

Project title: Inequality Acceptance: the role of self-interest, freedom and special obligations

Duration: June 2020 – June 2025

Client: The Research Council of Norway

Project leader: Alexander W. Cappelen

Project description

Inequality is a pressing social issue and inequality considerations figure prominently in almost all spheres of society. An important question is why people accept large inequalities. The research project examines three potential source of inequality acceptance.

In the first part of the project we study the role of self-interest as a source of inequality acceptance. The ambition of this is to conduct the first study of how representative samples from the general population view the moral acceptability of selfishness and how selfishness is justified.

In the second part of the project, we study the role of freedom as a source of inequality acceptance, with a focus on the freedom to help others. A key challenge in liberal egalitarian societies is to combine the liberal ideal that individuals should have the freedom to pursue their own idea of the good life and the egalitarian ideal that unfair inequalities should be eliminated. There is an inherent tension between these ideals because individuals who exercise their freedom to choose might create unfair inequalities.

In the third part of the project, we study the role of special obligations as a source of inequality acceptance. We conduct experimental studies of how inclusive or exclusive people are when they draw the "moral circle", and the prevalence of moral universalism across the world.