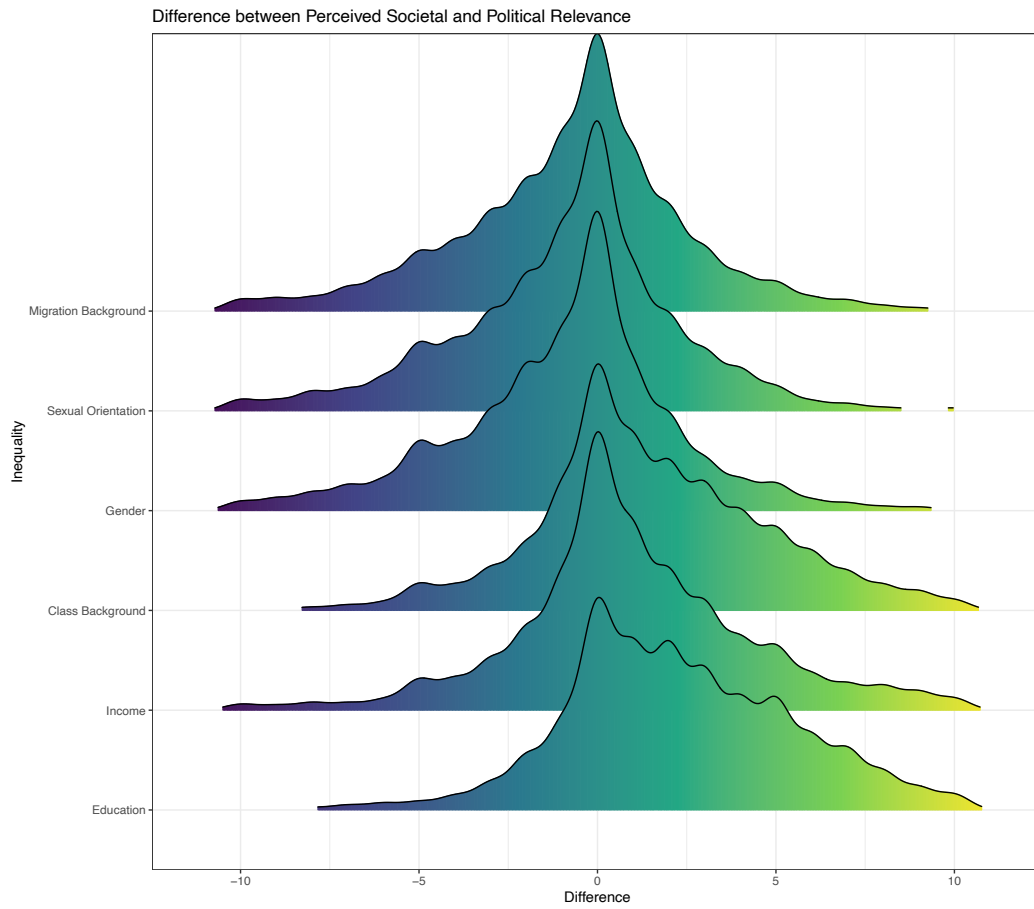
FIGURE 3
Perceived Politicization of Inequality



The potential of a multidimensional, nuanced measure of inequality perceptions is highlighted in Figure 4. Here, we relate the perceived societal importance of inequality to the perception of its political importance. This analysis reveals substantial differences between these two facets of perceptions. The graph shows the difference between societal and political importance, with both measures ranging from 0 to 10. Negative values mean that respondents think that the issue is disproportionately politicized, i.e. takes more space in politics than its societal importance merits. In contrast, positive values suggest that respondents think the inequality in question is much more important societally than the attention it receives in politics suggests.

A substantial part of our sample thinks that the importance of socioeconomic inequalities, especially related to education and social origin is far more important in our society than in politics. The opposite seems to hold for the sociocultural inequalities, where a majority of respondents thinks that the societal relevance of these dimensions is lower than their importance in the political debate these days. Such discrepancies between perceived societal and politi-

FIGURE 4



cal importance could point to mobilization potential for political actors and necessitate further analysis as for whom such discrepancies exist, and if they align with or contradict other political divides.

4 Who thinks that inequality matters?

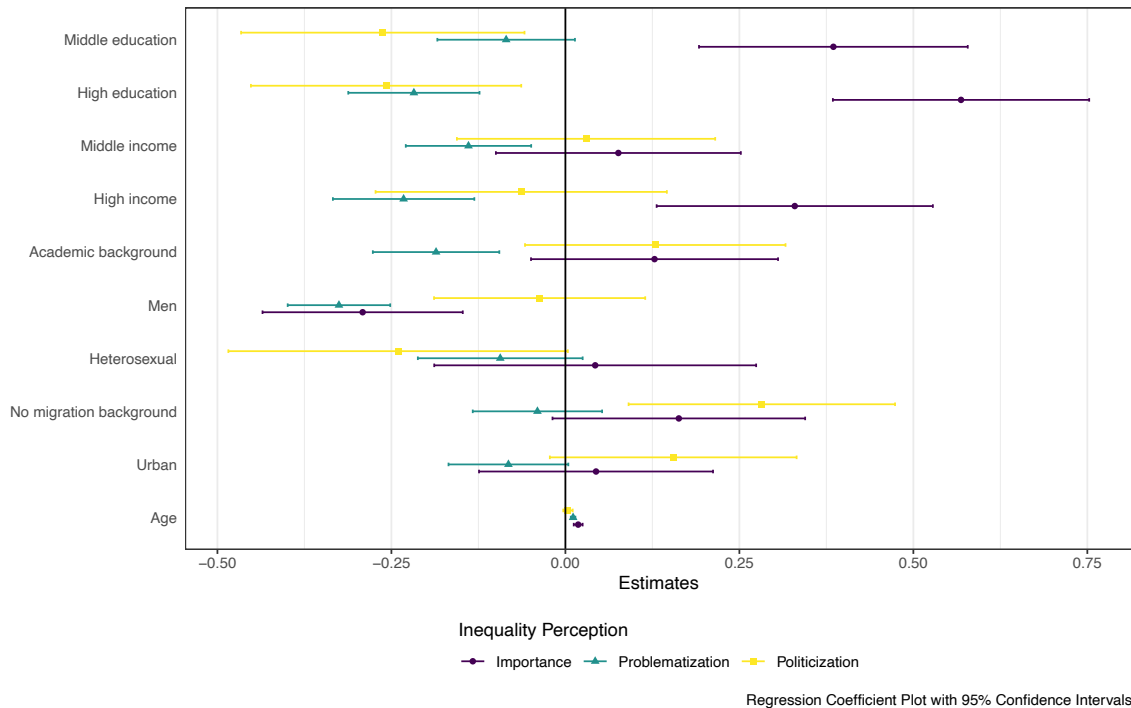
We next move beyond the mapping of inequality and explore, what explains the variation in the inequality perceptions we have documented so far. Because we are particularly interested in the relationship between objective measures of inequality and subjective perceptions, we explore how respondents' objective position in each of these divides is related to their views about how societally and politically important each of these divides is.

Our measures for respondents' objective position regarding the three socioeconomic inequality dimensions, income, education and social origin, are as follows: Income is measured with an item asking respondents about their household income in 10 brackets. We recode answers into three broad categories: Household incomes below 1.950€ are coded as low income, between 1.951 and 3.750€ respondents are grouped into the middle income category and everyone with a household income above 3.751€ is coded as high income. For education we code respondents as highly educated if they have a tertiary education, as having a mid-level of education if they finished secondary school or completed vocational training, and as low educated if they report that they have no formal schooling, or finished primary school or lower secondary school. Social origin is constructed from two items that measure the highest level of education of both parents. Everyone who indicated that one parent has received a university degree is coded as having an academic background. We include an item that reports respondents gender. Men are coded as 1, all other gender are coded as 0. Sexual identity is coded as 0 if the respondent identifies as any other sexual orientation than heterosexual, everyone indicating a heterosexual orientation is coded as 1. We also use a binary indicator to distinguish between respondents with (0) and without a migration background (1). In addition, we control for age and residence type (urban or rural) of respondents.

4.1 Education Inequality

We first analyze the perceived societal relevance of education inequality. People who are on the privileged side of the education divide in society attribute more importance to this dimension than those who are objectively disadvantaged in a modern knowledge economy such as Germany. Figure 5 shows that compared to respondents who completed only primary or lower secondary school, those with an upper secondary diploma are significantly more likely to think that education is an important determinant of societal (dis)advantages. Individuals who completed at least a Bachelors degree attribute even more importance to educational inequality. Education is also more often perceived as important determinant of inequality by those with high income. Men are less likely than women and non-binary respondents to perceive education as central and the older the more important respondents think education is.

FIGURE 5
Perceptions of education inequality



Furthermore, we ask people to evaluate the legitimacy of potential inequalities related to education. When analyzing who thinks that (dis)advantages due to education are problematic,

the direction of influence changes: those with a BA degree or higher educational achievement are significantly less likely to report that they think (dis)advantages due to education are problematic. Respondents who are on the winning side of this societal divide think that differences due to educational achievements are more legitimate than their lower educated counterparts. High income and academic family background also reduce the likelihood that individuals problematize (dis)advantages related to education. Similarly, men are less likely to perceive and problematize differences due to educational achievement. Figure 5 also shows that compared to less educated respondents those with middle and high levels of education think that the education inequality is less central to politics. Apart from higher levels of education, only a heterosexual orientation reduces the perceived politicization of education inequality. Urban respondents and those without a migration background are slightly more likely to report that (dis)advantages due to education are often debated in politics.

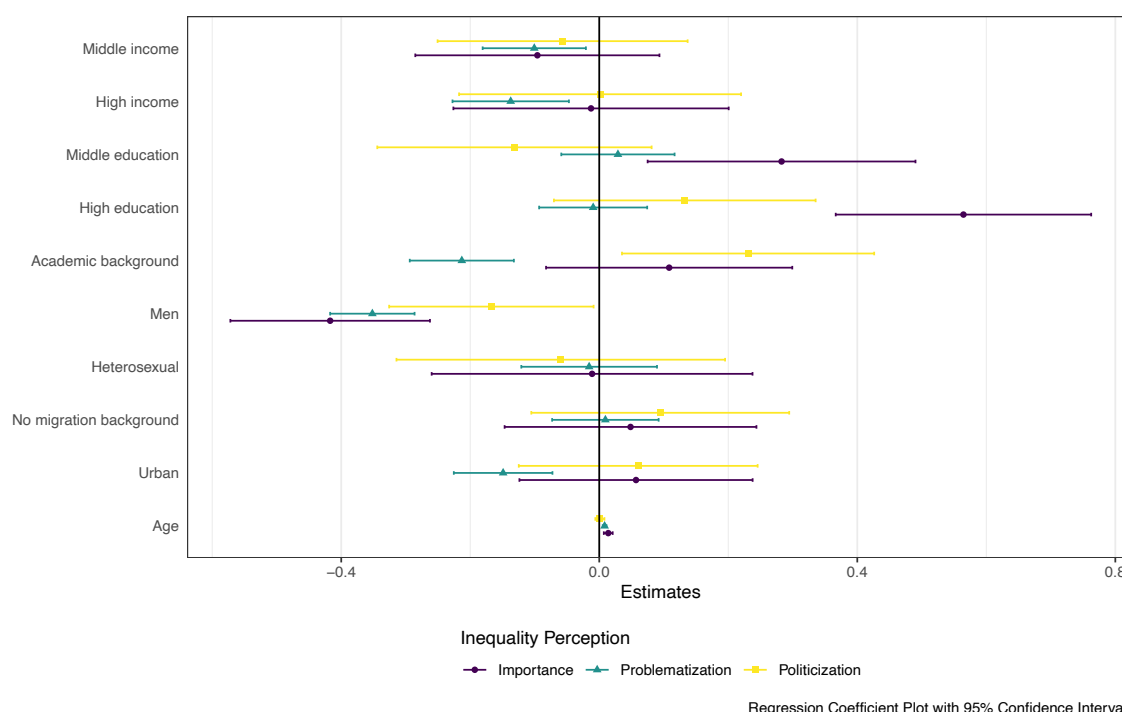
In sum, perceptions of educational inequality depend to a large degree on the objective position of individuals in the respective divide. The noteworthy pattern here, is that the privileged, highly educated are more aware of (dis)advantages due to education, yet, they deem these disparities as more acceptable than their low educated counterparts.

4.2 Income inequality

autoreffig:income shows that with regard to perceptions of income inequality, respondents' objective position in the income distribution is not decisive for how important they think income is for having (dis)advantages in society. However, those with higher education levels attribute more importance to income inequality. While men are less likely to think that income leads to (dis)advantages, the older people get, the more they think income is central for societal differences. When asked about how problematic (dis)advantages due to income are, those with middle and high income tend to be more accepting of differences than low income respondents.

Similarly, individuals with an academic background, men and urban people think that differences due to income are more acceptable than those from non-academic backgrounds, women or rural respondents. Only individuals with an academic background are more likely to think that income differences are a hotly debated topic in politics, while men are less likely to think that this a politically contested issue (column 3 of Figure 6). Overall, people's objective position in the income distribution is not decisive for their perceptions of importance and politicization of income inequality and only impacts how they judge the legitimacy of differences due to income.

FIGURE 6
Perceptions of income inequality

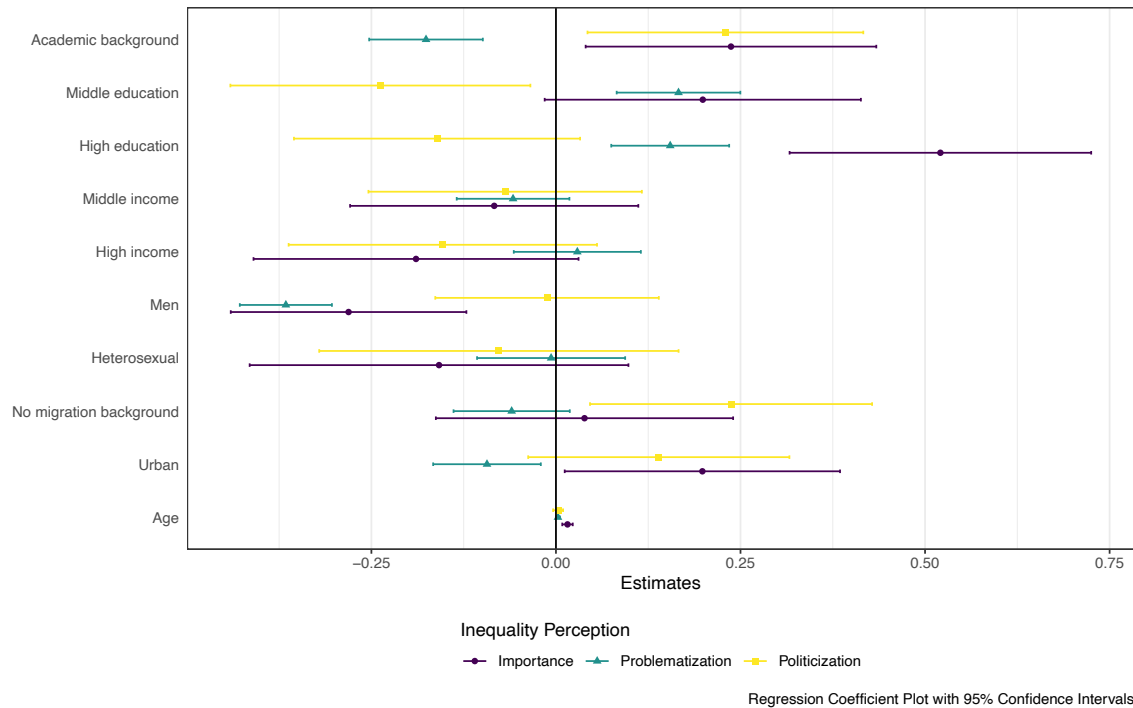


4.3 Social origin inequality

The last socioeconomic inequality analyzed are differences due to individual's social origin. In comparison to those from non-academic backgrounds, having highly educated parents increases people's perception that social origin is decisive for societal differences in Germany (see Figure 7). Similarly, respondents with higher education levels are more aware of inequality related

to social origin. While men are again, less likely to acknowledge this type of socioeconomic inequality, urban and older people see social origin as important dividing line in society.

FIGURE 7
Perceptions of social origin inequality



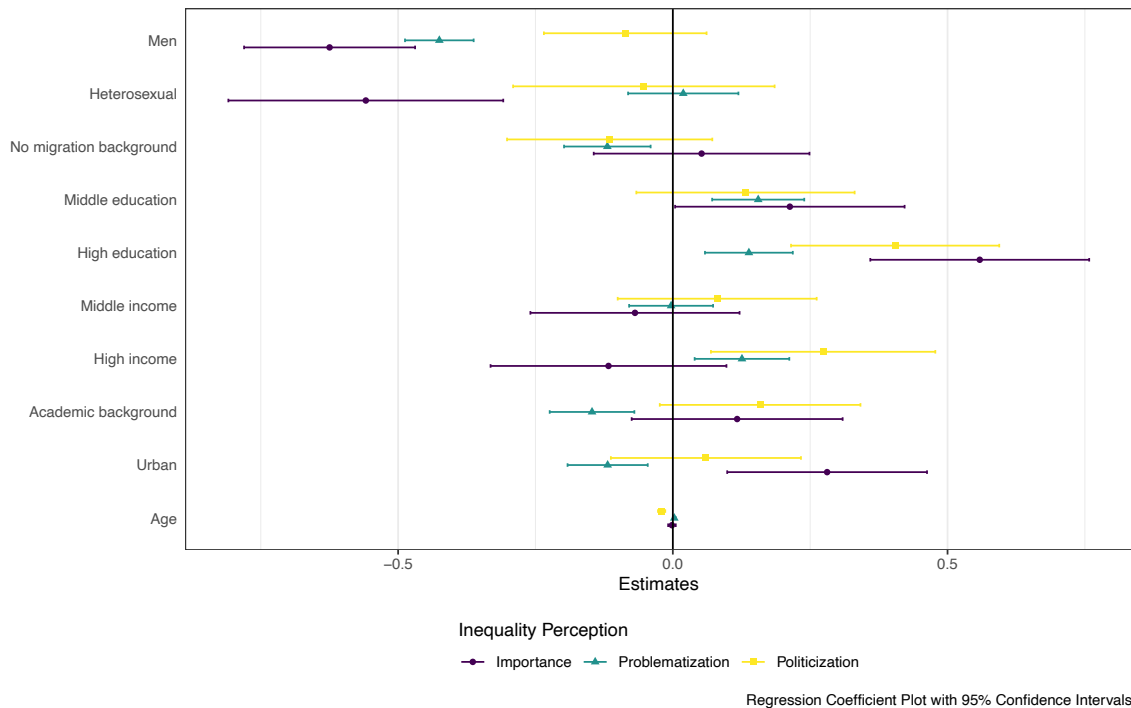
People's own class background also influences how problematic they view inequalities based on social origin. Interestingly, however, the effect points in the opposite direction: more privileged respondents are more likely to think that such differences are acceptable. Only higher education and residing in an urban area make people less accepting of social origin inequality. Respondents from privileged social backgrounds are more likely than those from non-academic backgrounds to think that this inequality dimensions is a hotly debated topic in politics; a sentiment they share with respondents that have no migration background. Apart from these two characteristics only education levels influence the perceived politicization of social origin inequality, with mid-level educated respondents thinking that the topic is less debated than those with lower achievements. Overall, respondent's objective parental background is decisive for their perceptions of social origin inequality. The pattern here is in line with that observed for

education inequality, where the privileged are more likely to acknowledge the importance of this dimension but are also more accepting of differences due to that factor.

4.4 Gender inequality

For perceptions of gender inequality, we also observe a strong influence of respondent's objective position, albeit in the opposite direction compared to education and social origin inequality. Figure 8 shows that men are less likely to think that gender is an important aspect that affords advantages or disadvantages in society, which also applies to heterosexuals in comparison to those with other sexual orientations. Higher education and living in an urban area on the other hand increase perceived importance of gender inequality as societal divide.

FIGURE 8
Perceptions of gender inequality



Men are also less likely to report that differences due to gender are problematic than women or non-binary respondents. Respondents with a migration background are more accept-

ing of societal differences resulting from gender, similar to those living in more rural areas and individuals with an academic family background. Even though disadvantages due to gender are arguably more severe for women with low income and low education (single mothers or female workers in low-paying jobs in the health service sector), it is respondents with high levels of education and income who think that disadvantages due to gender are more important.

The objective position on the gender dimension - identifying as man, woman, or diverse - does not impact the perceived politicization of gender inequality. Only individuals with higher education, higher income and from a privileged family background are more likely to report that gender differences are a politically contested issue nowadays. The pattern observed for this ascribed inequality is clearly different than the ones we observed for inequality related to education and social origin. Here, the privileged – men – are both less likely to acknowledge differences in society due to gender and also think that these differences are more acceptable than women. Perceptions of this ascribed inequality are clearly dependent on the objective position in the divide, but here, perceived importance and problematization do not diverge, but align within the group of privileged and disadvantaged individuals.

4.5 Sexual orientation inequality

Perceptions of privileges and disadvantages due to one's sexual orientation are visualized in Figure 9. Heterosexuals, the objectively privileged, are significantly and substantially less likely to think that sexual orientation affords people advantages or disadvantages in German society. Men are similarly less likely to acknowledge the importance of sexual orientation for societal differences. Respondents without a migration background report sexual orientation as an important dividing line in society, as do those from with an academic background and urban respondents. Compared to individuals with low levels of education, respondents with mid levels of education are significantly less likely to acknowledge the importance of inequality due to sexual orienta-

tion, while there is no significant differences between low and high education levels. And the older people get the less importance they attribute to this inequality dimension.

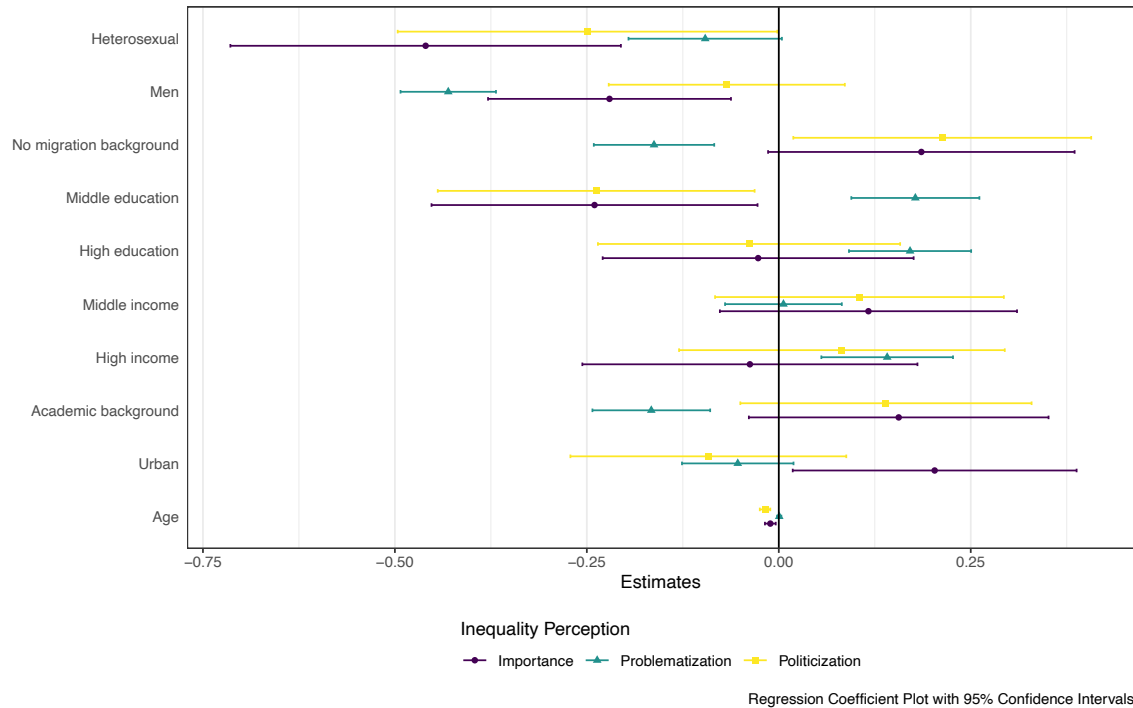
Heterosexual respondents are less likely to think that (dis)advantages afforded by people's sexual orientation are problematic than non-heterosexuals. Likewise, men are more accepting of inequality resulting from sexual orientation, as are people with a migration background and those from academic families. On the other hand, higher education and higher income increase the likelihood that people judge those differences as problematic.

The perceived politicization of the topic is also dependent on people's own sexual orientation. In contrast to homosexual or bisexual respondents and all others indicating a non-heterosexual orientation, heterosexuals are less likely to think that (dis)advantages due to ones sexual orientation are a hotly debated topic in politics. Respondents with a migration background perceive this dimension to be more politicized than those without a migration background, as do those from a relatively privileged social origin compared to low class respondents. The older people get, the less likely they are to report that this is a central topic for politics these days. The pattern regarding perceptions of (dis)advantages due to sexual orientation are similar to gender inequality perceptions, both ascribed inequalities, where the privileged are less aware and more accepting or differences.

4.6 Migration background inequality

For migration background inequality, individuals without a migration background attribute more importance to this type of inequality than respondents who themselves have a migration background. Being objectively disadvantaged on this dimension therefore decreases the likelihood of reporting this aspect as important determinant of societal differences. Men and heterosexual are also less likely to acknowledge the societal consequences of a migration background. On the other hand, the higher the individual's education level the more likely they are to report that a

FIGURE 9
Perceptions of sexual orientation inequality



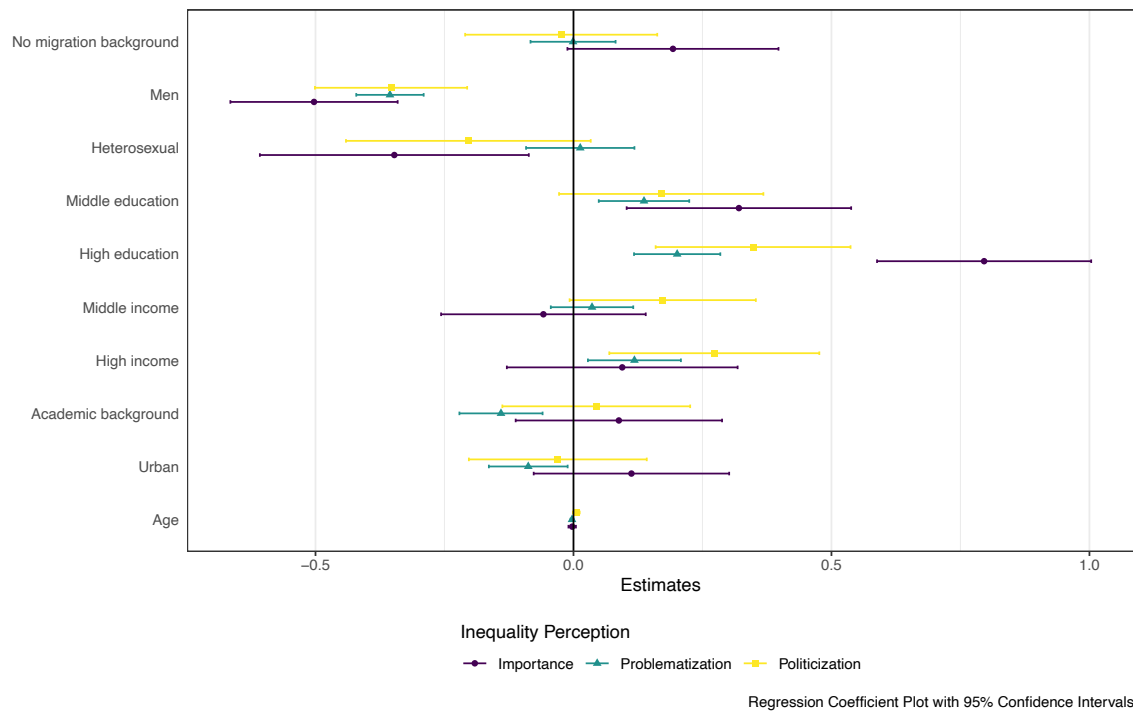
migration background can afford people (dis)advantages in society, which also applies to those with an academic family background.

The evaluation of societal differences related to a migration background is not dependent on the individual, objective position on this dimension of inequality. Differences in society due to a migration background are judged as less problematic men than women. While higher education and higher income lead people to be less accepting of (dis)advantages afforded by a migration background, older respondents, those from privileged social origin, and from urban areas are more accepting of differences due to having a migration background.

Men and heterosexuals are more likely to perceive that migration background inequality is not a hotly debated topic today. The perceived politicization is higher for respondents with at least a Bachelors degree, those with middle or high income and older people. Inequality due to a migration background can also be categorized as an ascribed inequality, yet, perceptions of this type of inequality differ from the pattern found for gender and sexual orientation inequality.

Similar to perceptions of education and social origin inequality, the privileged - without a migration background - are more likely to think that this inequality is decisive in society. Yet, problematization and politicization perceptions are not dependent on the objective position in this divide.

FIGURE 10
Perceptions of migration background inequality



4.7 Objective positions and inequality perceptions

Overall, the objective position of a person on the respective inequality dimension is a decisive determinant of whether people attribute importance to this type of inequality, how they judge it and how they perceive of the political debate surrounding these inequalities. Despite this overarching pattern there are some differences in how objective position relates to assigned subjective importance, problematization and perceived politicization of inequality (see Table 2).

For two of the three socioeconomic inequalities, education and social origin inequality, privileged individuals are more likely to attribute importance to these dimension than their

disadvantaged counterparts. On the other hand, both (dis)advantages due to gender or sexual orientation, sociocultural (ascribed) markers, are viewed as less important by those in the respectively privileged position (men, heterosexuals). The opposite holds for privileges or disadvantages from having a migration background: here individual who are in an objectively advantaged position are more likely to attribute societal importance to this dimension. In general, we find that the winners of the knowledge economy, highly educated individuals, are more likely to attribute importance to both economic and cultural divides compared to less educated losers of this structural transformation.

Across socioeconomic and sociocultural inequalities objectively privileged individuals are less critical of inequality than the disadvantaged (e. g. highly educated for education inequality or men for gender inequality). Differences due to the six dimensions are generally seen as rather problematic across the sample. However, those most likely to benefit from the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities on the respective dimension are the least critical of these differences.

For the last measurement of public inequality perceptions, relating to how fiercely debated in politics people perceive the issue, we find no overall pattern related to individual's objective position. For income, gender and migration background inequality the objective position does not significantly influence the perceived politicization of the topic. Differences due to education or sexual orientation are less often perceived as a controversial issue in politics by the advantaged side. Last, compared to those from working class families, a privileged (academic) social origin makes it more likely that people think the topic is hotly debated in politics these days.

The analysis of our data shows that the objective position of people regarding the respective type of inequality can be decisive. However, there are no uniform or simple answers, pitting the objectively disadvantaged across different types of inequalities against the privileged when it comes to perceptions and evaluations thereof. In contrast, while it remains important to com-

TABLE 2
Objective Position and Inequality Perceptions

	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
	<i>Objective Position: Advantaged</i>		
<i>Socio-Economic</i>			
Education	+	-	-
Income	/	-	/
Social Origin	+	-	+
<i>Socio-Cultural</i>			
Gender	-	-	/
Sexual Orientation	-	-	-
Migration Background	+	/	/

pare the patterns across different types of inequalities, it seems that they follow distinct logics when it comes to who acknowledges their importance and how these divides are judged.

5 Information on Inequality

The objective position within a specific dimension of inequality plays a significant role in how it is perceived and evaluated. However, this relationship does not always align with the expectation, as individuals objectively in a disadvantaged position may not always emphasize or judge the divide more critically. One key explanation for this phenomenon could be a lack of awareness or information about the extent of inequality, particularly amongst the disadvantaged side. Many studies have suggested that (mis)perceptions of inequality largely hinge on the quality of information or lack thereof that people receive. A simple cure for misperceptions or underestimating the importance of these structuring factors for being better or worse off in society could thus be the provision of information. To test this, we implemented a survey experiment that tests the effect of information on gender or education/income inequality framed either as disadvantage or privilege on public inequality perceptions. While information on either privilege or disadvantage makes it more likely that respondents think the primed dimension is an important structuring factor, it does not affect their evaluation of these differences. If we think

that both recognition and dissatisfaction with societal divides are necessary for the emergence of political demands, those are difficult news. Political actors need to do more than just inform their constituencies about the “true“ extent of inequality to garner support for addressing these disparities.

Specifically, we test if information on privileges or disadvantages related to education/income and gender inequality impacts subsequent perceptions and evaluations differently. We find that both, the negative frame of disadvantages, which has been found to be more influential in previous studies (Dietze and Craig, 2021), and positively framing inequality as privileges increases assessments that this dimension is decisive for one’s standing in society. However, the information on the extent of inequality has no effect on the evaluation of these differences. Information on either disadvantages or advantages due to education/income or gender alone seems to be almost irrelevant for judging whether these types of inequalities are acceptable or not. This result is important, as it shows that mere acknowledgement or awareness of inequality works differently and might be more easily influenced than more deep seated evaluation or judgements of these differences.

How do people become aware of or start recognizing that certain aspects such as education or gender, afford some people substantial privileges and others major disadvantages? One key requirement is the availability of information on inequality. People get this information from different sources, their own experiences, their direct environment (Hauser and Norton, 2017; Newman, Shah, and Lauterbach, 2018), the media (McCall, 2013), or through partisan cues (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2018). However, the available information often leaves people with distorted assumptions about the existence or extent of inequality. While this might be problematic at first sight, people are able and sometimes willing to update their (incorrect) beliefs. Accordingly, experimental survey research shows that people react (at least to a certain extent) to (new) information on inequality (McCall et al., 2017; Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2018; Trump

and White, 2018).

Therefore, we want to test the impact of information on the extent of disadvantages or privileges related to education and gender inequality on people's awareness that the respective inequality dimension is decisive for the distribution of resources and opportunities in society. Providing people with information can impact inequality perceptions through two different mechanisms: first, it can generate awareness of a societal issue that people have not explicitly thought about or discussed with anyone. Second, it can correct existing misperceptions. In our setting, information on privileges or disadvantages should mainly rectify the overall tendency of people to underestimate inequality.

Providing people with adequate information on the extent of inequality should not only raise awareness of the existence of inequality but also lead to the evaluation of inequality as problematic. While we are not probing according to which normative principles people might judge the distribution of resources or opportunities as problematic, we argue that making people aware of the true extent of inequality violates a general sense of justice or fairness. Here we follow egalitarian approaches proposing that inequality always requires justification in a way that equality does not (Spafford, 2021; Darby and Branscombe, 2012). If we cannot come up with a justification, inequality remains unfair and therefore morally problematic. Exposing people to information on the extent of inequality requires effort on their part to remember or come up with justifications for why this inequality is acceptable. While this is certainly possible, it is a demanding task. We therefore argue that people who get information on inequality will update their belief about the importance of this factor for the distribution of resources and opportunities in society and will also be more likely to evaluate this unequal distribution as problematic.

5.1 Information on privilege or disadvantage

While we assume that information generally increases inequality awareness, our study aims to distinguish between the impact of information on privileges and disadvantages. Framing inequality as one group “having more than“ or as “having less than“ are arguably two side of the same coin. However, public discussions on inequality often focus on the disadvantages side, although this differs slightly according to the respective dimension of difference (Jun et al., 2022). Framing inequality as either privilege or disadvantage has been shown to be decisive for how people react to information on inequality. Information on the advantages of the rich, for example, has a positive effect on people’s willingness to redistribute wealth (Chow and Galak, 2012). While willingness to take away increases with information on the “having more than” side, the opposite applies for giving to disadvantages groups (Lowery, Chow, and Crosby, 2009). Applying this logic to how people judge the relevance of the respective dimension of inequality, we expect that information on privileges increases people’s perception that the respective dimension is an important determinant of having opportunities more than when receiving information on disadvantages.

5.2 Experimental Setting

Table 3 shows how we split our sample into five equally sized groups of approximately 1.000 respondents. We present information on the current extent of either education and income or gender differences in Germany.

The aim of this information is to update or correct people’s priors about the extent of inequality related to education and income in Germany these days. To initiate a process of belief updating, the information needs to be credible and the content needs to refer to relatable and important advantages or disadvantages in society. We follow a similar strategy as Dietze and Craig (2021) and devise comprehensive infographics, that combine information on the extent

TABLE 3
Experimental Groups

			Groups
Education and Income	Privilege		Treatment Group I
	Disadvantage		Treatment Group II
Gender	Privilege		Treatment Group III
	Disadvantage		Treatment Group IV
No information			Control Group

of education/income and gender inequality in three different areas of life.¹

For education and income inequality we inform our treatment group 1 and 2 about the likelihood that high (1) or low (2) educated/income people in Germany own property, about their life expectancy and their representation in the German parliament.² We only vary the viewpoint of the information, either giving respondents information on the extent of privileges or disadvantages, but always use the exact same reference category, in order to tease out the difference between a disadvantage and privilege frame of inequality (Dietze and Craig, 2021). For instance, we report that people with low income and education in Germany have a 3 year shorter life expectancy than their highly educated counterparts in Treatment Group II. We frame the same information from the vantage point of the privileged, informing respondents about the fact that high education/income people in Germany have a 3 year longer life expectancy (Treatment Group I).

Similarly, we provide information on the extent of gender inequality from the vantage point of men or women to treatment groups 3 and 4. Here, we include data on the extent of inequality in the area of SME leadership, care work, and political representation. When describing SME leadership from the disadvantaged side we inform respondents about the fact that ‘only 16% of SMEs in Germany are headed by a woman’ or from the privileged side, that ‘over 80% of SMEs in Germany are headed by a man’.

¹ All information given in the infographics has been fact-checked and refers to the latest data available for Germany.

² The exact wording and display of all four vignettes is presented in the Appendix.

We expect that receiving information on the extent of education/income inequality and gender inequality increases the likelihood that individuals indicate that this dimension of inequality is decisive for having advantages or disadvantages in society. In essence, we test whether people have “digested“ the information on the extent of inequality and updated their beliefs in accordance with the information given in the graphics. Thus, we ask respondents directly after receiving the information about the extent of inequality how important and problematic they think the different types of inequality are in society.

5.3 Impact of Information on Perceptions and Problematization

Table 4 shows the impact of the different treatments on perceptions of education and gender inequality and the problematization thereof. In line with our expectations, information about the extent of education/income differences increases the importance respondents attribute to these two types of inequality. However, in contrast to previous findings (Dietze and Craig, 2021), our results suggest that respondents react slightly more to the framing of inequality as being privileged (or having advantages) than being disadvantaged. Interestingly, we find a spillover effect from the information on gender disadvantage on the perceptions of education inequality. Respondents who got information on the extent of women’s disadvantages in Germany today were more likely to attribute importance to education as a factor contributing to inequality in society. Our gender inequality information treatment did however not affect the judgement of these educational divides.

Respondents who got information on the disadvantages of women or the advantages of men were more likely to report that they think gender is an important factor contributing to some people being better and others being worse off in society. We find again, that the particular framing as either privilege or disadvantage makes almost no difference in people’s evaluation of inequality, if anything a privilege frame seems to move people more towards acknowledging

this type of inequality, similar to our results from the income/education treatment. However, the information on women’s disadvantages is not decisive for evaluations of gender inequality. Only the privilege frame of gender inequality had an overall negative effect on the problematization of this dimension, meaning people thought that differences between men and women are less problematic after receiving the information.

TABLE 4
Effect of (Dis)advantage Information

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Education Perception	Education Problematization	Gender Perception	Gender Problematization
Education/Income Disadvantage	0.29*** (0.11)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.16 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.05)
Education/Income Advantage	0.34*** (0.11)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.12 (0.12)	0.01 (0.05)
Gender Disadvantage	0.24** (0.11)	-0.005 (0.06)	0.39*** (0.12)	-0.05 (0.05)
Gender Advantage	0.15 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.41*** (0.12)	-0.09* (0.05)
Constant	6.48*** (0.08)	2.40*** (0.04)	4.52*** (0.09)	3.19*** (0.03)
Observations	5,108	5,108	5,108	5,108

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6 Outlook

Perceived inequality has gained prominence since a number of studies have shown how these perceptions are decisive for political attitudes and behavior, sometimes even more so than objective levels of inequality (Knell and Stix, 2020; Kuhn, 2011; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005). A potential mismatch between objective levels of inequality and subjective perceptions thereof has been explained by the lack of accessible, objective information on inequality (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, and Tetaz, 2013), the over-reliance on cues from people’s direct environment (Xu and Garand, 2010; Newman, Johnston, and Lown, 2015; Minkoff and Lyons, 2019; Franko, 2016; Newman, Shah, and Lauterbach, 2018), the comparison with particular reference groups (Runciman, 1966; Davis, 1959; Condon and Wichowsky, 2020), the discomfort that the “true“ distribu-

tion of resources and opportunities would entail (Lane, 1959) or the need to justify the existing system people live in (Trump, 2017; Trump and White, 2018). Despite its trouble to estimate the true extent of inequality, the public is not unaware of rising inequality and would often prefer lower levels of inequality.

This study builds on these findings and aims to broaden our understanding of inequality perceptions. First, by focusing not only on economic inequality but measuring public perceptions of inequality along three socioeconomic (education, income and class background) as well as three sociocultural (gender, sexual orientation and migration background) types of inequalities. Our newly collected data shows that socioeconomic inequalities are still perceived as more decisive than sociocultural inequalities. Overall, there are substantial differences in how the public perceives of and evaluates the differences between the rich and the poor, the low and high educated, those from different class backgrounds, men and women, people with different sexual orientation and those with and without a migration background.

Second, we aim to refine our understanding of public perceptions regarding these inequalities. Instead of asking about estimations of the “true“ extent of inequality, we are interested in the importance individuals ascribe to the specific dimension for being better or worse of in society. Our perception measure thus captures people’s sentiment about the societal importance of six inequality dimensions. Second, we probe the acceptability of these privileges or disadvantages afforded by education, income, class background, gender, sexual orientation and migration background. The resulting measure of people’s judgement of inequalities helps us to differentiate the evaluation of inequalities from the perception of their societal importance. Last, we broaden the measurement of perceptions of inequality to also include the perceived importance of the respective dimension in the political debate, meaning how hotly debated they think the issue is.

Taken together, our findings hint at a potentially important caveat of any intervention that

aims at updating people's perceptions and beliefs about inequality: While factual information on the extent of inequality in different areas of life is acknowledged by those receiving this information, i.e. they update perceptions on the importance of these factors, this does not automatically result in judging these inequalities as more (or less) problematic. Such a distinction between updating perceptions and evaluations is especially important if we want to understand demand for inequality-reducing policies. As Dahl (1971) already sketched out, the process from objective inequality to demands for greater equality is long and possibly breaks down at different steps: First, it might be that people do not perceive of inequality. The experimental evidence collected here and in other studies indicates that it is possible to influence this first step. Second, people might not judge the respective dimension of inequality as relevant to their own condition. While we do not explicitly test this conjunction, our analysis suggests that the perception of inequality is at least partly influenced by people's own objective position with regard to inequality. Third, people can still think that the unequal distribution of resources is legitimate.³ Receiving information on the extent of inequality does not seem to affect individual evaluations of inequality and their judgement of how acceptable these differences are. This might not come as a surprise, given that evaluations of inequality are arguably tied to people's (sometimes latent) norms and values that are not as easily changed compared to the (mere) acknowledgement of these differences.

³ Dahl (1971) also further points out that people need to be frustrated or develop a sense of resentment or anger as another step in order to make demands for the reduction of inequality.

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A Appendix

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A.1 Regression Models

TABLE 5
Perceptions of income inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
Middle income	−0.10 (0.10)	−0.10** (0.04)	−0.06 (0.10)
High income	−0.01 (0.11)	−0.14*** (0.05)	0.001 (0.11)
Academic background	0.28*** (0.11)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.13 (0.11)
Middle class	0.56*** (0.10)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.13 (0.10)
Upper class	0.11 (0.10)	−0.21*** (0.04)	0.23** (0.10)
Men	−0.42*** (0.08)	−0.35*** (0.03)	−0.17** (0.08)
Heterosexual	−0.01 (0.13)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.06 (0.13)
No migration background	0.05 (0.10)	0.01 (0.04)	0.09 (0.10)
Urban	0.06 (0.09)	−0.15*** (0.04)	0.06 (0.09)
Age	0.01*** (0.004)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.004)
Constant	5.95*** (0.20)	2.98*** (0.08)	5.61*** (0.20)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

TABLE 6
Perceptions of education inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
Middle education	0.39*** (0.10)	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.26** (0.10)
High education	0.57*** (0.09)	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.10)
Middle income	0.08 (0.09)	-0.14*** (0.05)	0.03 (0.09)
High income	0.33*** (0.10)	-0.23*** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.11)
Academic background	0.13 (0.09)	-0.19*** (0.05)	0.13 (0.10)
Men	-0.29*** (0.07)	-0.33*** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.08)
Hetero	0.04 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.24* (0.12)
No migration background	0.16* (0.09)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.28*** (0.10)
Urban	0.04 (0.09)	-0.08* (0.04)	0.15* (0.09)
Age	0.02*** (0.003)	0.01*** (0.002)	0.004 (0.003)
Constant	5.55*** (0.18)	2.52*** (0.09)	4.49*** (0.19)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

TABLE 7
Perceptions of social origin inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
Academic background	0.24** (0.10)	-0.18*** (0.04)	0.23** (0.10)
Middle education	0.20* (0.11)	0.17*** (0.04)	-0.24** (0.10)
High education	0.52*** (0.10)	0.15*** (0.04)	-0.16 (0.10)
Middle income	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.09)
High income	-0.19* (0.11)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.15 (0.11)
Men	-0.28*** (0.08)	-0.37*** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.08)
Heterosexual	-0.16 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.12)
No migration background	0.04 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.04)	0.24** (0.10)
Urban	0.20** (0.10)	-0.09** (0.04)	0.14 (0.09)
Age	0.02*** (0.004)	0.003* (0.001)	0.003 (0.003)
Constant	4.92*** (0.20)	3.25*** (0.08)	4.04*** (0.19)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

TABLE 8
Perceptions of gender inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
Men	−0.62*** (0.08)	−0.43*** (0.03)	−0.09 (0.08)
Heterosexual	−0.56*** (0.13)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.05 (0.12)
No migration background	0.05 (0.10)	−0.12*** (0.04)	−0.11 (0.10)
Middle education	0.21** (0.11)	0.16*** (0.04)	0.13 (0.10)
High education	0.56*** (0.10)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.40*** (0.10)
Middle income	−0.07 (0.10)	−0.003 (0.04)	0.08 (0.09)
High income	−0.12 (0.11)	0.13*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.10)
Academic background	0.12 (0.10)	−0.15*** (0.04)	0.16* (0.09)
Urban	0.28*** (0.09)	−0.12*** (0.04)	0.06 (0.09)
Age	−0.002 (0.004)	0.003* (0.001)	−0.02*** (0.003)
Constant	5.14*** (0.20)	3.28*** (0.08)	6.12*** (0.19)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

TABLE 9
Perceptions of sexual orientation inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
Heterosexual	−0.46*** (0.13)	−0.10* (0.05)	−0.25** (0.13)
Men	−0.22*** (0.08)	−0.43*** (0.03)	−0.07 (0.08)
No migration background	0.19* (0.10)	−0.16*** (0.04)	0.21** (0.10)
Middle education	−0.24** (0.11)	0.18*** (0.04)	−0.24** (0.11)
High education	−0.03 (0.10)	0.17*** (0.04)	−0.04 (0.10)
Middle income	0.12 (0.10)	0.01 (0.04)	0.11 (0.10)
High income	−0.04 (0.11)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.08 (0.11)
Academic background	0.16 (0.10)	−0.17*** (0.04)	0.14 (0.10)
Urban	0.20** (0.09)	−0.05 (0.04)	−0.09 (0.09)
Age	−0.01*** (0.004)	0.001 (0.001)	−0.02*** (0.003)
Constant	4.81*** (0.20)	3.43*** (0.08)	5.84*** (0.20)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

TABLE 10
Perceptions of migration background inequality

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Importance	Problematization	Politicization
No migration background	0.19* (0.10)	-0.001 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.09)
Men	-0.50*** (0.08)	-0.36*** (0.03)	-0.35*** (0.08)
Heterosexual	-0.35*** (0.13)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.20* (0.12)
Middle education	0.32*** (0.11)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.17* (0.10)
High education	0.80*** (0.11)	0.20*** (0.04)	0.35*** (0.10)
Middle income	-0.06 (0.10)	0.04 (0.04)	0.17* (0.09)
High income	0.09 (0.11)	0.12** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.10)
Academic background	0.09 (0.10)	-0.14*** (0.04)	0.04 (0.09)
Urban	0.11 (0.10)	-0.09** (0.04)	-0.03 (0.09)
Age	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003* (0.001)	0.01 (0.003)
Constant	5.23*** (0.21)	3.20*** (0.08)	5.64*** (0.19)
Observations	4,741	4,741	4,741

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A.2 Experimental Vignettes

We included four different vignettes in our information treatment. Figure 11 shows how we presented respondents with information on disadvantages due to low education and income. Figure 12 depicts the exact same information only from the advantaged point of view. The translated disadvantage frame for education and income reads as follows: “People with low incomes and low education have a number of disadvantages compared to people with higher incomes and a higher level of education in our society: They are 3 times less likely to own their own property, which also means that they are less likely to be able to inherit wealth to their children. They have a life expectancy that is 3 years shorter. They are underrepresented in the Bundestag, less than 15% of representatives have not studied.”

Figure 13 and Figure 14 show the information treatment for gender inequality, again as two side of the same coin from the disadvantaged side of women and the advantaged side of men. The advantage frame of the gender treatment in English says: “Men have a number of advantages compared to women in our society today. Compared to women...More than 80% of small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany are run by a man. Men do more than 50% less work every day in the household, nursing and care. Men are strongly represented in the Bundestag, over 65% of the representatives are men.”

FIGURE 11
Education and Income Disadvantage

Menschen mit **niedrigem Einkommen** und **geringer Bildung** haben im Vergleich zu Menschen mit höherem Einkommen und mehr Bildung heutzutage eine Reihe von **Nachteilen** in unserer Gesellschaft:



Sie besitzen **3 mal seltener Wohneigentum**, was auch bedeutet, dass sie ihren Kindern weniger Vermögen vererben können.



Sie haben **eine 3 Jahre kürzere Lebenserwartung**.



Sie sind im Bundestag untervertreten, **weniger als 15% der Abgeordneten** haben nicht studiert.

FIGURE 12
Education and Income Privilege

Menschen mit **hohem Einkommen** und **hoher Bildung** haben im Vergleich zu Menschen mit niedrigem Einkommen und geringer Bildung heutzutage eine Reihe von **Vorteilen** in unserer Gesellschaft:



Sie besitzen **3 mal häufiger Wohneigentum**, was auch bedeutet, dass sie ihren Kindern mehr Vermögen vererben können.



Sie haben **eine 3 Jahre längere Lebenserwartung**.



Sie sind im Bundestag stark vertreten, **mehr als 85% der Abgeordneten** haben studiert.

FIGURE 13
Gender Disadvantage

Frauen haben heutzutage im Vergleich zu Männern eine Reihe von **Nachteilen** in unserer Gesellschaft:



Nur **16% der kleinen und mittleren Unternehmen** in Deutschland werden von einer **Frau geführt**.



Frauen leisten täglich **über 50% mehr Arbeit im Haushalt, der Pflege und Betreuung**.



Frauen sind im Bundestag untervertreten, nur **knapp 35% der Abgeordneten** sind Frauen.

FIGURE 14
Gender Privilege

Männer haben im Vergleich zu Frauen heutzutage eine Reihe von **Vorteilen** in unserer Gesellschaft:



Über **80% der kleinen und mittleren Unternehmen** in Deutschland werden von **einem Mann geführt**.



Männer leisten täglich **über 50% weniger Arbeit im Haushalt, der Pflege und Betreuung**.



Männer sind im Bundestag stark vertreten, **über 65% der Abgeordneten** sind Männer.