

Legitimising Inequality
— Attitudes Towards Income Inequality in Comparative Perspective

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This dissertation investigates some of the possible explanations behind varying levels of inequality tolerance across a selection of economically developed countries and explores how the tolerance of income inequality has changed over the last quarter of a century, between the years 1994 and 2020. When positioning the research within the wider theoretical framework, I identify and combine two important aspects relevant to the discourse of tolerating socio-economic inequality. First, the diffusion and acceptance of inequality normalising narratives, also known as “inequality myths,” as the integral part of wider processes of neoliberalisation and globalisation. Second, I link the agreement with inequality normalising narratives as well as the role of subjective nature of self-interest to the tolerance of unequal income distribution. Subsequently, I apply both of these relationships when modelling tolerance of income inequality in a cross-national comparative perspective, and when scrutinising how tolerance of income inequality has changed over time. Furthermore, I also consider the relationship between country-level objective inequality and economic prosperity and individual-level tolerance of income inequality. The research design of the thesis responds to the gaps in previous studies by exploring not only the normative values, but also by taking into consideration the perceived reality of tolerating unequal income distribution.

The main argument I propose comprises three parts. First, the tolerance of economic inequality, as captured by the tolerance of unequal income distribution, while peaking around 2005-2009, has been mostly decreasing over the last decade. Meanwhile, the differences in the tolerance of unequal income distribution have become clearer and more unified between the years 1994 and 2020; I identify that the explanations for tolerating inequality have become more similar across economically developed East Asian countries, and have simultaneously gained strength over time. Second, perceptions of inequality normalising narratives predict higher tolerance of unequal income distribution and individuals’ subjective social status have increasingly

less influence on their views of how much income inequality is tolerated. Therefore, I conclude that what individuals think and believe about the origins of socio-economic inequality, and normative values that relate to this knowledge, such asides about personal responsibility, role of luck and merit on life outcomes and personal success and many others, is a more significant predictor of economic inequality tolerance compared to the effect of people's already achieved, individual and subjective position in the social hierarchies. Third, while contextual factors, such as whether an individual lives in an economically prosperous or unequal environment does not affect directly how much economic inequality is tolerated, I argue, however, that the context is nonetheless relevant because it affects how an individual's social status and her/his normative views about the origins and causes for inequality influence tolerance of unequal income distribution.