Measuring Justice Judgments: Evaluations of income distributions

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All distributions of social goods may be judged according to the question whether they are just or not. Everyday evidence shows that people frequently judge and compare wages and incomes of persons or occupations according to standards of justice. The justice of a national income distribution often is a political issue. Wegener and Jasso made a proposal how to measure justice judgments of income distributions: For two occupations (a skilled worker and a manager of a large national enterprise) respondents are asked to estimate the average actual income of a fulltime employee and to give the amount of income one should earn in the respective position, i.e. the just income. For each occupation, the ratio of actual income to just income is calculated. The Wegener-Jasso Justice Index sums the absolute values of these logged ratios. For a consistent interpretation of the index, the use of absolute values is necessary but the price is a loss of information. In several international surveys (ISSP, ISJP), there is a battery of items allowing a calculation of the index. This battery asks for actual and just incomes in nine occupations coming from all layers of income. We propose an alternative measure of justice judgments which (a) uses all items available (i.e. nine occupations instead of two) and (b) allows additional interpretation. Using the estimates of incomes any standard measure of inequality may be calculated. For reasons of familiarity we will use Gini coefficients. A Gini coefficient based on estimates of actual incomes shows how much inequality exists between the nine occupations according to the respondents. A Gini coefficient based on amounts of just incomes shows how much inequality should exist between the nine occupations according to the respondents. We calculate a logged ratio of the two Gini coefficients. By avoiding the use of absolute values, our index not only indicates whether a given income distribution is justified according to respondents. Positive values indicate that respondents favour a decrease of inequality. Negative values indicate that respondents favour an increase of inequality. Preliminary analyses using data from the 2000 German General Social Survey show a moderate correlation between the Wegener-Jasso index and our new measure ($r=0.49$). According to theoretical consideration of justice research, justice judgments are influenced both by interests and values. We compare the construct validity of the two measures using OLS regression models. In a preliminary analysis using class, gender, mobility, political orientation (left-right) and support of the achievement principle as predictors, 8.8 percent of variance in the Gini-based coefficient are explained compared to 6.1 percent explained variance in the Justice Index. With the Gini-based coefficient as a dependent variable, 6 out of 10 regression coefficients for predictors become significant ($p<0.05$) (all as hypothesized) compared to 3 out of 10 in a model with the Justice Index as a dependent variable. Our preliminary findings indicate that both measures have their own merits: The Justice Index is superior in administration. An index based on inequality measures is slightly superior with regard to construct validity.