



Catalysts and buffers: How diversity and status in social networks shape attitudes towards inequality in contemporary societies

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Subjective inequality
Social networks
Diversity
Status
SES

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the socioeconomic composition of individuals' social networks shapes attitudes towards inequality in contemporary societies. While limited cross-national research has examined the location of people's acquaintances within the social structure, this study fills a crucial gap by jointly analyzing their heterogeneity and concentration. Using data from the ISSP 2017 Social Networks Module, the study investigates how socioeconomic network diversity and status relate to perceptions of inequality and preferences for redistribution across 32,310 individuals in 31 countries. Country fixed-effects regression results indicate that individuals with more socioeconomically diverse networks show modestly higher national inequality perceptions, whereas having higher-status acquaintances is strongly associated with lower support for redistribution. These effects are not uniform: network diversity often acts as a catalyst and network status as a buffer of distributive attitudes. Social networks thus operate simultaneously as comparative frames (highlighting disparities) and reference frames (anchoring norms), amplifying or dampening individuals' views on inequality. Notably, network effects operate consistently across all socioeconomic groups, regardless of individuals' SES. Overall, the study advances meso-level perspectives on distributive justice by demonstrating how everyday social relationships shape perceptions and beliefs about inequality in stratified societies.

1. Introduction

Why do individuals differ in how they perceive and respond to inequality? Even when sharing similar structural conditions, people estimate varying levels of inequality in their societies and diverge in their support for redistributive policies. This puzzle has grown increasingly salient in a context marked by rising economic inequality (Piketty and Saez, 2014) and yet relatively stable levels of concern about it (Kenworthy and McCall, 2008). Social justice scholars have argued that this discrepancy reflects a widespread unawareness of the true extent of inequality, the psychological motivation to legitimize existing social systems, and the persistence of meritocratic beliefs that obscure structural explanations and justify unequal outcomes (Mijls, 2019; Orford, 2025). However, recent cross-national evidence suggests that rising inequality does not sustain meritocratic beliefs, but instead depresses and polarizes citizens' trust in meritocratic success, indicating that growing disparities may undermine, rather than reinforce, dominant narratives of fairness (Ehmes and Gangl, 2026). Building on this, emerging perspectives emphasize the role of relational environments—the social contexts in which people are embedded—as a crucial factor shaping attitudes towards inequality.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2026.103389>

Received 17 October 2025; Received in revised form 19 March 2026; Accepted 1 June 2026

Available online 11 June 2026

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While much research has addressed the influence of individual characteristics (e.g., income, education, class) and national-level factors (e.g., welfare regimes, objective inequality), growing evidence highlights the meso-level—the realm of everyday social relationships—as a key setting where inequality is experienced, perceived, and interpreted (Summers et al., 2022). Recent studies show that individuals do not assess inequality in a vacuum but infer it from interactions within their social environments (Mijls, 2018). This relational perspective foregrounds mechanisms such as social sampling (Dawtry et al., 2019), by which people extrapolate macro-level conditions from their network composition, and reference group theory (Evans and Kelley, 2017), which suggests that fairness and distributive justice are judged relative to one's peers. These insights form the foundation of this study's focus on how personal networks shape distributive attitudes.

In contemporary societies, two core dimensions of network composition are particularly relevant: the heterogeneity of socioeconomic positions within a network (network diversity) and the overall level of socioeconomic status of one's acquaintances (network status) (Otero et al., 2023). These dimensions are distinct yet potentially complementary. Diversity captures the spread of contacts across the social hierarchy, while status reflects the average prestige of those contacts. Two individuals may have equally diverse networks but differ markedly in their average status—or vice versa. Understanding how these dimensions affect attitudes toward inequality, both independently and in interaction, is key to advancing a meso-level theory of distributive justice.

Previous research—mostly single-country studies—suggests that exposure to a broader range of social positions tends to heighten perceptions of inequality and, under some conditions, support for redistribution (Chiang, 2011, 2011, 2011; Mijls, 2023; Mijls and Usmani, 2024; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026; Willis et al., 2024). Conversely, high-status networks are associated with meritocratic norms and reduced redistributive preferences, while contact with working-class individuals can foster greater willingness to address inequality (Lindh et al., 2021, p. 20; Lindh and Andersson, 2024; Vargas Salfate and Stern, 2023; Vázquez et al., 2023). Yet few studies have analyzed both dimensions jointly, or examined whether their influence varies systematically with individuals' own socioeconomic status (SES). Furthermore, some existing research relies on subjective perceptions of intergroup contact rather than direct measures of network composition, raising concerns about measurement bias and endogeneity.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it develops a relational framework for analyzing distributive attitudes, integrating insights from reference group, social sampling, and social inference approaches. Second, it empirically distinguishes the independent and interactive effects of network diversity and network status—dimensions that prior research typically examines separately rather than jointly. Previous studies focus on homophily, heterogeneity, or the prevalence of acquaintances from specific social strata, but rarely assess diversity alongside contact with deprivation simultaneously. Third, it examines whether these effects are conditioned by individuals' SES, testing whether the same social exposure yields different attitudinal consequences across the social hierarchy.

This study uses data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2017 Social Networks Module, which includes information from 32,310 respondents in 31 countries. The position generator identifies whether respondents know someone working in occupations spanning the full socioeconomic spectrum, providing objective indicators of network composition. Analytically, I employ country fixed-effects regression models, focusing on within-country variation to hold constant unobserved national characteristics. The analysis tests whether network diversity and network status shape distributive attitudes, whether their interaction reinforces or dampens these effects, and whether individuals' SES moderates these associations.

This article does not compare countries directly; rather, it leverages cross-national data to test whether these meso-level mechanisms operate consistently across diverse social contexts. I propose that socioeconomic diversity functions as a catalyst, expanding individuals' comparative frames and making inequality more visible in everyday life—thus heightening their perceptions of societal disparities. Conversely, network status operates as a buffer, anchoring distributive norms and fostering meritocratic interpretations that temper support for redistribution. Together, these mechanisms capture two complementary processes through which social environments are associated with distributive attitudes: diversity sharpening awareness of inequality, while status conditioning how this awareness translates into normative orientations toward redistribution.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses; the following sections describe the data and analytical strategy, present the results, and conclude with implications for theory and future research.

2. Theory

2.1. Attitudes towards inequality and the meso-level approach

Attitudes towards inequality encompass individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and judgments about how economic resources are distributed in society and the principles that underpin such distribution (Janmaat, 2013), including views on redistribution, taxation, and wages. The literature generally identifies two primary and most extensively studied dimensions of these attitudes: perceptions of inequality—defined as individuals' subjective estimates of how unequal their society is (Engelhardt and Wagoner, 2014; García-Sánchez, 2023)—and preferences for redistribution—which capture the extent to which individuals support state policies aimed at reducing socioeconomic disparities (Franetovic and Castillo, 2022; Luebker, 2014). These two dimensions are also the most foundational in structuring the diverse ways in which people conceive of inequality—what scholars have termed inequality belief systems (Bertero et al., 2024; Bertero and Franetovic, 2025; Franetovic and Bertero, 2023). Although closely related, perceptions and preferences are shaped by different cognitive and motivational mechanisms. For instance, some individuals may acknowledge high levels of inequality yet oppose redistribution based on beliefs in meritocracy or self-interest, while others may favor redistribution even when they underestimate existing disparities, often due to normative values or group-based solidarities. Unlike studies that combine perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution into a single indicator (e.g., Lindh and Andersson, 2024), this paper analyzes

them separately, as they capture distinct dimensions of distributive attitudes: the former estimative (perceptions of societal disparities) and the latter political (support for redistributive policies).

Most research on these attitudes has focused either on the micro level—examining how income, education, or ideology shape beliefs—or the macro level, linking institutional or economic factors to public opinion (Janmaat, 2013). However, a growing body of literature stresses the importance of the meso level: the social environments in which individuals are embedded. These contexts influence attitudes through mechanisms of exposure, comparison, and identification (Summers et al., 2022). Studies have analyzed how inequality beliefs are shaped by socioeconomic segregation in personal networks (Iturra-Sanhueza, 2025; Lindh et al., 2021; Lindh and Andersson, 2024; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026), neighborhoods (Merolla et al., 2011; Steele and Perkins, 2018; Thal, 2017), and schools (García-Castro et al., 2022; Goudeau and Cimpian, 2021; Mijs, 2023), among other settings. These perspectives share a relational assumption: that people assess inequality not in absolute terms but relative to their social context (Condon and Wichowsky, 2020). Accordingly, individuals with similar structural conditions may form divergent attitudes depending on the composition of their social environments and the reference groups they encounter.

Research on the socioeconomic configuration of personal networks—especially within the social capital tradition—has identified two key dimensions that structure social exposure: network diversity and network status (Otero et al., 2023; Van der Gaag, 2005; Van Tubergen and Volker, 2015). Diversity refers to the range of occupational positions present in a person's social circle, capturing how many different levels of socioeconomic status are represented. Status, in contrast, reflects the average prestige of these positions, indicating the overall standing of one's network within the social hierarchy. While diversity highlights variation, status signals concentration.

These dimensions, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive. Individuals can have contacts concentrated at similar positions in the stratification system—thus exhibiting similar prevalent network status—but differ in how concentrated they are or how wide the span of their distribution. The opposite is also possible: similarly diverse networks can have acquaintances concentrated in the lower or upper parts of the social structure, thus differing in their prevalent status. This distinction is critical because diversity and status may exert independent and interactive effects on inequality attitudes. For instance, a network composed exclusively of mid-status individuals is less diverse than one spanning low- and high-status ties, even if their prevalent status is comparable.

Focusing on only one dimension risks obscuring important dynamics. High diversity without exposure to the extremes of the hierarchy may limit recognition of systemic inequalities, while high-status networks lacking diversity may reinforce dominant ideologies and legitimize inequality. Prior studies—mostly conducted in specific national contexts—suggest that diversity enhances recognition of inequality (Mijs, 2018; Minkoff and Lyons, 2019; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026; Steele and Perkins, 2018), while high-status networks often function as buffers, promoting system-justifying beliefs and reducing support for redistribution (Lindh et al., 2021; Lindh and Andersson, 2024). Building directly on this established meso-level literature—including the cross-national analyses of Lindh and Andersson (2024) and Iturra-Sanhueza (2025), this study integrates these insights into a unified relational framework that systematically distinguishes diversity (catalyst) from status (buffer) effects, both independently and interactively. It extends prior work by testing this integrated framework across 31 diverse countries using objective position generator data, providing broader generalizability than most existing single-country or limited-sample research.

2.2. Network diversity and inequality perception: inference through social exposure

Individuals' perceptions of inequality are not formed in a vacuum but are shaped by the structure of their immediate social environments. When these environments include people from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds—what I refer to as network diversity—they offer opportunities for recognizing the existence and implications of inequality. The heterogeneity of social ties across occupational and class positions fosters exposure to contrasting life conditions, which in turn informs how individuals perceive societal disparities.

Building on this relational perspective, a growing body of research shows that people use their localized networks as cognitive shortcuts to evaluate inequality more broadly. Because interpersonal networks tend to be structured by homophily and segregation (McPherson et al., 2001), they are often unrepresentative of broader society. Individuals thus generalize distributive patterns from their immediate surroundings—whether accurate or not—leading to systematic biases in perceptions (Galesic et al., 2012). Studies confirm that while people are relatively accurate in assessing inequality within their own social circles, they frequently misestimate national-level distributions, especially when embedded in homogeneous contexts (Iacono and Ranaldi, 2021; Newman et al., 2018). These biased perceptions reflect the particular structure of individuals' networks: when one's contacts are socioeconomically similar, it becomes difficult to grasp the full extent of societal disparities (Chiang, 2011; Schulz et al., 2022).

However, diversity does more than bias estimates—it also encourages critical reflection. A complementary line of research emphasizes how heterogeneous networks provide contrasting reference points that foster awareness of structural barriers to individuals' unequal outcomes, failure, and success. In socially varied environments—whether at school, in the workplace, or in neighborhoods—individuals encounter inequalities in opportunity that challenge dominant meritocratic narratives (Mijs, 2018). This exposure promotes a shift from individualistic to structural explanations of inequality, leading to a more acute recognition of social asymmetries (Lindner et al., 2023; Summers et al., 2022). Experimental work on inequality and fairness adds to this picture by showing that individuals' evaluations of unequal outcomes depend strongly on how they interpret the role of luck and fairness in the process (Molina et al., 2019). Empirical studies show that individuals with more diverse social contacts are more likely to perceive larger economic disparities (Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026), and that relational mobility across social classes tends to heighten awareness of inequality (Willis et al., 2024). In contrast, those living in affluent, homogeneous neighborhoods systematically underestimate existing gaps (Thal, 2017).

Recent simulation-based work is consistent with this view, illustrating how perceptions of inequality might be shaped not only by current social ties but also by cumulative exposure to segregation across social settings over time (Mijs and Usmani, 2024; Schulz et al., 2022). These simulations are not taken as proof of the underlying psychological mechanism, but rather as a demonstration of how such a mechanism could plausibly generate the observed patterns. Together, the evidence suggests that network diversity is not just a structural condition, but also an important cognitive and relational context for recognizing inequality. Building on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is tested.

H1. Individuals with more socioeconomically diverse networks will perceive higher levels of inequality.

2.3. Network status and redistribution preferences: reference groups and normative anchors

While network diversity mainly shapes how individuals perceive inequality, the prevalent level of socioeconomic status within their social circle—referred to as network status—plays a distinct role in shaping their preferences for redistribution. This dimension reflects the concentration of social ties around positions of privilege or disadvantage and captures the relative standing of one's network within the occupational hierarchy.

Individuals do not develop redistributive preferences in isolation. Rather, their normative views are influenced by the expectations, norms, and beliefs that prevail within their social environments. One theoretical perspective that illuminates this process is reference group theory. According to Merton (1968), people evaluate societal fairness not through objective indicators but relative to those around them. These judgments are shaped by cognitive biases, such as the tendency to overestimate the prevalence of people similar to oneself (Kahneman et al., 1982), leading individuals to misplace themselves in the social structure (Evans and Kelley, 2004) and underestimate inequality (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). In high-status networks, where most individuals enjoy privilege, these biases are amplified, reinforcing the idea that redistribution is unnecessary (Dawtry et al., 2015; Evans and Kelley, 2017).

Interpersonal environments also exert normative pressure by promoting dominant ideologies. Theories of intergroup contact suggest that social ties across status lines can increase empathy and reduce prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), but they can also create illusions of fairness that undermine redistributive impulses, particularly among disadvantaged groups (Dixon et al., 2006; Saguy et al., 2009). These relational mechanisms are especially powerful when individuals internalize the prevailing views of their peers, a process supported by evidence showing alignment between personal beliefs and those dominant in one's social circles (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2018; Tropp et al., 2021).

Empirical research supports this argument. Lindh et al. (2021) and Lindh and Andersson (2024) find that ties to the upper classes are associated with reduced support for redistributive policies, while connections to working-class contacts correspond with stronger calls for economic leveling. Paskov and Weisstanner (2021) demonstrate that upper-class individuals with working-class ties show higher support for redistribution, whereas working-class respondents with upper-class links exhibit decreased demand for redistributive measures. Similarly, Vargas Salfate & Stern (2023) show that contact with the upper class increases legitimization of inequality, whereas contact with lower-status groups reduces it—underscoring how network status channels normative beliefs.

Taken together, these insights suggest that high-status networks do more than shield individuals from material need: they function as normative buffers, offering a relational framework that stabilizes distributive beliefs, reduces sensitivity to inequality, and anchors attitudes to dominant ideologies. As such, the main socioeconomic status of one's social contacts constitutes a powerful reference point for forming attitudes towards redistribution.

H2. Individuals with higher network status will show lower support for redistribution.

2.4. Diversity as catalyst, status as buffer: network composition as comparative frame

While network diversity and status are analytically distinct, their effects on inequality attitudes are likely to interact. I argue that diversity provides the comparative frame, enabling individuals to interpret the implications of their network's socioeconomic status. In homogeneous networks, status effects are muted: individuals may naturalize prevailing norms without encountering contrast (Chiang, 2011; Mijs, 2018). In contrast, diverse networks bring socioeconomic disparities into sharper focus, prompting critical evaluation of inequality and fairness (Lindner et al., 2023; Summers et al., 2022).

In this sense, diversity functions as a relational catalyst: it exposes individuals to contrasting life conditions, enhancing the salience of inequality-related cues embedded in network status (Mijs, 2018; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026). A low-status network may foster awareness of disadvantage, but only if such disadvantage is made visible through comparison. Likewise, a high-status network may reduce support for redistribution, especially when juxtaposed with visible inequality among lower-status contacts (Lindh et al., 2021; Paskov and Weisstanner, 2021).

However, this catalytic effect is conditional. If diversity enables comparison, status functions as a buffer, shaping how those comparisons are interpreted. High-status networks often anchor distributive norms and reinforce meritocratic narratives, leading individuals to rationalize observed disparities (Edmiston, 2018; Suhay et al., 2021). As a result, the effect of diversity on inequality perception may weaken in high-status environments. This is consistent with Mijs (2018), who argues that inequality is fundamentally a problem of inference, shaped by what individuals see in their everyday contexts.

Taken together, these insights suggest that diversity and status interact in shaping attitudes, but not symmetrically. On one hand, diversity's impact on perceived inequality may be buffered by network status. On the other hand, the negative effect of status on redistributive preferences may be amplified by network diversity (Binder et al., 2009; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

H3a. The positive effect of network socioeconomic diversity on perceived inequality is less pronounced in high-status networks.

H3b. The negative effect of network socioeconomic status on support for redistribution is more pronounced in highly diverse networks.

2.5. Individual social position as moderator: moral circles, social closure, and relative position

The relationship between network composition and attitudes towards inequality may vary according to individuals' own social position. Social segregation limits opportunities for cross-status interaction, shaping the diversity of people's social exposure (Blau, 1977; Bottero, 2007). High-SES individuals are often concentrated in exclusive environments—elite schools, affluent neighborhoods, and prestigious workplaces—that reinforce homogeneity and reduce contact with lower-status groups (Bee, 2007; Godechot et al., 2020; Méndez and Gayo, 2018). This isolation can weaken recognition of structural inequality (Edmiston, 2018; Suhay et al., 2021). Low-SES individuals also experience homogeneity, but in their case it tends to reflect constrained opportunities, shaping how they perceive inequality (Merolla et al., 2011).

The evidence on whether SES moderates the influence of network diversity and status is mixed. Some studies suggest relatively similar effects across strata (Lindh et al., 2021; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026). Others point to stronger sensitivity among low-SES individuals, who may interpret social cues through their exposure to structural constraints and systemic threats (Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead, 2018). Yet alternative findings indicate that high-SES individuals may be especially responsive to their environments when forming political or redistributive views (Binder et al., 2009; Tropp and Pettigrew, 2005).

Two mechanisms can help explain this greater responsiveness among higher-status groups. First, high-SES individuals tend to have narrower moral circles, focusing concern on close ties, which increases sensitivity to the composition of their immediate environments (Elbæk et al., 2023). Second, status asymmetry affects how intergroup contact is processed: higher-status individuals may be concerned with avoiding the appearance of exploitation, while lower-status individuals focus more on avoiding discrimination (Shelton, 2003). As a result, the same cross-status interaction can produce different attitudinal outcomes depending on one's social position. For example, Robinson and Preston (1976) found that desegregation initiatives in U.S. schools reduced prejudice among white teachers but had little effect among black teachers, since the interaction was not perceived as equally balanced. This illustrates how contact can generate stronger attitudinal change among advantaged groups. In line with later meta-analyses (Binder et al., 2009; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), these findings suggest that in the context of socioeconomic networks, high-SES respondents may be especially responsive to the diversity and status composition of their social ties.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that network composition influences inequality attitudes across all SES groups, though the magnitude of these effects may vary. Prior research indicates that they are often stronger among high-SES individuals, yet most of this evidence comes from single-country contexts. This article extends the analysis by testing whether such moderation patterns generalize across a wide and diverse set of societies.

H4. The effects of network diversity and network status on inequality attitudes will be stronger among high-SES individuals.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

The study uses data from the 2017 Social Networks Module of ISSP (ISSP Research Group, 2019). The ISSP is an ongoing annual initiative involving cross-national survey collaboration, addressing a broad spectrum of topics crucial to social science research. The 2017 module focuses on the composition and nature of people's social relationships and various sociopolitical attitudes. By gathering cross-nationally comparable information from representative samples across a wide range of countries, this survey provides a unique opportunity to study the relationship between the socioeconomic composition of social networks and attitudes towards inequality from a comparative perspective. The analysis includes a sample of 32,310 individuals from 31 countries: Australia (AU), Austria (AT), China (CN), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Great Britain (GB), Hungary (HU), Iceland (IS), India (IN), Israel (IL), Japan (JP), Lithuania (LT), Mexico (MX), New Zealand (NZ), Philippines (PH), Russia (RU), Slovak Republic (SK), South Africa (ZA), Spain (ES), Suriname (SR), Sweden (SE), Switzerland (CH), Taiwan (TW), Thailand (TH), Turkey (TR), and the United States (US).

3.2. Attitudes towards inequality

This research examines two central attitudes related to distributive justice: perception of inequality and preference for

redistribution. These attitudes are measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents “strongly disagree” and 5 represents “strongly agree”.¹ Perception of inequality is assessed by respondents' agreement with the statement, “Differences in income in (country) are too large”.² Preference for redistribution reflects agreement with the statement, “It is the government's responsibility to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.” These indicators have been validated in prior research as reliable measures of distributive justice attitudes (Choi, 2019; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Trump, 2023).

3.3. Network diversity and network status

The primary independent variables are network diversity and network status, capturing distinct aspects of the socioeconomic composition of individuals' social networks. Network diversity reflects the variation of socioeconomic statuses within one's network, while network status indicates the overall socioeconomic level of these acquaintances.

These variables are derived using the ISSP position generator, which asks respondents whether they know someone in each of ten occupations spanning a broad socioeconomic spectrum: bus or lorry driver, senior executive of a large company, home or office cleaner, hairdresser or barber, human resources manager, lawyer, car mechanic, nurse, police officer, and schoolteacher.³ Respondents could indicate whether they knew someone in each role as a family member, close friend, or acquaintance, or if they did not know anyone in that occupation. These responses were recoded into a binary format indicating presence or absence of a relationship, consistent with established practices in social capital research (e.g., Otero et al., 2023).

Each occupation was matched to an ISCO-08 code (Ganzeboom, 2010) and assigned an International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) score (Ganzeboom et al., 1992). ISEI scores range from 16 to 90, with higher values indicating greater occupational prestige. This measure is widely used in cross-national research for its consistency and validity (Ganzeboom and Treiman, 2003). The full list of occupations, ISCO-08 codes, and ISEI scores is available in Table A1 in the Supplementary Material.

From these ISEI scores, seven network composition indicators were derived: network upper reachability (the highest ISEI score reached by the respondent), network range (the difference between the highest and lowest ISEI scores), network extensity (the number of reached occupations), network prestige (the mean ISEI score), the number of high-status positions ($ISEI \geq 65$), the number of mid-status positions ($40 \leq ISEI < 65$), and the number of low-status positions ($ISEI < 40$).⁴ Respondents who named only one or no occupation were excluded from the analysis, as the diversity and status indicators cannot be meaningfully constructed in these cases. This exclusion represents a small fraction of the total sample and ensures the robustness of the latent constructs.

To reduce dimensionality and avoid multicollinearity, a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with oblimin rotation was conducted using the seven indicators. This approach allows the identification of latent dimensions underlying the socioeconomic composition of networks. The analysis yielded two components, together explaining 82% of the variance (see Supplementary Table A2). The first factor, accounting for 42% of the variance, loads strongly on range and extensity, as well as on low-, mid-, and high-status ties—interpreted as network diversity. The second factor, explaining 40% of the variance, is driven by upper reachability, average prestige, and high-status positions, with a negative loading on low-status ties—interpreted as network status. To assess the cross-national robustness of this measurement strategy, the same two-factor PCA was replicated separately by country. Supplementary Table A3 shows that the factor structure is broadly consistent across countries in terms of loading orientation and explained variance. These components are standardized within each country ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) and used as the key independent variables in the multivariate analysis. This within-country standardization aligns the measurement with the stratified structure of fixed-effects models and ensures that coefficients are interpreted relative to within-country distributions.

A PCA-based approach is particularly appropriate here because, unlike more detailed national surveys, the ISSP position generator records only whether respondents know someone in each occupation and the type of relationship, but not the number of contacts per occupation. This limitation makes it difficult to rely exclusively on single summary indicators such as the mean or standard deviation of ISEI. A broader set of indicators is therefore needed to capture both the diversity and status dimensions of network composition, an approach also consistent with previous work using the same data source (e.g., Otero et al., 2023). Table A4 in the Supplementary Material lists the countries, their sample sizes, and average scores for attitudes towards inequality and network indicators.

¹ The original ISSP scale, where value 1 was associated to “strongly agree” and 5 to “strongly disagree” was inverted, so higher values can refer to larger agreement.

² As some researchers point out, this item has the complexity of simultaneously addressing perceptions of inequality and concerns about inequality (Castillo et al., 2022; Haddon and Wu, 2022; Knell and Stix, 2020). Even though, this generic indicator (Castillo et al., 2022) is used instead of other measurements of perception of inequality—such as the diagram-based indicator or the salary gap index—since it is the only one available in the ISSP 2017 Social Networks Module.

³ The complete ISSP question is the following: “Here is a list of jobs that people you know may have. These people could be family or relatives, close friends or someone else you know. By “knowing” a person, we mean that you know him/her by name and well enough to contact him/her. If you know several people who have a job from the list below, please only tick the box for the person who you feel closest to. Each of these jobs could be held by a woman or a man. Do you know a woman or a man who is ... ?”

⁴ Unlike Otero et al. (2023), I do not use the resource volume indicator (total ISEI accessed), because it corresponds to a variable especially dedicated to the study of social capital and access to resources, which does not fit the interest of this article.

3.4. Social position and sociodemographic characteristics

Recognizing the significant role of individuals' position in the social structure in shaping attitudes (Brooks and Svallfors, 2010; Lindh and McCall, 2020), particularly regarding inequality (Choi, 2021; Langsæther and Evans, 2020), socioeconomic status (SES) emerges as a critical individual variable. SES is operationalized using the ISEI score of respondents' current or most recent occupation and categorized into three levels, consistent with the thresholds applied to their acquaintances: low ($ISEI < 40$), mid ($40 \leq ISEI < 65$), and high ($ISEI \geq 65$). The analysis also controls for sociodemographic variables, including binary gender (man/woman), age (in years, with years-squared included to capture potential curvilinear associations), and area of residence (towns or countryside and big cities). I deliberately avoided (over)controlling for education and income, as they are endogenous to SES, particularly when measured through ISEI scores—an index explicitly constructed based on both variables (Ganzeboom et al., 1992). Adjusting for them could obscure the broader influence of SES.

A detailed description of the sample composition for these variables is provided in Table 1.

3.5. Analytical strategy

The analytical approach is divided into descriptive and explanatory phases. The descriptive analysis provides an overview of the composition of social networks and attitudes towards inequality across individuals and countries. The explanatory phase tests the study's hypotheses using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with country fixed effects.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, baseline models estimate the independent effects of network diversity and network status on perceptions of inequality and preferences for redistribution. Second, models incorporate controls for respondents' own SES and sociodemographic characteristics. Third, interaction terms are added to examine how the effects of network composition vary across individual socioeconomic status (testing H4), and whether network diversity moderates the effect of network status, and vice versa (testing H3a and H3b).

Fixed effects are used to control for all country-level unobserved heterogeneity—such as institutional regimes, inequality levels, or cultural factors—ensuring that only within-country variation informs the estimates. This decision also addresses concerns about the small number of countries ($N = 31$), which limits the reliability of hierarchical or random-intercept models.

All standard errors are clustered at the country level to account for within-country correlation and ensure robust inference. While ISSP provides sampling weights, no internationally comparable weight exists across countries; models are therefore estimated unweighted, following ISSP's recommendation for cross-national analyses.

Finally, as the data are cross-sectional, the analysis does not imply causal relationships. However, the inclusion of detailed controls and fixed effects reduces potential biases due to omitted variables or confounding at the country level.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analyses

I begin with descriptive analyses of the socioeconomic composition of individuals' social networks in relation to their attitudes toward inequality. Fig. 1 presents the bivariate relationship between network diversity and network status across the sample, validating the PCA extraction of two distinct factors. The figure reveals a curvilinear association where both low- and high-status networks exhibit lower diversity, while higher diversity is concentrated in mid-status networks. This non-linear pattern indicates that the two dimensions capture independent sources of variation: individuals can display similar levels of diversity but differ markedly in network status, and conversely, individuals with comparable status levels can vary substantially in diversity. These findings justify estimating

Table 1
Distribution of variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perception of inequality	4.11	0.94	1	5
Preference for redistribution	3.75	1.11	1	5
Network diversity	0.00	1.00	−4.16	2.39
Network status	0.00	1.00	−4.41	3.25
SES				
1 Low	0.46			
2 Mid	0.43			
3 High	0.11			
Gender				
1 Man	0.48			
2 Woman	0.52			
Age	46.87	16.67	18	96
Area of residence				
1 Town or countryside	0.51			
2 Big city	0.49			

Notes: Individual level data retrieved from the ISSP 2017 Social Networks Module (ISSP Research Group, 2019). $N = 32,310$.

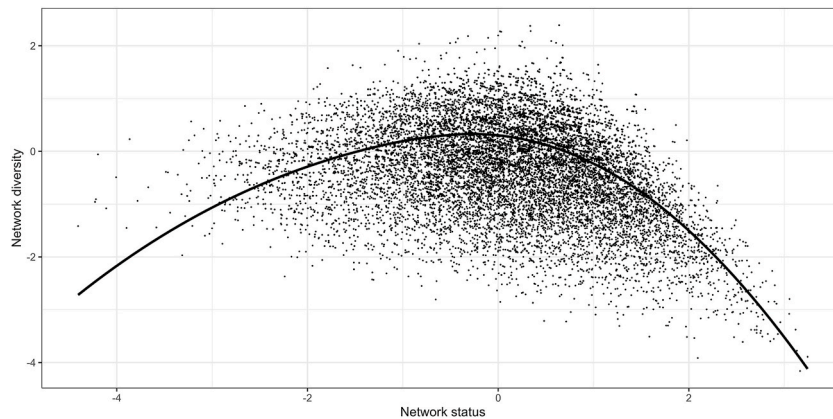


Fig. 1. Bivariate relationship between network diversity and network status

Notes: Standardized country-centered measures. Scatterplot displays individual-level observations ($N = 32,310$) with LOESS smoother. Curvilinear pattern shows both low- and high-status networks exhibit reduced diversity, while peak diversity occurs at intermediate status levels.

diversity and status effects separately while accounting for their mutual influence in the multivariate models.

Fig. 2 displays the means of perception of inequality for individuals in the lowest (Q1) and highest (Q5) quintiles of network diversity, alongside the national average, across the 31 countries in the sample. Fig. 3 does the same for preferences for redistribution and network status.

Two main patterns emerge. First, individuals embedded in more socioeconomically diverse networks tend to report higher perceptions of inequality. This difference—although not consistent across all countries—is present in most of them. In cases such as Finland and Austria, the gap in perceived inequality between individuals with lowest and highest network diversity reaches 0.5 points on the 1-5 scale. This trend aligns with theoretical expectations (H1), suggesting that exposure to acquaintances from a broader range of socioeconomic positions heightens awareness of social disparities.

Second, individuals with higher-status networks express systematically lower support for redistribution. The decline in redistributive preferences from the lowest to the highest quintile of network status is notable and consistent across nearly all countries. Countries like Estonia and Finland show differences close to 0.8 points on the 1-5 scale between individuals relating to low-versus high-status acquaintances. This pattern accords with H2, indicating that relationships with higher-status contacts may reinforce meritocratic or self-interested orientations that weaken redistributive attitudes.

Overall, these descriptive results provide preliminary support for the argument that network diversity primarily relates to inequality perception, whereas network status chiefly influences redistribution preferences. The next section tests whether these patterns persist after accounting for individuals' socioeconomic position, demographic characteristics, and country-level heterogeneity.

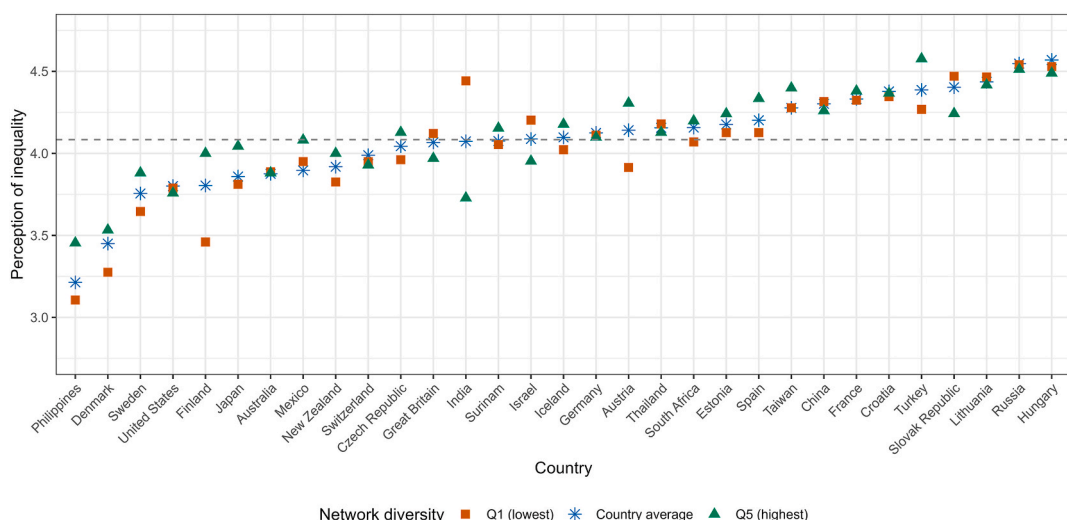


Fig. 2. Perception of inequality by network diversity across countries

Notes: Means of perception of inequality, for quintile 1 (lowest), country average, and quintile 5 (highest) of network diversity, by country. Countries ordered by national means. The average across countries is represented by the dotted line. $N = 32,310$.

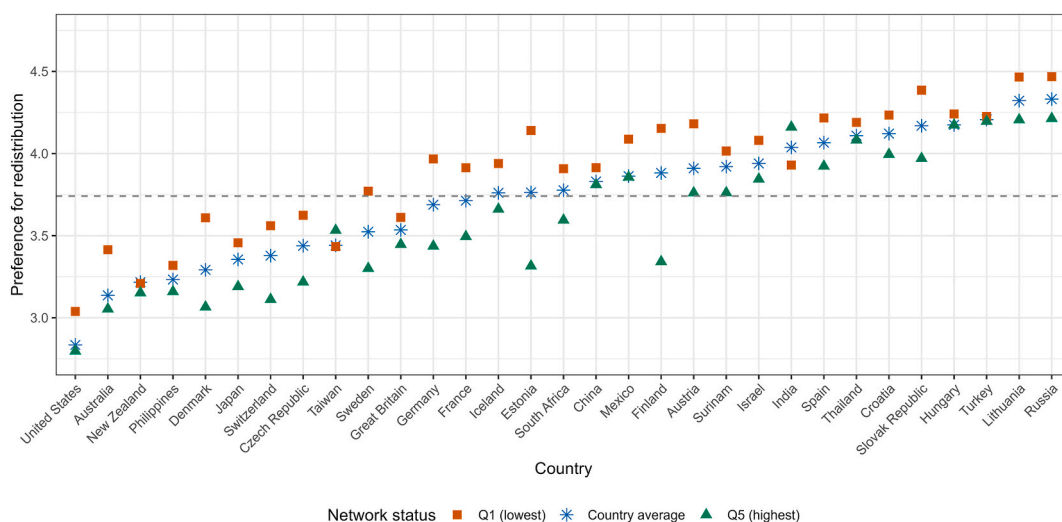


Fig. 3. Preference for redistribution by network status across countries

Notes: Means of preference for redistribution, for quintile 1 (lowest), country average, and quintile 5 (highest) of network status, by country. Countries ordered by national means. The average across countries is represented by the dotted line. $N = 32,310$.

4.2. Explanatory analyses

The following explanatory analysis investigates whether the descriptive trends between the socioeconomic composition of social networks and distributive attitudes remain significant once accounting for individuals' socioeconomic status (SES), demographic characteristics, and unobserved country heterogeneity. The analysis tests all hypotheses through linear regression models with country fixed effects.

4.2.1. Network socioeconomic composition and attitudes towards inequality

Regarding preferences for redistribution, the results strongly support [H2](#). Network status is negatively associated with support for redistribution across specifications: individuals whose acquaintances occupy higher occupational standings tend to express weaker agreement with state-led income redistribution ($b = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$ in Model 3b). The effect is larger and more consistent than for diversity, robust to all controls. Network diversity shows a small negative coefficient ($b = -0.03$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern suggests network status plays the dominant role in shaping redistributive attitudes—even after controlling for individuals' own SES—consistent with the idea that upward socioeconomic ties reinforce orientations that weaken support for redistribution.

[Table 2](#) presents the results of six models predicting individuals' perception of inequality (Models 1a–3a) and preference for redistribution (Models 1b–3b).

Regarding perceptions of inequality, the results support [H1](#). Network diversity is positively associated with perceived inequality across all model specifications: individuals embedded in more socioeconomically diverse networks tend to perceive income differences as more pronounced ($b = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$ in fully-adjusted Model 3a). The effect remains robust after accounting for SES and other

Table 2

Linear regression models on attitudes towards inequality.

	Perception of inequality			Preference for redistribution		
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
Network diversity	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 * (0.01)	0.01 * (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)	−0.03 *** (0.01)
Network status	−0.07 *** (0.01)	−0.06 *** (0.01)	−0.05 *** (0.01)	−0.10 *** (0.01)	−0.08 *** (0.01)	−0.08 *** (0.01)
SES						
Mid		0.11 *** (0.02)	0.10 *** (0.02)		0.14 *** (0.02)	0.14 *** (0.02)
Low		0.16 *** (0.02)	0.15 *** (0.02)		0.22 *** (0.02)	0.21 *** (0.02)
Woman			0.09 *** (0.01)			0.07 *** (0.01)
Age			0.01 *** (0.00)			0.00 * (0.00)
Age ²			−0.00 ** (0.00)			−0.00 (0.00)
Big city			−0.05 *** (0.01)			−0.03 * (0.01)
(Intercept)	4.14 *** (0.03)	4.02 *** (0.03)	3.73 *** (0.05)	3.91 *** (0.03)	3.74 *** (0.04)	3.54 *** (0.06)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ² /R ² adjusted	0.093/0.092	0.095/0.094	0.101/0.100	0.115/0.114	0.118/0.117	0.121/0.120
BIC	85046.21	84986.08	84824.26	94803.38	94707.69	94650.44

Notes: Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$. $N = 32,310$.

characteristics. In addition, network status shows a significant negative association ($b = -0.05$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals whose acquaintances occupy higher occupational standings perceive income inequality as slightly less pronounced. This suggests both dimensions of network composition play relevant—though distinct—roles in shaping inequality perceptions.

Regarding preferences for redistribution, the results strongly support H2. Network status is negatively associated with support for redistribution across specifications: individuals whose acquaintances occupy higher occupational standings tend to express weaker agreement with state-led income redistribution ($b = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$ in Model 3b). The effect is larger and more consistent than for diversity, robust to all controls. Network diversity shows a small negative coefficient ($b = -0.03$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern suggests network status plays the dominant role in shaping redistributive attitudes—even after controlling for individuals' own SES—consistent with the idea that upward socioeconomic ties reinforce orientations that weaken support for redistribution.

The control variables behave as expected. Lower-SES individuals perceive greater inequality and display stronger redistributive preferences than those in higher social positions. Women consistently score higher than men on both attitudes, while age and residence in large cities show small but statistically significant effects. All results remain robust in specifications with additional controls such as education (in years), household income (country-specific quintiles), work status, and union membership (Supplementary Table A5).

Fig. 4 translates main coefficients into predicted values from fully-adjusted Models 3a and 3b, holding all covariates at their means. Panel A displays predicted inequality perception across the full range of network diversity, whereas Panel B shows predicted preference for redistribution by network status. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals, providing visual assessment of effect sizes and precision. These marginal effects directly address whether statistically significant associations translate to substantively meaningful patterns.

Panel A reveals a modest but robust effect: predicted inequality perception increases from 4.14 to 4.21 points across the observed diversity range (-4.16 to $+2.39$ SD), a 0.07-point rise representing 7% of the cross-national standard deviation in perception of inequality ($SD = 0.94$) on the 1-5 scale. Panel B demonstrates substantially greater magnitude: redistribution support declines from 4.00 to 3.42 points across the observed status range (-4.41 to $+3.25$ SD), a 0.58-point drop equaling 52% of the cross-national standard deviation in preference for redistribution ($SD = 1.11$)—comparable to major demographics like SES. These visualizations confirm both hypotheses while highlighting network status's dominant influence on redistributive attitudes.

4.2.2. Diversity and status: buffering and catalytic effects of social networks

The analyses above demonstrated that socioeconomic diversity and network status each influence distributive attitudes in distinct ways. This section examines whether these effects depend on one another—that is, whether the impact of diversity varies across levels of status and whether status conditions the influence of diversity. Interaction terms between both network dimensions were introduced in the regression models for perceived inequality and support for redistribution.

Fig. 5 visualizes these interaction patterns. Panel A shows that the effect of network diversity on perceived inequality is positive when network status is low or average, but it flattens and becomes statistically negligible at high levels of status. At the mean level of network status, a one-standard-deviation increase in diversity is associated with an estimated 0.02-point rise in perceived inequality ($p < 0.01$). However, because the interaction term is negative ($\beta = -0.02$, $p < 0.01$), this effect diminishes as status increases and virtually disappears among individuals embedded in high-status networks. This pattern confirms H3a, the buffering effect: diversity heightens perceptions of inequality primarily among those whose acquaintances occupy lower-status positions, while in high-status environments its impact on perceived inequality is effectively null.

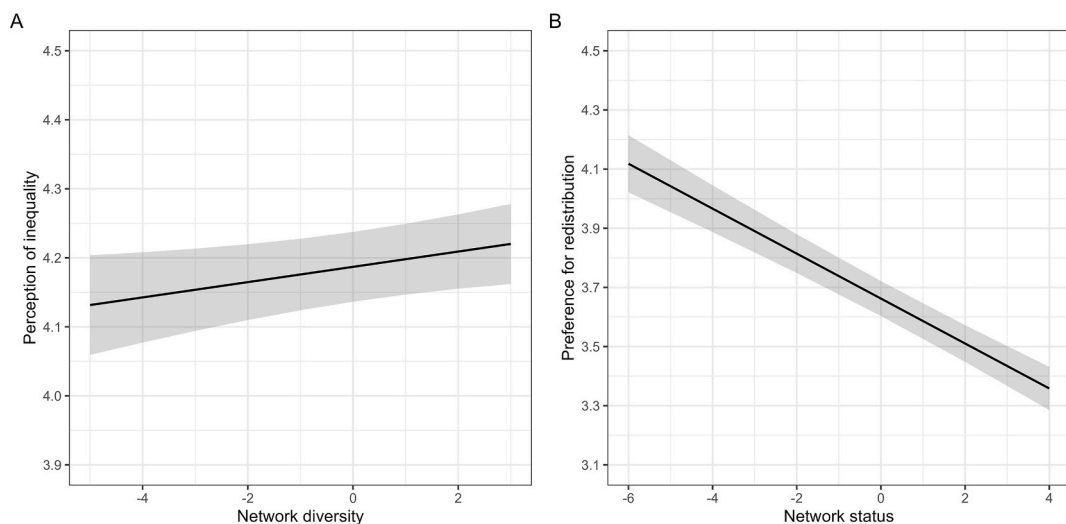


Fig. 4. Predicted values for attitudes towards inequality by network composition

Notes: Predicted values from fully-adjusted Models 3a (Panel A) and 3b (Panel B), adjusted for means and reference categories: High (SES), Man (gender), 46.87 (age), 2474.38 (age-squared), Town or countryside (area of residence), China (country). Confidence intervals at 95%. $N = 32,310$.

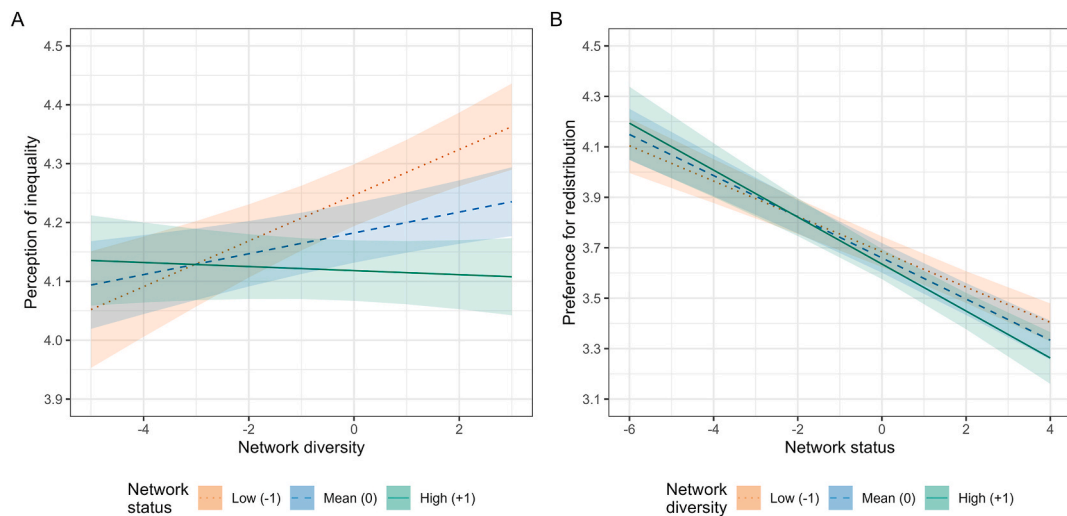


Fig. 5. Conditional marginal effects of network diversity and network status on attitudes towards inequality.

Notes: Predicted values from fully-adjusted Models 7a (Panel A) and 7b (Panel B), adjusted for means and reference categories: High (SES), Man (gender), 46.87 (age), 2474.38 (age-squared), Town or countryside (area of residence), China (country). Models 7a and 7b available in the Supplementary Material. Confidence intervals at 95%. $N = 32,310$.

Panel B depicts the relationship between network status and preference for redistribution. Network status shows a strong negative association with redistributive preferences ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$) that persists across diversity levels. The interaction term ($\beta = -0.01$, $p > 0.05$) is not statistically significant, indicating diversity does not meaningfully moderate status's influence on redistribution preferences. While the status slope appears descriptively steeper at high diversity levels, overlapping confidence intervals prevent statistical differentiation from low or mean diversity contexts.

The results show a statistically significant interaction for inequality perception but a non-significant interaction for redistribution preferences (Supplementary Table A6, Models 7a–7b). The interaction coefficient between network diversity and network status is -0.02 ($p < 0.01$) for perception—strongly confirming H3a—while the -0.01 coefficient for redistribution ($p > 0.05$) provides no statistical support for H3b. These findings demonstrate that network status robustly buffers diversity's effect on inequality perception, while diversity does not significantly condition status's influence on redistribution preferences.

In sum, the results robustly confirm H3a but do not support H3b. Network composition effects are interactive in perception of inequality but not in preference for redistribution. Diversity heightens inequality awareness primarily through low-status networks, where socioeconomic contrasts are most salient for respondents. High-status networks filter out this awareness, consistent with the

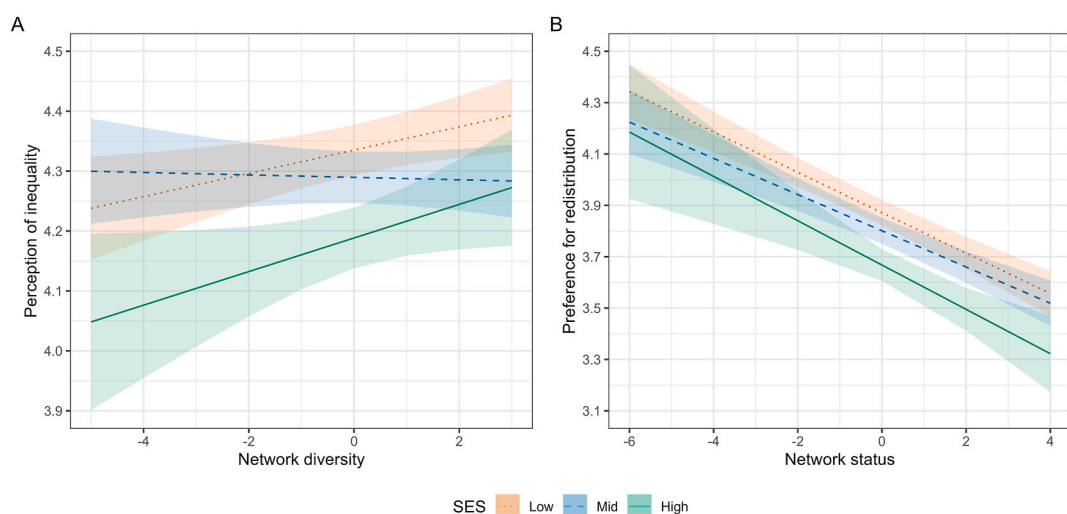


Fig. 6. Conditional marginal effects of network diversity and network status on attitudes towards inequality, by SES

Notes: Predicted values from fully-adjusted Models 8a (Panel A) and 8b (Panel B), adjusted for means and reference categories: 0.00 (network status/network diversity), Man (gender), 46.87 (age), 2474.38 (age-squared), Town or countryside (area of residence), China (country). Models 8a and 8b available in the Supplementary Material. Confidence intervals at 95%. $N = 32,310$.

buffering mechanism. For redistribution preferences, network status operates consistently across diversity contexts, underscoring its primary influence. These asymmetric interactions reveal how social structure is associated with attitudinal processes: in personal networks, diversity exposes inequalities when status permits, while status independently drives policy preferences.

4.2.3. Social position, network diversity and network status

This section examines whether the effects of network diversity and network status vary across socioeconomic groups. Interaction models with SES were estimated and marginal effects are shown in Fig. 6.

For perceptions of inequality, network diversity shows positive but similar slopes across SES groups (Panel A). High and low-SES individuals display a descriptively steeper slope, yet interaction terms are not statistically significant (Supplementary Table A7). Socioeconomic position thus does not robustly moderate diversity's influence on perceived inequality. For redistribution preferences, network status shows negative slopes across all SES, slightly steeper among high-SES individuals (Panel B). Despite this descriptive pattern—aligning with expectations that privileged respondents react more strongly to status cues—the interaction terms remain statistically non-significant. Confidence intervals overlap substantially across groups.

Given these results, H4 is not supported. While high-SES individuals appear descriptively more responsive to network composition (particularly status), these differences lack statistical support. Network diversity and status influence inequality attitudes consistently across socioeconomic positions, suggesting broad generalizability of the main effects.

5. Conclusions

This study shows that social relationships play a central role in shaping individuals' understandings of inequality. Using data from 31 societies, it examines how the socioeconomic composition of personal networks relates to people's distributive attitudes, revealing that social connections often mirror and reinforce existing socioeconomic boundaries. Understanding these dynamics is particularly relevant in contemporary societies, where increasing social closure limits opportunities for interaction across class lines.

The findings reveal two complementary mechanisms through which social environments are associated with distributive attitudes. Socioeconomic diversity shows a statistically significant but modest increase in perception of inequality, confirming its role as a relational catalyst, while socioeconomic status within networks reduces support for redistribution, operating as a normative buffer. Both effects remain statistically significant even after accounting for individuals' SES, sociodemographic characteristics, and countries' unobserved heterogeneity. These results suggest that network composition simultaneously amplifies and constrains how people interpret inequality, depending on the socioeconomic configuration of their social circles.

Notably, the behavior of socioeconomic diversity among acquaintances harbors specificities. Its effect on people's perceptions of inequality aligns with social sampling (Dawtry et al., 2019) and social inference (Mijs, 2018) approaches. In line with the classic notion that individuals form their attitudes through social comparison (Condon and Wichowsky, 2020; Festinger, 1954), diverse social environments expose people to contrasting living conditions, making socioeconomic differences cognitively salient and prompting reflection on fairness and opportunity. Regardless of individuals' objective position in the social structure, meeting people from a wider variety of social statuses is linked to a greater perceived inequality at the national level. This reaffirms the idea that individuals generalize distributions inductively, from the composition of their social environments to society as a whole (Galesic et al., 2012; Mijs and Usmani, 2024; Schulz et al., 2022). However, interaction analyses reveal that the magnitude of this effect is contingent on the prevalent status of people's acquaintances. Diversity heightens perception primarily in low- and medium-status network contexts (where contact with deprivation is more likely) but disappears in high-status environments that buffer awareness. Thus, these results complicate these theoretical stances by showing that inequality awareness requires not only environmental socioeconomic diversity but also contact with deprivation. In this way, diversity provides the comparative frame that makes socioeconomic differences cognitively visible, though immersion in high-status environments buffers that awareness.

In contrast, network status, in turn, acts as a more consistent buffer. People with higher-status acquaintances show consistently lower support for redistribution, even controlling for their own SES. This pattern suggests that high-status social environments transmit and reinforce meritocratic norms, reducing egalitarian preferences beyond mere self-interest. As Kelley and Evans (1995, p. 158) noted, “objective class positions matter only as they are filtered through the distorting lens of a reference group.” Recent research further demonstrates that individuals' subjective sense of social position plays a central role in how they justify inequality, often invoking meritocratic principles to rationalize income differences (Mac-Clure et al., 2024). In this light, the socioeconomic status of one's social circles becomes a key interpretive lens: it can legitimize privilege and weaken redistributive solidarity, especially among the affluent. High-status networks tend to anchor distributive norms and reinforce meritocratic narratives, leading individuals to rationalize existing disparities rather than question them (Edmiston, 2018; Suhay et al., 2021). This is consistent with studies showing that high-status networks reproduce dominant worldviews, as contact tends to make individuals emphasize commonalities with privileged groups (Saguy et al., 2009) and internalize their prevailing norms and beliefs (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2018; Tropp et al., 2021). Thus, high-status social environments tend to normalize inequality rather than challenge it.

The analyses by social position reveal no statistically significant moderation by SES. Network diversity and status influence inequality attitudes consistently across socioeconomic groups, with confidence intervals overlapping substantially despite descriptive patterns suggesting high-SES individuals may be slightly more responsive to status cues. This underscores the broad generalizability of network effects: the attitudinal impact of social context operates similarly regardless of one's objective position. While some studies emphasize altruistic orientations among the affluent (Chiang, 2011; Dimick et al., 2016), others reveal situated reference group effects where social environments shape preferences beyond self-interest (Christensen et al., 2024; Sands, 2017). My findings suggest these relational dynamics apply universally across the social hierarchy. In increasingly segregated societies, socioeconomic isolation restricts

cross-class contact for all groups, reinforcing interpretive frames that stabilize existing distributive attitudes. As Lindh and Andersson (2024) argue, such closure erodes collective support for redistribution and weakens the moral foundations of solidarity.

This article makes various contributions to the field of distributive justice and social stratification. First, it reaffirms the importance of the meso-level in shaping attitudes towards inequality. It is worth studying people's social relationships to understand how they comprehend and address differences in the distribution of resources. Second, it provides large-scale evidence on the effect of network socioeconomic composition on people's perceptions and attitudes toward inequality. By working with information from the position generator, the endogeneity associated with studying segregation through questions about perceived contact with other social positions is reduced. But above all, this research highlights the importance of considering with whom people tend to relate and not just how diverse their circles are. Research on homophily and social heterogeneity has made significant advances in understanding attitudes towards inequality (Mijs and Usmani, 2024; Otero and Mendoza, 2023; Plaza et al., 2026; Schulz et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2024). However, by focusing only on similarity or difference, the differentiated impact of maintaining ties with higher or lower positions in the social hierarchy has often been overlooked. The stronger influence of network status relative to diversity's modest effects enhances the contributions that literature on intergroup contact and social influence can make to the study of subjective inequality.

Despite these contributions, this research is not without limitations. The primary limitation concerns causality and selection effects. Cross-sectional data means robust associations do not necessarily imply networks cause attitudes. Reverse causality is possible through political homophily (Huber and Malhotra, 2017) where individuals may select acquaintances aligning with pre-existing distributive preferences. Longitudinal or quasi-experimental evidence would be needed to confirm these mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which individuals choose their acquaintances entirely based on how they understand inequality. To minimize this risk, this study adopts a broad definition of acquaintances, extending beyond close friends and family. A second limitation concerns the ISSP position generator, which identifies whether respondents know someone in a given occupation but not how many. Hence, while it captures network composition objectively, it cannot measure intensity or tie strength. Finally, the ISSP sample overrepresents European and Asian societies and underrepresents African and Latin American ones. Future surveys could make an effort to incorporate more nations from these regions, which tend to display higher levels of inequality (Chancel et al., 2022).

This research also points to promising avenues for future work. One direction involves incorporating network status into analyses of how social environments influence attitudes toward inequality, as discussing diversity alone proves insufficient. Another would explore the role of the number of acquaintances by occupation and network size using more detailed datasets. Differentiating between core and extended networks could further illuminate how the composition of social circles influences distributive attitudes. Finally, while this study controls for country-level unobserved heterogeneity, future research could explicitly test how macro-level factors shape the links between social networks and distributive attitudes.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Renzo Carriero, Simona Guglielmi, Arvid Lindh, Leo Azzollini, and Herman van de Werfhorst for their thoughtful comments that greatly helped refine the theoretical and analytical arguments. Earlier versions of this work benefited from presentations and feedback received at the 5th ISA Forum of Sociology, the ISA RC28 on Social Stratification and Mobility Summer Meeting 2024, the ECSR Annual Conference 2024, and the BSA Virtual Annual Conference 2024. Their contributions have substantially enriched the quality and clarity of this study.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2026.103389>.

Data availability

This work uses data from the ISSP 2017 Social Networks Module. Data are open access and available at the GESIS Data Archive: <https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/data-and-documentation/social-networks/2017>. All analyses reported in this article are fully reproducible. Replication code is openly accessible on GitHub: https://github.com/gonzalofranetovic/catalysts_and_buffers.

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