Punching up or punching down? How stereotyping the rich and the poor impacts redistributive preferences in Germany

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Redistribution and the welfare state have been linked by academic discourse to narratives that portray specific societal groups as 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. The present analysis contributes to this scholarship in a twofold manner. First, it provides a holistic view on the beneficiaries and benefactors of welfare and asks how the public perception of the rich and the poor drives redistributive preferences. It is revealed that these beliefs, particularly about the 'deserving' poor, are significant determinants of strong redistributive preferences. Despite powerful prevailing prejudices about the rich, support for redistribution in Germany is not motivated by the urge to castigate this group for their affluence. Second, we are interested in the distribution of the different moralistic beliefs about the rich and the poor over socio-demographic characteristics. Regarding stereotypical beliefs about the poor, we quantify the phenomenon of 'punching down', performed by those immediately above the lowest income quintile. In fact, members of the second income quintile show levels of disdain similar to their wealthier counterparts on the other end of the income distribution. On the other hand, moralistic beliefs about the 'deserving poor' are equally held across different socio-economic levels. Implications and limitations of our findings are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Inequality and redistribution have been hot topics in the media, politics, and society since the financial crisis. Whether their stance declares redistribution to be beneficial (Vanham, 2017) or detrimental (Kimball, 2021), or inequality to be increasing (United Nations, 2020) or decreasing (Méndez, 2015), the welfare discourse is based on a rich variety of contradicting opinions. In light of the unequally felt economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Winston, 2021) and presently rising inflation (Tan, 2022), investigation into these topics feels more poignant than ever.

Though everyone may have an opinion on the level of inequality present in society today, the accuracy of these opinions is surprisingly low. Niehues (2014) found that residents in many countries, including Germany, tend to overestimate the extent of societal inequality. Later works stress the (im)precision of these perceptions, both in Germany and elsewhere (Engelhardt and Wagener, 2018; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018).

Regardless of their accuracy, one would expect that preferences for redistribution align with such beliefs, i.e., that the perception of high (low) income inequality begets greater (lower) preferences for redistribution. The reality of this relationship, however, is not so cut-and-dry. Although Americans surveyed in 2001 believed that income inequality had increased and that this increase was a problem, they continued to favor tax cuts that would primarily benefit the rich (and widen the gap) (Bartels, 2005). Kuziemko et al. (2015) found similar results: While an information treatment about US income inequality led more respondents to view inequality as a "very serious" problem, the magnitude of the shift in redistributive preferences as observed through income taxation is quite small.

Given that the relationship between perceptions of inequality and redistribution is not robust, the following question arises: what unaccounted-for elements could be influencing the impact of inequality perceptions on redistribution? Recent scholarship has developed one such possibility—reference groups—in the hope of answering it (Knell and Stix, 2020). These reference groups are characterized by the phenomenon of "homophily" (Kandel, 1978); (McPherson et al., 2001), which dictates that people are often surrounded by others who are similar to them along one or more axes; here, the relevant axis is socio-economic status with a focus on income. Perceived inequality and subjective rank in the income distribution seem to vary with income when the reference groups of the respondents are accounted for. As these results show that exposure to the rich and/or the poor has an impact on perceptions of inequality, we can extrapolate more broadly that one's relationship with these groups may prove important in determining redistributive preferences.

Within this overarching "relationship" category, beliefs about the benefactors and beneficiaries of the welfare state certainly have a role to play. These beliefs may have a direct relationship with redistributive preferences, but they could also influence these preferences through or in tandem with one's perceptions of inequality. Although the top 20 percent of income earners in Germany accrued a 40 percent share of total income (World Bank, 2018), beliefs about the morality of this distribution—whether the top 20 percent *deserve* such a sizeable piece of the pie—will determine whether inequality itself is deemed a problem worthy of solving using redistribution.

The formation and arrangement of these moralistic beliefs are anything but random. According to Horwitz and Dovidio (2017), the explicit preferences tend to favor the middle class over the rich and poor regardless of one's individual economic standing, but *implicit*

preferences favor the rich over the poor and middle class. Social psychology has categorized these moralistic beliefs in a variety of ways, with the most common dichotomies distinguishing between internal/individualistic and external/systemic (in relation to control over one's situation, i.e., "blame") (Smith and Stone, 1989; Weiner et al., 2011). The possession of these beliefs and related moralistic worldviews has been shown to correlate with political ideology, and, by proxy, redistributive preferences (Zucker and Weiner, 1993; Cozzarelli et al., 2001).

Having recognized the weakness in the straightforward relationship between perceptions of inequality and redistributive preferences, as well as the developments in understanding social groupings and beliefs about the rich and the poor, we intend to augment the literature by relating redistributive preferences to the beliefs about the 'deservingness' of the rich and the poor. Therefore, our goal is as follows: *we want to establish a specific relationship between the moralistic beliefs about the beneficiaries and benefactors of the welfare system and redistributive preferences, as well as identify the groups for whom these beliefs are most salient.*

In pursuit of this goal, we have chosen to focus on Germany for a particular reason. A significant portion of the existing literature on beliefs about the rich and the poor focuses on the United States, which is somewhat of an anomaly when compared to other Western countries due to its comparatively small welfare state and underestimation of societal inequality (Niehues, 2014). Germany, by contrast, has a particularly generous redistribution system and residents tend to overestimate the levels of inequality present in their society. Given these differences, we would like to see if Germans hold comparable beliefs about the rich and poor, determine if there exists an interaction between these beliefs and perceived

inequality, and analyze the extent to which redistributive preferences are impacted by these factors.

We begin with a literature review, during which all relevant information will be presented and discussed, along with our hypotheses. The sections that follow will lay out our empirical methodology and results, culminating in a discussion of our findings and a conclusion that addresses the real-world implications and applications of our work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The rich: self-made role models or trust-fund babies?

Following the "Robin Hood function" (Barr, 2001) of the welfare state, inequality-related discussions focus not only on the recipients of welfare, but also on those who will bear the costs of a respective redistribution program. After all, reducing inequality can be done by redistributing to the deprived or redistributing away from the affluent (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). The discussions around a wealth tax or higher income tax for the (super)rich make these considerations most explicit (Smith Ochoa, 2019).

Despite being subjected to intense public discourse, sociological research centered on the rich has been rather scarce (Bartels, 2017). Arndt (2019) summarizes the recent progress in the field of sociology of wealth, zooming in on the varieties of attitudes within this specific group (see also Waitkus and Groh-Samberg, 2017). Arndt (2019) qualifies the common income and wealth-based definition of the rich by specifying the origins of one's wealth. This enables a distinction of the affluent on the basis of 'self-earning', i.e., whether wealth was earned (through labor, for example) or received (inheritance, lottery winnings, etc.).[1] An empirical

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[1] See Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022) for an overview over media frames that describe sources of wealth in the German media discourse.

analysis reveals that the rich who received windfall gains ('not self-earned') hold considerably more left-wing political attitudes than those who did not. Clearly, the affluent need to be considered as a heterogeneous group.

Most people do not engage with the affluent on a daily basis, and attitudes towards this group are prone to biases and stereotypes (Fiske et al., 2002; Knell and Stix, 2020). As a result, the rich are perceived as an ambivalent group and "evoke a number of different emotions and reactions: not only a sense of injustice, but also of resentment, fascination, envy and admiration, as idols of luxury, glamour and success." (Theborn, 2017, p. 16). In line with the broader field of inequality research, the *perception* of the rich could matter more for their public evaluation than their actual group size, attitudes, and/or behavior.

Depending on the (social) media landscape, cultural traits, and country-specific incidences, stereotypes differ significantly in cross-country comparisons (Schürz, 2022). Strikingly, the narrative behind the American Dream has found its way into the collective assessment of wealth and of the rich in the US (Shiller, 2019). The idea that hard work eventually results in monetary payoffs translates rather smoothly into the assumption that the rich have likely worked hard for what they have. Respective feelings towards the rich would then relate to what Georg Simmel (1989, p. 275) named "respectability" in his seminal sociological analysis of affluence. Research in social psychology has shown that although the rich in the US are not considered particularly warm (morality), they are certainly viewed as being competent (agency) (Fiske et al., 2002) and are generally seen favorably (Shutts et al., 2016). If affluence is rather understood to be the result of individual characteristics ('self-earned'), it seems much more likely that people would view this group positively.

In contrast, the discussed pessimistic perception of the income and wealth distribution in Germany is accompanied by the belief that affluence is primarily due to family endowment, the economic system, distinguished education, or knowing the right people ('not self-earned') (Adriaans et al., 2019). Hence, it does not come as a surprise that Germans hold comparatively negative views about the rich: Half or more consider the affluent to be selfish, materialistic or reckless (Zitelmann, 2020), and they are regarded as less warm than even welfare recipients (Krause and Gagné, 2019). Interestingly, the reputation of entrepreneurs ranges particularly low (forsa, 2022). These views are also reflected in negative media portrayals of the rich as 'trust-fund babies' with a "gold spoon" (The Economist, 2019; see also Smith Ochoa, 2019).

Although being rich clearly plays out differently in the US, both individual ('self-earned') and external or systemic ('not self-earned') ascriptions are expected to impact the larger moralistic beliefs about the rich in Germany. Furthermore, we believe that the conflicting views regarding the main benefactors of the welfare state are related to redistributive preferences.

> Hypothesis 1: The moralistic beliefs that people hold regarding the rich will impact their preferences for redistribution. More specifically, we predict that persons with more individualistic attitudes with respect to the rich will prefer lower redistribution (H1a) and persons with more external attitudes with respect to the rich will prefer higher redistribution (H1b).

2.2 The poor: Between 'deservingness' and 'undeservingness'

Compared to other economic groups, the poor are consistently perceived in a more negative light. Unlike the rich and middle class, the poor are considered to be both cold (morality) and incompetent (agency) (Fiske et al., 2002). When respondents are primed to consider a student

to be well-off or low-income through the appearance of her surroundings, the low-income student is believed to have performed worse than the well-off student, even when her actual test performance is held constant (Baron et al., 1995). Lott and Saxon (2002) find that lower-income women are deemed to be less desirable romantic partners and ill-suited for leadership positions when compared to middle-class women.

The proliferation of negative stereotypes of and beliefs about the poor has implications, as such sentiments warp and evolve into the moralistic belief of 'deservingness': whether the poor are 'deserving' of aid to reduce their hardship and, therefore, whether their poverty is through some fault of their own. In contrast to beliefs about the affluent, the relative 'deservingness' of the poor is remarkably consistent across countries, including Germany (Diermeier and Niehues, 2022). Apart from immigrants, the perceived 'deservingness' of the poorer social strata such as the unemployed as potential beneficiaries of government aid was lower than all other categories in every Western country surveyed (van Oorschot, 2006; van Oorschot et al., 2017). Clearly, beliefs about the 'deservingness' of the poor are present and can have an impact on priorities when making policy decisions.

These overarching beliefs regarding the 'deservingness' of the poor can be broken down into more specific categories, which allow us to develop a better understanding of how such beliefs function. Smith and Stone (1989) use three categories to determine one's beliefs around 'deservingness': individualism, structuralism/situationalism, and fatalism. Individualism, in this case, encompasses metrics that place a degree of blame for poverty on the individual; this includes measures of morals, laziness, and thrift. Structuralism/situationalism places the blame on the surrounding conditions, such as family conditions, education, and discrimination e.g. in hiring. Finally, fatalism justifies poverty based on uncontrollable person characteristics,

including talent, intelligence, and luck. Weiner et al. (2011) take a more elaborate approach, using a taxonomic system consisting of locus (internal vs. external), stability (may change vs. unlikely to change over time), and controllability (can be changed by the individual vs. cannot be changed by the individual). Cozzarelli et al. (2001) apply a principle component analysis, whereby they interpret three factors to represent external attributions, internal attributions, and a "subculture of poverty".

For our purposes, we focus primarily on a two-category system—internal/individualistic and external/structural—to develop our concept of 'deservingness' as a moralistic belief. Our delineation of these categories aligns more closely with that of Smith and Stone (1989), and the details of our methodology align most closely with Cozzarelli et al. (2001). Using this system, we hope to see the degree to which moralistic beliefs about poverty are present in German society, as we believe they will impact redistributive preferences. This brings us to the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 2: The moralistic beliefs that people hold regarding the poor will impact their preferences for redistribution. We predict that people with more individualistic attitudes with respect to the poor will prefer lower redistribution (H2a), and people with more external attitudes with respect to the poor will prefer greater redistribution (H2b).

2.3 Psychological distancing: punching up or down?

Moralistic beliefs about the 'deservingness' of societal groups are expected to correlate with redistributive preferences. However, the distribution of these beliefs and stereotypes over different socio-economic characteristics remains unclear until today. Piff et al. (2018) find that those not belonging to the lower classes in society will attempt to distance themselves from

said classes, with the upper echelons achieving this most effectively. Lott (2002) provides a slight contradiction, arguing that distancing is a primarily middle-class phenomenon rooted in classism, but her work still supports the notions of psychological and social distancing behaviors which isolate the poor.

By providing a plethora of anecdotal evidence particularly concerning the specific attitudes of poor people about poverty, literary 'auto-socio-biographic' descriptions corroborate this intuition of class distancing from 'the poor' by social strata located below typical middle class households. Most recently, Éduard Louis (2022) depicts a common sense of shame that dominated the perception of people who failed to make their living on their own during his youth in a de-industrialized area of Northern France. When describing his own family's regular visits to food banks, he notes "no one had ever told me, I myself was aware that I was not allowed to tell anyone in the village about these excursions" (own translation, p. 38). Reflecting his mother's 'deservingness' hierarchy, the French scholar Didier Eribon (2013) asks whether her "virulent scorn that she […] always showed for immigrant workers […] wasn't in some way a means for her […] to feel of people even more inferior than her. Was it a way of constructing a somewhat valorized image of herself, something she accomplished through the devalorization of others?" (p. 141). Deliberating on her childhood, Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux (2021) pictures the deprivation of her parents who worked as small shop owners in post-war France. "Hovering above the poverty, but only just" (p. 31), they punched down on a group of people by telling children who had to 'chalk up' their purchases: "'Tell your mother she'd better pay, or else I'll stop serving her.' They were no longer on the side of the humiliated" (p. 31).

For Germany, Christian Baron takes the same line as he elaborates on a sense of "superiority" (own translation, 2020, p. 151) among his family that used to be positioned close to the bottom of the income distribution. Furthermore, the poverty distancing mechanism that he describes contains a spatial component: "Yes, we might be poor, but we would never live in an undesirable neighborhood. My father would keep his word" (own translation, Baron, 2020, p. 151). Compared to Louis (2022), he carves out dependency on social welfare as a marker of negatively connotated poverty. In a biographic novel, his fictional grandfather is quoted accordingly: "I'd rather have my arm rot off than take just one Mark from the welfare office." (own translation, Baron, 2022, p. 271).[2]

Despite the plethora of anecdotal evidence attesting to this particular distancing phenomenon, the body of empirical work examining it and its impacts is relatively small. Seccombe et al. (1998) study mothers receiving welfare benefits in the United States. While the women tended to blame structural or fatalistic factors for their own plight, they did not extend this same courtesy to others, whose poverty they believed was the result of individualistic shortcomings. Beyond this verbal distancing, several mothers attested to buying their children name-brand clothing so they wouldn't appear poor.

Although these moralistic beliefs are evidently held by the poor and psychological distancing occurs as a result, we take a cue from the sense of "superiority" that Baron (own translation, 2020, p. 151) noted to define the following ideas: punching down, whereby individuals distance themselves from those below them through physical, social, and psychological means, and punching up, through which individuals distance themselves from those above

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[2] See Baron and Barankow (2021) for several essayistic descriptions of the poor punching down on the poor in Germany.

them using the aforementioned methods. We believe that those just above 'the poor' will have the greatest tendency to punch down, as they seek to avoid any association with the negative stereotypes attributed to the poor. On the other end, those just below 'the rich' might engage in a similar behavior by punching up attempting to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes often assigned to the rich. This brings us to our final hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 3: Negative moralistic beliefs about the benefactors and beneficiaries of welfare are driven by psychological distancing behavior. This distancing response is particularly pronounced among socio-economic groups that run the risk of being attributed themselves with negative stereotypes, thereby creating a non-linear relationship between income and moralistic beliefs. Socio-economic layers located just above 'the poor' and their more well-off counterparts will hold similar beliefs about the 'undeservingness' of the poor. (H3a). Both socio-economic layers located just below 'the rich' and lower socio-economic groups hold similar perceptions that 'the rich' are advantaged by the system (H3b).

3. Methodology

The analysis is based on data of the 'Innovation Sample' from the Socio-economic Panel Study (SOEP-IS).[3] In particular, it relies on variables from the BMAS online survey "Perceptions of Poverty & Wealth" (n=1,398) which was surveyed between October 2018 and March 2019.[4] As part of the study, people were asked in detail about their perceptions and attitudes towards

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[3] The SOEP-IS is a random sample of German households. Scholars are invited to submit proposals for questions to be included in the survey. For an initial 12-month period data from the modules can be exclusively used by the researchers who submitted the questions. After this period the data is released to the entire SOEP user community for secondary analysis (for further information see http://www.diw.de/soep-is-mod, DOI: 10.5684/soep.is.2020 or Goebel et al. (2019).

[4] See Adriaans et al. 2019, for a comprehensive description of the survey design as well as an overview and discussion of the main results.

poverty and wealth. Since there is no information on general redistribution preferences in the BMAS-module, the views on poverty and affluence are combined with information from the Innovative Module "Perception of Inequality" (n=3,217) which was surveyed in the SOEP-IS between September 2018 and March 2019.[5] Restricting the sample to respondents who participated in both modules reduces the sample size to 920 observations. We run our estimations with cross-sectional weights (phrf).

To test our hypotheses, we first run separate principal component analyses for the rich and the poor. The data used in constructing these components originates from the BMAS module and we focus primarily on variables from the following groups: 1) reasons for being rich, and 2) reasons for poverty. Table 1 provides a detailed list of the variables used in each principal component analysis. We exclusively consider non-missing values in all variables employed in the regression analyses, which further restricts the number of observations to 807. In line with Cozzarelli et al. (2001), we run our analyses with an oblique rotation specification, but we keep only the first two components from each analysis (internal/individualistic vs. external/structural).

Table 1: Principal Component Analysis Composition

1: 'The Rich'		2: 'The Poor'	
Variable	**Description**	**Variable**	**Description**
bmas_onl_c6_1	Reasons for being rich: talents	bmas_onl_b8_1	Reasons for poverty: lack of skills
bmas_onl_c6_2	Reasons for being rich: entrepreneurial spirit	bmas_onl_b8_2	Reasons for poverty: lack of education
bmas_onl_c6_3	Reasons for being rich: luck	bmas_onl_b8_3	Reasons for poverty: lack of effort
bmas_onl_c6_4	Reasons for being rich: willingness to act ruthlessly	bmas_onl_b8_4	Reasons for poverty: poor initial conditions (parental home)
bmas_onl_c6_5	Reasons for being rich: high willingness to take risks	bmas_onl_b8_5	Reasons for poverty: economic system that is focused on profit
bmas_onl_c6_6	Reasons for being rich: hard work	bmas_onl_b8_6	Reasons for poverty: technological progress that makes own training redundant

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[5] Redistribution preferences are proxied by the approval and disapproval of the question „It is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income".

bmas_onl_c6_7	Reasons for being rich: knowing the right people	bmas_onl_b8_7	Reasons for poverty: health impairments
bmas_onl_c6_8	Reasons for being rich: good initial conditions (family)	bmas_onl_b8_8	Reasons for poverty: living conditions of family
bmas_onl_c6_9	Reasons for being rich: the economic system	bmas_onl_b8_9	Reasons for poverty: mismanagement of money
bmas_onl_c6_10	Reasons for being rich: good sense of money	bmas_onl_b8_10	Reasons for poverty: bad luck
bmas_onl_c6_11	Reasons for being rich: excellent education	poor_risk_all	Everyone has a certain risk of becoming poor
bmas_onl_c6_12	Reasons for being rich: choice of partner	poor_risk_certain	The risk of becoming poor is limited to certain groups of people
rich_can_all	In GER, every person can become rich	poor_circum	Some people have no chance of overcoming poverty due to their circumstances
parents_rich	In GER, only those with rich parents can become rich		

For our first and second hypotheses, we seek to establish the relationship between redistributive preferences and beliefs about the rich and the poor, respectively. Due to the ordered nature of the redistributive preferences variable, we run ordered logistic regressions. To facilitate the comparison between the different coefficients, we standardized all variables. Our regressions are modeled in Equation 1 below.

$$Y_i = \beta X_i + \delta U_i + \gamma Z_i + \varepsilon \qquad (1)$$

The variables of this equation are defined as follows: Y represents redistributive preferences; X is a vector of the two components extracted from our PCA on the rich; U is a vector of the two components extracted from our PCA on the poor; Z is a vector of control variables; ε is our error term; and i is the individual respondent.[6] The control vector contains variables usually associated with redistributive preferences, such as perceived wealth inequality as well

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[6] Table A1 in the Appendix contains an explanatory list and descriptive statistics of all variables utilized for all models.

as respondents' self-positioning on the social ladder.[7] As socio-economic controls, we include age, education level, and income as well as their respective squares.

In a first step, we test Hypotheses 1 and 2 separately by including either X or U. To get a sense of whether beliefs about the rich or the poor have more explanatory power for redistributive preferences, we run additional ordered logistic regressions that include all four components in a single regression.

The operationalization for Hypothesis 3 involves OLS regressions similar to the logistic regressions used in Hypotheses 1 and 2, but we shift our focus towards explaining beliefs about the rich and poor, as captured through our components, using income. A general model, which applies for all four components under investigation, is given in Equation 2.

$$C_i = \lambda + \phi H_{q,i} + \psi Z_i + \varepsilon \tag{2}$$

Here, C represents one of the four components of interest. Z is a vector of control variables as explained above, i is the individual respondent, while λ and ε are the constant and error terms, respectively. We introduce H as our explanatory variable, which measures income broken down by each quintile q.[8] For all regression models, we calculate statistical significance based on robust standard errors.

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[7] See Gimpelson and Treisman (2018) for the finding that perceived rather than actual inequality drives the demand for redistribution.

[8] We use equivalent monthly household net income [hgi*hinc] from the generated household variables to group respondents into five income quintiles. We compare the quintile effects in comparison with the first quintile as a reference category.

4. Results

4.1 'Deserving' or 'undeserving'? The public image of the rich and the poor

To compile more comprehensive measurements of beliefs about the rich and the poor, we run separate principal component analyses according to the previously outlined specifications. Each analysis combines individualistic, structural, and fatalistic reasoning elements to create two components representative of the 'deserving-undeserving' belief dichotomy.

The two components measuring beliefs about the rich, shown in Table 2.1, account for 38.56 percent of the overall variance.[9] We identify the first component to represent the moralistic belief in the 'self-made' or 'deserving' rich, while the second component represents the 'trust-fund baby' or 'undeserving' rich. This distinction is motivated by the differing factor loadings across components. Most distinctively, the variable, which measures the extent to which hard work contributes to one being rich, has a sizable positive factor loading for the first component and an equally sizable negative factor loading for the second. Hence, the former component is driven by the belief that hard work is a strong contributor, while the latter goes along the belief that hard work is unimportant. A similar divide can be seen for beliefs about whether anyone can become rich. The first component is defined by strong support for this belief, while the variable loads negatively on the second component. Furthermore, whether or not someone believes only those with rich parents can become rich provides evidence for the 'self-made' vs. 'trust-fund baby' operationalization. The factor loading for the first component shows a lower value for this metric, while the factor loading for the second has a stronger,

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[9] See the last rows in Table 2.1 for the variance proportion explained by the two respective components. Due to our theoretical considerations lined out above, we limit our analysis to only two components. The relatively low share of explained variances is in line with comparable analyses (see Cozzarelli et al., 2001) and potentially driven by the diverse narratives and perspectives on the rich (and the poor) in the society.

positive value. Finally, respondents who attribute the reason for being rich to talent, entrepreneurial spirit, or a good sense of money load high on the first component ('self-earned'), whereas the attribution of being rich to knowing the right people, good initial conditions, or the economic system exclusively load high on the second principal component ('not-self-earned'). Taken as a whole, the non-random differences in factor loadings support the differentiation of the first component as the belief in the 'self-made' rich and the second as the belief in the 'trust-fund baby'.

Shown in Table 2.2, the two components separating beliefs about the poor account for 32.96 percent of the overall variance.[10] The first component of this analysis represents the belief of the poor as 'deserving' of governmental aid, while the second component marks the belief that the poor are 'undeserving' of such assistance. Several variables have strong, distinctive factor loadings. First, the measurement of whether a lack of effort is believed to be a cause for poverty is associated with a negative factor loading in the first component, while the second component shows a strong positive loading. Similarly, blaming poverty on poor money management loads negatively on the first and strongly positive on the second component, indicating support for the belief that poverty is the result of a personal shortcoming and, therefore, that the poor are 'undeserving' of assistance. When measuring the belief of whether some people will *never* be able to escape poverty, we observe a strong positive factor loading for the first component, while the corresponding loading for the second component is negative. Finally, blaming bad initial conditions, the family, or bad luck for poverty is exclusively related to the 'deserving poor' component (external/systemic), whereas attributing poverty to a lack of skill or education entails strong factor loadings for the

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[10] See Table 2.2 for the variance proportion of the two components. See footnote 9 for an explanation why we limit our analysis to only two components.

'undeservingness' component (internal/individualistic). When all variables are accounted for, the stark differences in the component values make a compelling case for our designation of the first component as the belief in the poor as 'deserving' and the second as the 'undeserving' poor.[11]

Table 2.1: PCA Results for 'The Rich'

Variable		1: 'Self-Made'	2: 'Trust-Fund Baby'
	talents	0.4077	-0.0639
	entrepreneurial spirit	0.3917	0.0327
	luck	0.1886	0.1391
	willingness to act ruthlessly	-0.019	0.451
	high willingness to take risks	0.283	0.1765
	hard work	0.3677	-0.2259
Reasons for being rich	knowing the right people	0.2034	0.3874
	good initial conditions (family)	0.1184	0.3179
	the economic system	-0.0989	0.4231
	good sense of money	0.3933	0.0168
	excellent education	0.3368	0.0231
	choice of partner	0.1388	0.2107
In GER, every person can become rich		0.2188	-0.2554
In GER, only those with rich parents can become rich		-0.1691	0.3864
Variance (Rotation: oblique quartimin (Kaiser off))		2.88222	2.51595
Proportion		0.2059	0.1797

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[11] A correlation analysis reveals the relationship between respondents who hold 'deserving poor' and 'trust-fund baby' beliefs (correlation coefficients: 0.42) as well as between those who hold 'undeserving poor' and 'self-made rich' beliefs (correlation coefficients: 0.3). Apparently, a negative image of the rich goes along with higher perceived 'deservingness' of the poor and vice versa.

Table 2.2: PCA Results for 'The Poor'

Variable		1: 'Deserving'	2: 'Undeserving'
	lack of skills	0.1182	0.4751
	lack of education	0.1682	0.34
	lack of effort	-0.1559	0.5467
	poor initial conditions (parental home)	0.3926	0.0758
	economic system that is focused on profit	0.3082	-0.0981
Reasons for poverty	technological progress that makes own training redundant	0.3324	-0.1023
	health impairments	0.2969	0.1698
	living conditions of family	0.3434	0.0825
	mismanagement of money	-0.0449	0.5211
	bad luck	0.3027	-0.0247
Everyone has a certain risk of becoming poor		0.2708	-0.0494
The risk of becoming poor is limited to certain groups of people		0.0466	-0.0496
Some people have no chance of overcoming poverty due to their circumstances		0.4457	-0.1461
Variance (Rotation: oblique quartimin (Kaiser off))		2.46797	1.81726
Proportion		0.1898	0.1398

4.2 Redistributive preferences: the role of stereotypes of benefactors and beneficiaries of the welfare state

We test the relationship between beliefs about the rich and redistributive preferences in ordered logistic regressions according to the specifications described in Equation 1 (Column I of Table 3). [12] In line with Hypothesis 1, we see that the 'self-made' rich and 'trust-fund baby' beliefs are statistically significant, with the 'self-made' belief correlating with lower preferences for redistribution, while the 'trust-fund baby' belief goes along with higher preferences. This finding relates to the "Robin Hood function" (Barr, 2001) of the welfare state and points to the fact that the societal image of those who presumably contribute the most plays a decisive role in the redistribution debate. In fact, the coefficient sizes reveal that—in a

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[12] As a robustness check, we include the results from equivalently specified OLS regressions (beta coefficients) in Table A2 of the Appendix.

country where the rich range among the least prestigious social groups (Krause and Gagné, 2019)—a positive take on reasons for being rich ('self-made') reduces the urge for redistribution. On the other hand, a negative image of those on top of the wealth and income distribution ('not self-earned') goes along with higher redistributive preferences. The significant (but smaller) coefficient could be interpreted as preferences to castigate those who do not deserve their affluence. Interestingly, these effects are not moderated by self-position or perceived wealth inequality, though a U-shaped statistically significant relationship between age and redistributive preferences can be carved out.[13]

We repeat this process to assess the relationship between beliefs about the poor and redistributive preferences (Column II of Table 3). Our ordered logistic regression model finds both the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor components to be statistically significant, with the 'deserving' poor belief leading to higher redistributive preferences and the 'undeserving' to lower preferences. The effect sizes allow us to conclude that redistributive preferences in Germany are rather driven by sympathy with the least affluent and only to a lesser extent prevented by their perceived 'undeservingness'. We again find both age controls to be statistically significant, while self-position and estimated wealth inequality are not.[14]

Although the stereotypical images of both the rich and the poor are clearly associated with preferences for redistribution, we cannot come to final conclusions about Hypotheses 1 and 2 without first determining whether these beliefs remain significant when all four are accounted for in a single regression (Column III of Table 3). While the 'self-made' rich,

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[13] The values of the standardized coefficients for the principal components align well with the beta coefficients found in our OLS robustness check in Table A2 Column I.
[14] The values of the standardized coefficients for the principal components align well with the beta coefficients found in our OLS robustness check in Table A2 Column II.

'deserving' poor, and 'undeserving' poor components have statistically significant and strong effects on redistributive preferences, the 'trust-fund baby' component is no longer significant.

From these results, we can more definitively affirm the validity of Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 2b. Across all three models, the relevant components have maintained their statistical significance and display effects in agreement with those predicted by our hypotheses. In line with Fiske et al. (2002), we also conclude that redistributive preferences in Germany are particularly related to how warm and competent the poor are perceived: The positive coefficient of the 'deserving poor' shows by far the strongest effect, comparable to the aggregated negative impact of the 'undeserving poor' and the 'self-made rich'. Statistically, a one standard deviation increase in the 'deserving poor' component is associated with $e^{0.53}$ higher odds (69 percent) of a one-scale-point *increase* in redistributive preferences. A similar increase in the 'undeserving poor' and 'self-made rich' components goes along with a 18 and 29 percent higher chances for a one-scale-point *decrease* in redistributive preferences, respectively.

Hypothesis 1b, however, warrants further discussion. When the poor components are excluded, redistributive preferences seem to be dictated by the push and pull of admiration and disdain for the rich. The beliefs about the poor primarily moderate the effect of this disdain, as these beliefs about the rich and poor do not exist in vacuums but are rather closely interrelated. In reality, all four of these beliefs are triggered when determining redistributive preferences. Applying this logic leads us to reject Hypothesis 1b: When controlling for the stereotypical image that Germans hold regarding the poor, their redistributive preferences are not motivated by a Robin-Hood-like hatred of the rich.

Table 3: Ordered Logistic Regressions of Redistributive Preferences

	I	II	III
'Self-made' rich	-0.3893573***	-	-0.3355252***
'Trust-fund baby'	0.2902609***	-	0.1174047
'Deserving' poor	-	0.5830233***	0.527234***
'Undeserving' poor	-	-0.2745735***	-0.2013966*
Self-position	0.0421786	0.0007999	0.0496916
Estimated wealth inequality	0.0305603	0.0013369	-0.0133009
Education	1.447405	0.9133121	1.086523
Squared education	-1.358809	-0.9101291	-1.069172
Age	-1.408437***	-1.224909**	-1.4684***
Squared age	1.532428***	1.361848**	1.551283***
Natural log of net income	-1.020906	-0.4889584	-0.2374179
Squared natural log of net income	0.781262	0.2981611	0.063263
Pseudo R-squared	0.0345	0.0465	0.0561

Robust standard errors. *** $p < .005$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

4.3 Socio-economic determinants of stereotypical beliefs

Hypothesis 3 challenges the idea that the perception of the rich and the poor, which we identified to be decisive for redistributive preferences, is distributed linearly over income. Namely, we expect to disprove the idea that psychological distancing simply increases with economic distance, as argued by Piff et al. (2018), but rather follows a complex balancing between stereotypical rejection and appreciation of respective in-groups.

For each model, we regress one of the principal components on income quintiles, self-position, estimated wealth inequality, education, and age. Results for all four models can be found in Table 4.[15]

For the first model, we use the 'deserving' poor component to determine the effect of each income quintile on this belief about the poor. We find that membership in the fourth income quintile and estimated wealth inequality are statistically significant and negative. For the remaining quintiles and controls we find no significant effect. The statistical insignificance that the coefficient plots of Column I in Table 4 (depicted in Figure 1) display, reveal that the variable most decisive for redistributive preferences is distributed neither linearly nor U-shaped over socio-demographic characteristics.

Our findings for the 'undeserving' poor reveal a relationship more in line with our expectations. Membership in the second, fourth, and fifth quintiles, along with estimated wealth inequality and age, are significant and positive. More importantly, the values for the coefficients for these statistically significant income quintiles are remarkably close to one another. Furthermore, their size is comparable to the effect of a two standard deviation decrease in perceived wealth inequality. Membership in the second quintile has a similarly sized correlation with one's belief about the poor as 'undeserving', even though members of the second quintile are economically much closer to the poor than those in the fourth or fifth quintiles (see the coefficient plots of Column II Table 4 in Figure 1). This contrasts the idea that

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[15] From a theoretical point of view, it might be preferable to employ subjective positioning instead of objective income groups. Unfortunately, however, subjective self-positioning is difficult to evaluate because most of the respondents' self-placement is biased towards the middle of the society. For example, it is barely possible to distinguish a lower middle class from 'the poor' based on self-positioning. In our data only 6,25 percent state that their own situation compared to the mean in Germany was "much worse". The same holds for people who perceive to be located on the other end of the income distribution: only 8.9 percent state that their own situation compared to the mean in Germany was "much better".

distancing is primarily a middle-class phenomenon (Lott, 2002) and occurs exclusively in a linear fashion (Piff et al., 2018). Finally, the results provide support for Hypothesis 3a: Excluding the very poor themselves, a cold and incompetent perception of the poor follows a non-linear pattern over income with strong disdain present also among those located only closely above the lowest income quintile.

Figure 1: Coefficient Plots from Table 4 Columns I and II
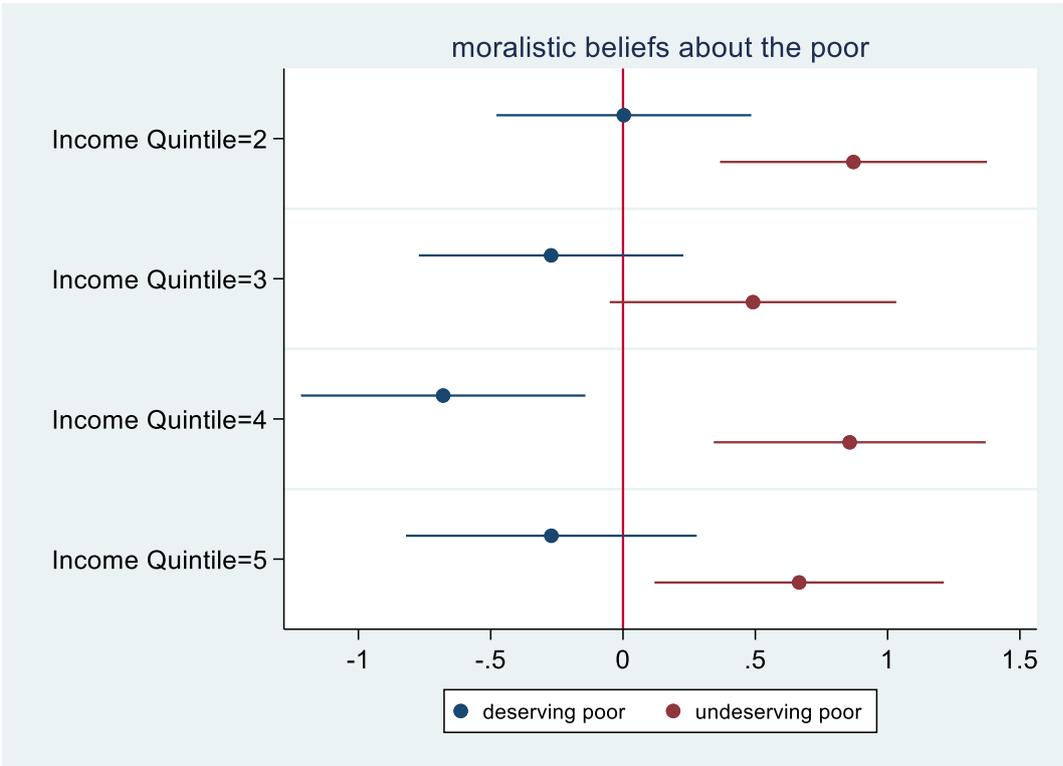
Similarly, the third model, focused on the 'self-made' rich belief, shows that income quintiles two, four, and five, as well as self-position, have positive significant effects on this belief. Again, we see similarly valued coefficients for the significant income quintiles that follow a U-shaped pattern over income quintiles (see coefficient plots of Column III from Table 4). In fact, the second income quintile's coefficient is 1.5 times of a magnitude as a one standard deviation increase in self-positioning on the social ladder. Given the general level of disdain for the rich present in German society (Krause and Gagné, 2019) and strong misperception of

inequality (Niehues, 2014; Bublitz, 2022), the strength of the effects of income, especially for members of the second quintile, on this positive belief towards the rich is rather surprising.

Figure 2: Coefficient Plots from Table 4 Columns III and IV
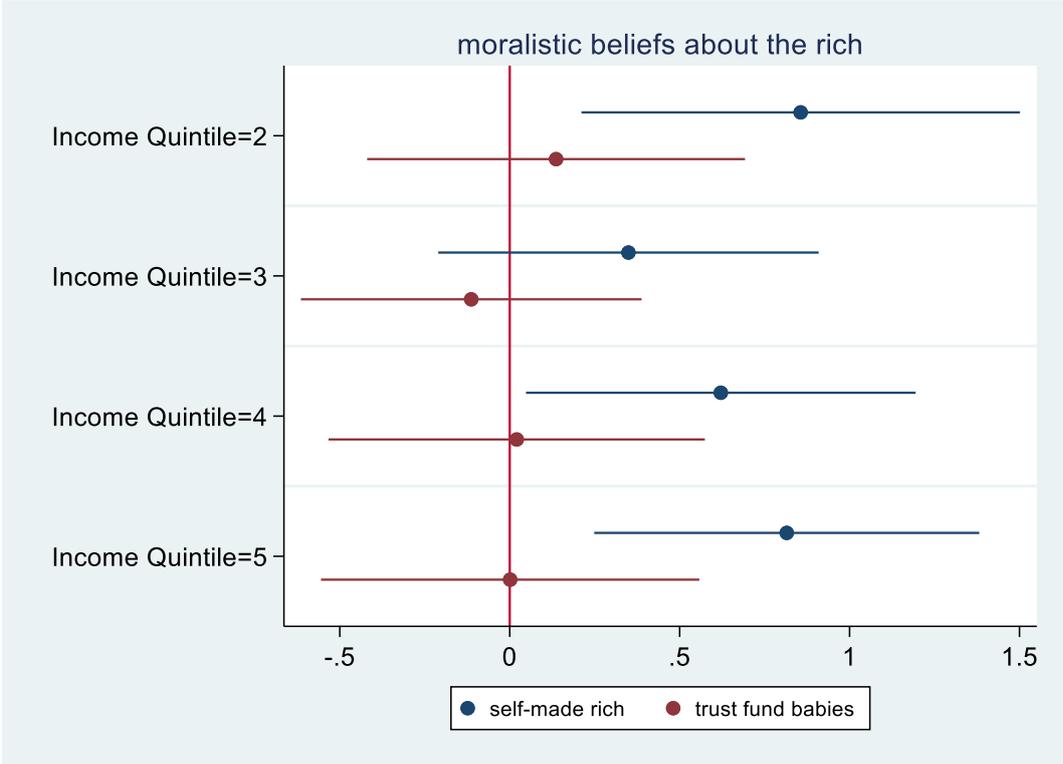
In our final model, which investigates the 'trust-fund baby' attitudes, we find that self-positioning and estimated wealth inequality are the only statistically significant variables. Respondents with a higher self-positioning would be less supportive of this 'trust-fund baby' belief, while those with higher estimates of wealth inequality express greater support for it. Nevertheless, the absence of a significant relationship between actual income and negative ('not self-earned') beliefs towards the rich seems counterintuitive. If some sort of in-group–out-group dynamic was at play (Piff et al., 2018), we would have expected to see a linear relationship between income and the belief about the rich as 'trust-fund babies', but this, too,

is absent (see coefficient plots of Column IV from Table 4).[16] Although attitudes towards the rich may tend to be negative in Germany (The Economist, 2019; Bieg, 2020), the possession of these beliefs is more equally distributed over actual income than are beliefs about the poor. This could suggest that, when considering the poor, individuals take an approach more centered in their own situation, but the approach when considering the rich is less socio-economically grounded. Further research might investigate the motivation behind these differences.

From these models, we can safely reject Hypothesis 3b, as membership in the fourth quintile (just below 'the rich') does not have a significant effect on negative beliefs towards the rich, but more discussion is needed for Hypothesis 3a. A decidedly non-linear relationship exists between income and support for the 'undeserving' poor belief, which aligns with our expectation of a non-linear relationship between income and disdain for the poor. Quantifying Baron's sense of "superiority" (own translation, 2020, p. 151) as a class distancing mechanism, the effect size for the second quintile is comparable to those of the far distant fourth and fifth quintiles. As this finding aligns with our prediction, we fail to reject Hypothesis 3a.

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[16] Note that proxying group affiliation by actual income is not without controversy. A more distinctive group identifier could be the perceived income position. Unfortunately, this subjective measure suffers from a strong bias to the mean. See footnote 15.

Table 4: Standardized Beta Coefficients for Moralistic Beliefs

	'Deserving' poor	'Undeserving' poor	'Self-made' rich	'Trust-fund baby'
2nd Income Quintile	0.0007187	0.2334475***	0.1818592**	0.0310091
3rd Income Quintile	-0.0618164	0.1302698	0.073427	-0.0254441
4th Income Quintile	-0.1773043*	0.260497***	0.1496425*	0.0052902
5th Income Quintile	-0.0826418	0.236774*	0.2297664**	0.0003946
Self-position	-0.0875309	0.0325255	0.1195517*	-0.1464595***
Estimated wealth inequality	0.0835208*	-0.1255885*	-0.043053	0.1503287***
Education	0.60299	-0.395341	0.2122202	0.1883471
Squared education	-0.4719219	0.3844448	-0.2309056	-0.1369909
Age	0.3482914	0.6916808*	-0.4200575	0.1940718
Squared age	-0.1933044	-0.647161*	0.2634946	-0.0911111
R-squared	0.0704	0.0833	0.0657	0.0503

Robust standard errors. *** $p < .005$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

5. Conclusion

The inequality discourse is as multilayered and fragmented as knowledge about the actual distribution is limited. Redistributive preferences have been shown to relate to peoples' position in the income distribution as well as to the degree of inequality in their country and are hence shaped similarly by self-interest and perceived justice (Engelhardt and Wagener, 2018). At the same time, country specific narratives such as the 'American Dream' and media portrayals of specific societal groups have been argued to impact preferences for redistribution significantly (Gilens, 1999; Shiller, 2019). Nevertheless, holistic analyses that zoom in on stereotyping of the main benefactors and beneficiaries of the welfare state are missing in the scholarly debate on inequality. Building up on the "Robin Hood function" (Barr,

2001) of the welfare state, the demand for more redistribution could be shaped by hostility towards the societal strata on the top or amity towards those on the bottom of the distribution. Conversely, a positive image of the rich ('self-earned') as well as a negative narrative about the poor ('self-responsible') could be important obstacles to preferences for reducing inequality. The fact that the jury is still out on the distribution of these oversimplified images over socio-economic characteristics is taken as a starting point to analyze the economic and psychological mechanisms at play when forming moralistic beliefs about respective societal groups.

We find that both beliefs about the poor as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' have the expected impacts on redistributive preferences (H2a and H2b). Within these same models, the charitable belief about the rich as 'self-made' is also significantly mitigating redistributive preferences (H1a). Despite the low reputation of the rich in Germany (Krause and Gagné, 2019), the negative imagery ('trust-fund baby') of the affluent is less decisive in the formation of redistributive preferences. Rather, how 'deserving' the putative recipients of welfare, the poor, are perceived, turns out to be the most important factor in explaining redistributive preferences. More generally, the support for the generous German welfare state is rather determined by the public image of beneficiaries than of benefactors of redistribution.

Upon investigating the driving factors behind these beliefs towards the rich and poor, we found that membership in the second income quintile has a similarly large effect on the belief about the poor as 'undeserving' as the richest quintiles, despite the closer economic proximity of second quintile members to the poor (H3a). This finding corroborates a plethora of anecdotal evidence that retrace a punching down behavior of people on the lower end of the income distribution who nurture feelings of "superiority" (own translation, Baron, 2020, p.

151). Additionally, this income group shares a similarly positive image of the rich, comparable to the affluent themselves.

The knowledge that beliefs about the rich and the poor can affect redistributive preferences has significant implications for society. As stereotypes of the poor and the rich abound (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Barnes, 2004; Liu et al., 2017), redistributive preferences will reflect these perceptions, leading to different levels of redistribution than what may otherwise be preferred. Our results corroborate that redistributive preferences are not exclusively shaped by 'the poor's' perceived 'deservingness' but also by stereotypes about their 'undeservingness'. Hence, special attention should be given to sources of degradation of societal groups, such as the negative portrayal of the poor in prominent media outlets (see Diermeier and Niehues, 2022). Negative stereotypes of vulnerable societal layers seldomly bear good council when making important political decisions. Thus, future research may explore how a less discriminatory image of poor people may be conveyed in order to secure support for an efficient welfare state that targets those most in need of state support.

Having identified the effect of income on beliefs about the rich and poor, the implications of this relationship for societal cohesion are particularly concerning. With the second quintile, we notice a 'hot-and-cold' effect, namely that the disproportionate disdain for the poor ('cold') and admiration for the rich ('hot') possessed by this group directly contradict the supposed interests of this group. As they are located markedly below the median income, members of the second quintile might benefit from higher levels of redistribution, so their support for beliefs that lead to lower levels of redistribution seems economically irrational. In line with Seeck (2021) who concludes from an inside perspective "we should not let ourselves be divided into the good and the bad" (p. 80), the psychological distancing may prevent

alliance-building among the lower end of the income distribution. On the other hand, we find no comparable effect regarding the most decisive attitude for redistributive preferences: 'deservingness' of the poor. The fact that also members of the richer income quintile hold similar moralistic attitudes about the 'deserving' poor might rather hint at the substantial support that the German welfare state enjoys over a socio-demographically heterogeneous society. Addressing how this support is endangered by prominent stereotypes about specific groups at the bottom of the 'deservingness' hierarchy should be pursued in future research.

Despite our best efforts, there are inevitably limitations to our findings. First, our analysis relies on a low number of observations from the first income quintile. Furthermore, perceived, not actual, income should be decisive for the evaluation of the own economic position regarding other groups and the evaluation of inequality. Unfortunately, the number of people that self-place themselves significantly below the mean income in our sample is even smaller, limiting our ability to assess the degree of psychological distancing and 'punching down' when employing this metric. Our models also suffer from the absence of controls for political party preferences, for which we lacked an adequate number of responses. Political party preferences correlate with larger belief systems about worldly 'deservingness' (Bobo, 1991; Lane, 2001). The absence of this control from our model limits our ability to confirm whether specific beliefs about the rich and the poor, more general ideas of 'deservingness' and meritocracy, or particular political views are responsible for the persistence of specific stereotypes.

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Appendix

Table A1: Description of Variables

Variable	Label	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
umv_gov	It is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income	807	4.949195	1.783199	1	7
mod_pc1_rich	Scores for component 1, the 'self-made' rich	807	-0.0355435	1.712043	-6.938565	4.769226
mod_pc2_rich	Scores for component 2, the 'trust-fund baby'	807	-0.0155922	1.534186	-4.922648	5.864224
mod_pc1_poor	Scores for component 1, the 'deserving' poor	807	0.0331661	1.537174	-6.672079	4.434093
mod_pc2_poor	Scores for component 2, the 'undeserving' poor	807	0.0198002	1.306792	-7.272912	4.249805
inc_quintile	Income quintile (1-5); calculated using the mean imputed value of monthly net household income	807	3.483271	1.369431	1	5
inc_compare	Own situation compared to mean in GER: monthly income	800	3.14	1.061512	1	5
self_pos	Subjective social status in GER: position on ladder (current)	807	5.983891	1.517798	1	10
est_wealth	Share of wealth estimated to belong to either the richest 10 or 20%	807	69.7658	22.315930	2	100
pgbilzt	Amount of education or training (in years)	807	13.50867	2.833782	7	18
pgbilzt_2	Squared amount of education or training (in years)	807	190.5046	80.371790	49	324
age	Age	807	48.79802	16.228210	17	93
age_2	Squared age	807	2644.275	1596.987000	289	8649
l_netto	Natural log of the mean imputed value of monthly net household income	807	7.597221	0.470857	5.681310	9.259130
l_netto_2	Squared natural log of the mean imputed value of monthly net household income	807	57.93919	7.140326	32.277280	85.731500

Table A2: Standardized Beta Coefficients for Redistributive Preferences

	I	II	III
'Self-made' rich	-0.2051806***	-	-0.1752931***
'Trust-fund baby'	0.161926***	-	0.0697204
'Deserving' poor	-	0.2840332***	0.2521029***
'Undeserving' poor	-	-0.1420773***	-0.0990792*
Self-position	0.0185733	-0.0054118	0.0234133
Estimated wealth inequality	0.0180593	0.0107786	0.0007337
Education	0.5493802	0.2876581	0.3539244
Squared education	-0.4995953	-0.2624186	-0.3302484
Age	-0.6234672**	-0.5092852*	-0.606359**
Squared age	0.6174094**	0.5149931*	0.5813159**
Natural log of net income	-0.1655923	0.1691395	0.3201534
Squared natural log of net income	0.0351773	-0.2881651	-0.4290423
R-squared	0.1090	0.1384	0.1706

Robust standard errors. *** p < .005, ** p < .01, * p < .05