

PhD student: Floor Boudesteijn, UU

Project title: Collective Action, Cohesion and Inequality

Keywords: Collective action - Social cohesion – ((dis)value of) Inequality – Sociology – Philosophy

Project description:

How does inequality relate to social cohesion and potentially undermine the conditions for societies to come together and address collective challenges such as climate change? We are looking for a PhD researcher to investigate this question and related questions by probing the relationship between inequality and social cohesion in the emergence of collective action. The research methodology will combine behavioural social experiments with theoretical sociology and philosophical analysis.

Aim of the project

The aim of this project is to understand the interplay between economic inequality, social relations and collective action through behavioural experiments informed by sociological theory as well as philosophical perspectives. Currently, this relation is unclear: inequality is sometimes argued to promote collective action, but it may also undermine networks of social relations necessary for collective action. Thus, the project seeks to understand the causal mechanisms through which inequality in resources and social relations interact in the emergence or breakdown of collective action. This particularly applies to societal challenges that require wide societal buy-in and have long-term effects. The project will situate this research within philosophical discussions and discuss its implications for the value of (in)equality and its relationship to collective action and community.

Research design

The project will start with a literature review on how inequality and social cohesion interact in the emergence of collective action. Based on this analysis, testable hypotheses are formulated. For example, different types of inequalities – such as income, geographic, education and intergenerational inequalities – might be promising areas of research. We might also zoom in on how inequalities and perceived unfairness and injustice within and across generations could affect cooperative behaviour. At least one of the studies will focus on climate adaptation as a case study. The methodology used to test hypotheses will be behavioural social experiments, which make it possible to identify causal mechanisms under a wide range of social conditions. In such experiments, conducted in the lab or online, collective action may be conceptualized as contributions in public good games while social cohesion may take the form of structures of interdependence relations (social networks), trust or shared norms. In turn, social inequality can be implemented as inequality in resources or power hierarchies, or be based on the actual social backgrounds of participants. At least one of the articles written will be sociological and/or philosophical theory, developing a theoretical lens of the interaction between social cohesion and inequality and what it tells us about the possible (dis)value of equality.

Names of supervisors:

Rense Corten (UU)

Andreas Schmidt (RUG)