Chapter 1: Distributive Justice Matters – Introduction

Distributive justice lies more at the core of our everyday dealings than we are probably aware of. In face of the worldwide raging Covid-19 pandemic, uncomfortable questions are being asked: Who is most at risk and are the measures in place effective in protecting those most vulnerable? Are governments taking action to attenuate the blow of the pandemic-related financial problems of their citizens? How do the protective measures affect our daily lives and economic realities differently depending on our personal situation and position in society? Which countries are provided with the vaccines first? And even more grimly: who gets prioritised when there are not enough hospital beds for every patient in need? The differences in the ways people are affected and in the resources and possibilities they have and can resort to when dealing with trying times and situations, as well as the way these distributional problems are solved say a lot about the way our societies are organised. Locally as well as globally, the pandemic has strengthened existing inequalities, shining light on power structures that privilege some, at the expense of others. However, even on a much smaller day-to-day scale, allocation problems are omnipresent. When we buy clothes, do we care how much of the money is going to the people who manufactured them and where the rest of the money is going to? When we receive our tax bill, do we feel like we are being robbed or like we are paying our due to society? The way we experience and evaluate these inequalities and questions of (re)distribution of resources in terms of fairness is far from accidental.

Perhaps more than we would ever like to admit, our views on issues of distributive justice have been shaped by our upbringing and socialisation, as manifestations of the contexts we find ourselves embedded within. Of course, what we perceive as fair also depends on our individual predispositions and experiences, however, from a sociological point of view, these are never independent of contextual influences, and are developed in interaction with our environment or *context*. Throughout this book, it will thus be assumed that our interpretations of the world around us are a result of an interaction of individual predispositions and the contexts we find ourselves in. Context itself is treated as inherently social in the sense that human behaviour is seen as a result of not only individual preferences, opportunities and restrictions,

but also of our inherent sociability and mutual interdependence (Zangger 2017; Granovetter 1985; Esser 2002). Depending on the context, situations and actions can carry different meaning and have different implications. Regional, temporal or (sub)-culture-specific social norms are an example of how context can shape collective belief formation, preferences as well as perceptions of the appropriateness of an action or situation. These social norms, or context-specific expectations, guide subsequent conforming or non-conforming behaviour, which in turn elicits social responses such as approval or disdain and punishment, for example, in the form of ostracism (Elster 2007).

Consequently, distributional preferences and the allocations we make also depend on our values and beliefs we have developed, while embedded in a specific context or contexts. These convictions manifest in the form of our beliefs, values and ideologies, whether they are religious, philosophical or political in nature, and guide us in our everyday decisions (Elster 1989; Binmore 2009). However, next to the implications for our daily lives, our beliefs about the state of the world and our preferred allocation systems of resources and rewards to members of society will have an effect on our political choices. For example, people who believe that poverty is primarily caused by laziness, are against policies for redistribution, while people who believe poverty is primarily a result of bad luck, that could hit anybody, are much more in favour of insuring themselves and others through such policies (Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2006). At its core, much of the polarity between the political left and right has to do with issues of distributive justice.

Philosophers since Aristotle (2000) have contributed to normative frameworks of social justice more broadly or distributive justice more specifically, out of which different traditions of thought have arisen. Ranging from the classic liberal thought of Locke (1976) and Smith (1976; 2002), the liberalism and egalitarianism of Rousseau (2002) and Kant (1991) to Marxism (2009; 1976) and utilitarianism (Mill et al. 2003). More recently Nozicks' libertarian (2013) entitlement principle, Rawls' (2005) theory of justice, Dworkin's (2002) resource egalitarianism and Sen's (1999; 2009) capability approach to social justice have been influential, to name a few. These theories rely on different perceptions of human nature and thus also bring forth and legitimate different value systems. In turn, these values, among other factors, inform our choice of allocation norms we apply to problems of distributive justice (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey 1987a; Frohlich 2007; Fleischacker 2004).

A. Justice, Individual Well-Being and Group Functioning

Allocation decisions have profound effects on individual and group welfare and thus determine the fate of groups and organisations (Leventhal 1976, p. 131). As Robinson and Bell (1978) note, differences in the perceptions of the fairness of inequalities in terms of various goods such as education, housing, job opportunities and health care are at the heart of many political struggles. It is thus of practical relevance to empirically evaluate how much inequality is too much for whom, under which conditions, and why (Robinson and W. Bell 1978, p. 126). People have a strong intuitive sense of justice and have strong reactions to it. On a personal level, feeling unfairly treated can lead to negative emotions such as anger, sadness or even depression; and can lead to conflicts at an interpersonal level (Adams 1965; Homans 1961).

Individual well-being and group functioning are thus intertwined and codependent. As Deutsch puts it: "[T]here is usually a positive, circular relation between the well-being of the individuals in a group (or society) and the well-functioning of that group: The more satisfied the individuals are, the better their group functions and vice-versa." (Deutsch 1975, p. 140). Individuals have a threshold of tolerance when it comes to being treated unfairly by their group, so that beyond a certain level of misfit between what one considers just treatment and the treatment one receives, the will or capacity to cooperate dies (Deutsch 1975, p. 141). Justice thus functions as one of the most central motivations of human behaviour and interaction (Lerner 1977, p. 49). Consequently, the distribution of goods in societies will be questioned and compared to normative ideas of justice:

> Why rewards and deprivations should be so unevenly distributed among men, and what the relation of this distribution to their 'deserts' may be, are not questions satisfactorily answerable in scientific terms.[...] Hence, because of their great importance in reconciling normative expectations and actual responses (rewards and allocations) common orientation through nonempirical ideas has great significance for the social system. (Parsons and Shils 2017, pp. 167–168)

Thus, the choice of allocation strategy in societies has consequences on many levels. Next to the consequences felt by each individual, distributions and the way they are perceived in terms of justice have instrumental effects. Moreover, a large discrepancy between the allocation of rewards and burdens can negatively affect motivation: "the distribution of rewards plays a large independent part in the motivation of action and particularly in the motivation of conformity and alienation vis-à-vis general value-orientations and specific role-expectations" (Parsons and Shils 2017, p. 201). This potential

disequilibrium can be reduced by the enforcement mechanisms of tradition and authority. However, a large imbalance between these control mechanisms and an individual's sense of justice creates cognitive strains "since in a system of cognitive values it is inherent that the ultimate criteria of truth should be cognitive, not traditional or authoritarian" (Parsons and Shils 2017, p. 168).

This of course brings to mind Weber's work on power and authority in modern societies that attain their legitimacy through the beliefs of citizens (Weber 1978).

I. Legitimating the Social Order or Striving to Change it

> Justice is one of the most highly respected notions in our spiritual universe. All men — religious believers and non-believers, traditionalists and revolutionaries — invoke justice, and none dare disavow it. [...] It is invoked to protect the established order as well as to justify its overthrow. And so, justice is a universal value. (Perelman 1980, p. 24)

When it comes to legitimising action or the absence of action, there are few reasons that are so powerfully felt as those justified by appeals to justice[1] (Lerner 1975, p. 19). Whether people are engaged in political debates for or against affirmative action, for or against more public spending, and even in the call for war or peace, the arguments are almost always based on some notion of justice (Konow 2003; Lerner 1977). "Certainly there is strong, clear evidence that at least at the level of verbalization and cultural symbols, the related themes of justice and deserving are uniquely central, powerful, and universal in Western civilization" (Lerner 1977, p. 4).

However, this brings us to the question of how this can be: How can people from opposing political spectrums all be advocating their own agendas but both in the name of justice? This begs the question: what is justice?

B. What is Justice?

> Justice is a curious mixture of equality within inequality. (Homans 1961, p. 244)

Although there are many ways of looking at justice, Homan's suggestion refers to the fact that in most conceptions of justice we are striving to achieve

1 The verb "to justify" originates from the latin "iustificare" which literally means to "make just".

an outcome that reflects equality on some level. More shall be said about this in chapter 2, however as Amartya Sen (2009) has pointed out: fundamentally, every theory of justice that has found support, perhaps in the last two to three centuries, has been concerned with equality in one way or another. However, different traditions of thought with their different perceptions of human nature and the functioning of society have come to diverging conclusions as to what exactly should be equalised — be it outcomes, opportunities or more generally the right and capability of everyone to live a decent life in dignity (Sen 2009; Sen 2001). Freedom and equality are perhaps two of the most important words used in any theory of distributive justice. While according to some theorists, freedom and equality are both deemed quintessential and inherent parts of justice (Sen 2009; Rawls 2005), in capitalist societies adhering to the liberal tradition, it is frequently argued that, to the contrary, equality is an enemy of freedom (M. Friedman and R. D. Friedman 2002; Nozick 2013).

Another more general rule of justice concerns the "elimination of arbitrary distinctions" as well as the establishment "of a proper balance between competing claims" (Rawls 1964, p. 133). These *competing claims* refer to the different justice principles or allocation norms people typically use as guidance in their allocations. Theorists and empiricists alike have suggested a whole array of justice principles, the most popular of which are presumably: *equity*, *proportionality*, *desert*, *merit*, *equality*, *reciprocity*, *needs*, *efficiency* and *accountability* (e.g. Deutsch 1985; D. Miller 2003; Leventhal 1976; Konow 2003). And while each of these will be discussed and put into context in chapter 2, the focus will lie on the principles of *merit*, *equality* and *need*, as three distinct allocation norms that together cover much of the variation in distributional preferences (Deutsch 1975).

While the normative question of what is just has traditionally been considered the domain of philosophy (e.g. Rawls 2005; D. Miller 2003; Sen 2009; Dworkin 2002; G. A. Cohen 1995; Nozick 2013), "what the people think" to say it in Miller's words (1992) is an empirical endeavour, very much in the realm of the social sciences. Therefore, while normative theories of justice will be discussed in chapter 2, this book is concerned with identifying *who* thinks *what* of justice *when* and, if we're being brave, *why*. Throughout the book, when talking about justice, unless stated otherwise, I am referring to distributive justice. When it comes to what exactly is being distributed, if not stated otherwise, the statement can be generalised to any kind of good, resource, reward that people might reasonably have an "interest in having or using (e.g. health, wealth, deference, skill)" (Schwartz 1975, p. 112).

I. What is Fair to Whom, When and Why?

While people are guided by the different allocation norms of merit, equality and need, previous research has not yet been able to offer a comprehensive theory of how people arrive at their understanding of what is just. For example: Why do they choose one principle over another in a given situation? Why do people in different countries have such different views on justice and redistribution? What happens when people feel that a just distribution requires both that needs be met and people be rewarded for their merit? Is there a hierarchy of principles? How do people weigh up the different principles of justice? While research on issues concerning distributive justice is anything but lacking, generalisable statements are still hard to find. This is partly due to the complexity of the issue at hand, but also because the subject has been handled very differently across disciplines. While, for example, economists have been concerned with finding explanations for deviations from strictly self-interested behaviour in game theoretic experiments (e.g. Ostrom and Walker 2003; Bowles and Gintis 1998b; Bowles and Gintis 2011; Kolm and Mercier Ythier 2006), social psychologists have been more concerned with the effects of different allocation norms on group behaviour (e.g. Deutsch 1975; Lerner 1977; Leventhal 1976). Those identifying more with the behavioural sciences have focused on the evolutionary perspective on human sociality (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 2011; R. M. Axelrod 2006; Ostrom and Walker 2003) and those working more in the tradition of the social sciences have instead striven to find out why some people endorse redistribution policies more than others or what people perceive as fair wages (e.g. Jasso and Rossi 1977; Fong 2001; Alesina and Giuliano 2011). While there is plenty of theoretical overlap across disciplines, there seems to be an unfortunate mutual lack of interest or at least not much interdisciplinary work to show for it. This has led to an overwhelming degree of fragmentation of knowledge.

Furthermore, the question of what people think of as a just distribution is complex, because there are three levels of factors influencing justice perceptions. For one thing, people differ in their justice perceptions on the individual level, so that, for example, women and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more egalitarian than men and those who are better off (e.g. d'Anjou, Steijn, and Van Aarsen 1995; Robinson and W. Bell 1978; Andreoni and Vesterlund 2001; Lewin-Epstein, Kaplan, and Levanon 2003; Shepelak 1989; Alves and Rossi 1978; Boeri et al. 2001; Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey 1987b; Leventhal and Lane 1970). Second, and this has predominantly

been noticed by social psychologists and social anthropologists (e.g. Deutsch 1975; Fiske 1992; Lerner 1977; Leventhal 1976), people use different allocation norms depending on the situation. Since a majority of work on distributive justice in the economic or sociological tradition has been set in the economic sphere, this has largely gone unnoticed.

Additionally, since the majority of empirical work in the social sciences has used data from subjects living in Western democratic countries, the variability of human attitudes towards distributive justice has been widely underrated (Henrich, Fehr, and Gintis 2004). This problem has been further exacerbated by the fact that a sizeable share of these subjects were students, making any generalisations to concepts such as human nature deeply problematic (e.g., Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007; Henrich, Fehr, and Gintis 2004; Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch 2004; Alesina and Giuliano 2009; Phillips 1983). This leads us to the third level: people's views on justice are also shaped by the contexts they live in.

C. Goal and Organisation of the Book

The goal of this book is to make a contribution to the disentangling of all these different aspects of distributive justice. For this purpose, a new modified survey experiment, which I have named *distributional survey experiment* (DSE), was developed and applied for the first time for the analyses presented in chapter 4 of this book. Using the DSE, it was possible to collect data efficiently on the level of the individual, the situation and context. First, since the DSEs were integrated in an online or paper and pencil survey, this allowed for an easy collection of respondent characteristics. Second, to capture the effect of *the situation*, the questionnaire included four different DSEs operationalising different social settings. Third, by administering the survey to three different populations, we are provided with some insight into the workings of context. The main achievement of the DSE, however, is that it measures people's attitudes towards distributive justice in as direct a manner as possible and by doing justice to the nature of the problem at hand, wherein — given limited resources — one person's gain is another's loss. The DSE is unique in that, by letting respondents distribute a prespecified amount of money among people described in vignettes, it combines the possibilities of distributional games in laboratory settings with the efficiency and scope of a survey experiment.

The DSEs were set in four very different situations: resources, in the form of money, were actively distributed to hypothetical friends, employees, family members and among prospective students applying for a scholarship. This last mentioned DSE was constructed as an example of a situation involving public goods. By way of bringing in context, the experiments were administered to three different populations: a general population survey in Switzerland as well as two student surveys were conducted. The students were sampled from the University of Bern in Switzerland and Princeton University in the United States. However, more shall be said on the data and methods in chapter 3.

In the following chapter, the principles of justice will be introduced and discussed in the context of some of the most relevant theories of justice and empirical findings. This is followed by the methods chapter which introduces the distributional survey experiment as a new tool. In a next step, the results are presented. Finally, the findings are discussed in regard to their broader generalisability and some concluding remarks on the implications are made. This book is guided by the hope of helping lay out some groundwork for the identification of the mechanisms leading to differing views on distributive justice.