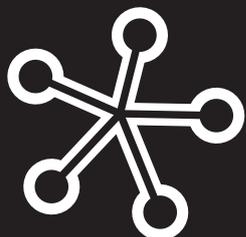




Who should earn what?

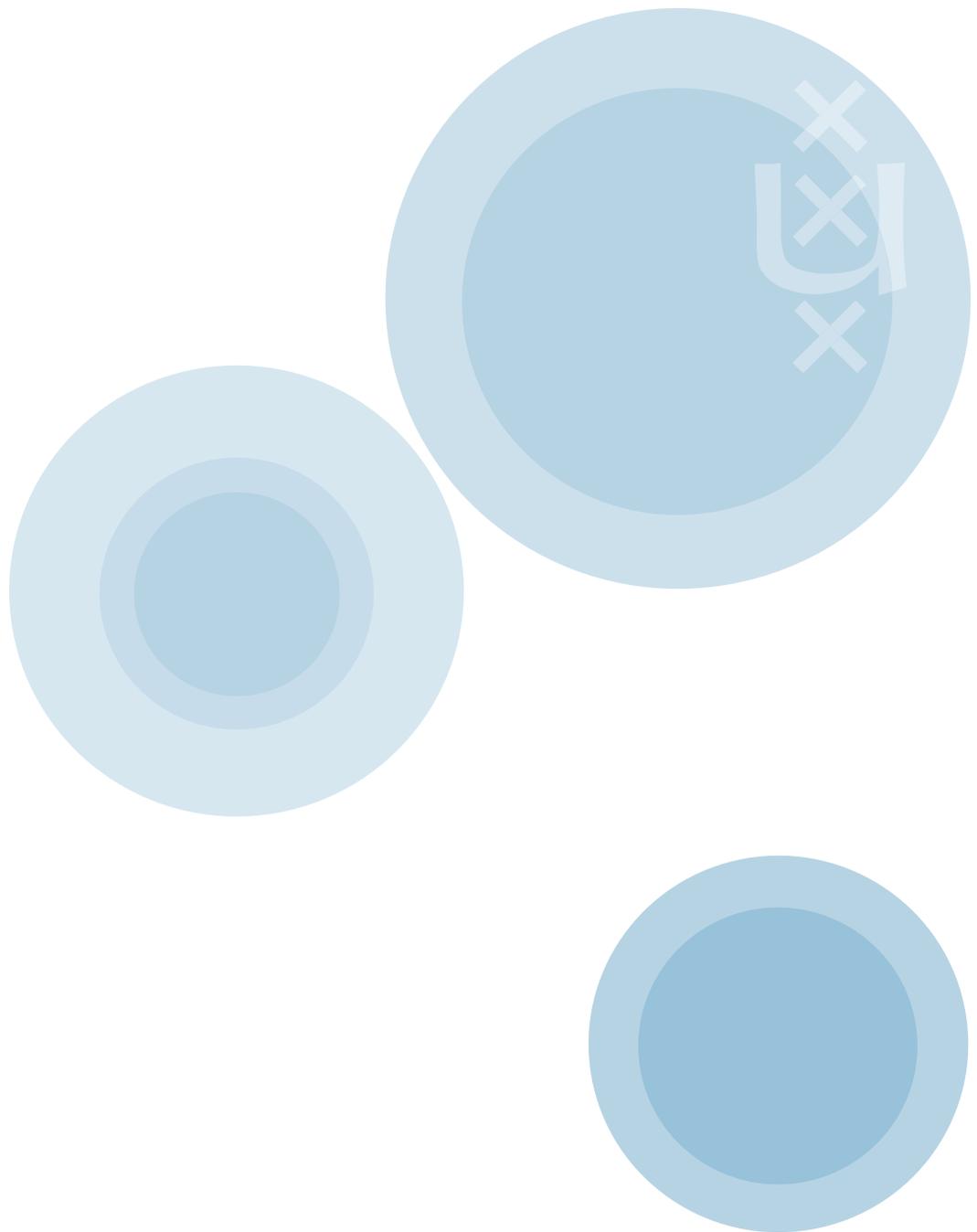
A Q methodological study on notions
of justice of wage differences

Wout Scholten & Margo Trappenburg



Working Paper 141

November 2013



November 2013

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General contact: aias@uva.nl

Bibliographical information

Scholten, W., Trappenburg, M. (2013). Who should earn what? A Q methodological study on notions of justice of wage differences. Universiteit van Amsterdam, AIAS Working Paper 141.

ISSN online: 2213-4980
ISSN print: 1570-3185

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Who should earn what?

A Q methodological study on notions of justice of wage differences

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Abstract

An increasing attention in The Netherlands is paid to wages. High wages (and bonuses) have given rise to a heated public debate and ministers have requested public officials in education, healthcare and public television to give up part of their income. At the same time there is a general decrease in real income in the last couple of years. In times of crisis these two extremes seem to trigger new (or old) notions of justice. But what are these notions of justice? Do we and others deserve what we earn and why? By using Q methodology we tried to research what different patterns of thought exist in assessing a fair wage and fair wage differences. We distinguish three profiles of justice related attitudes toward wage differences: (1) ‘compassion and complaint’, (2) ‘merit and the market’ and (3) ‘pure meritocracy’.



1 Introduction

In the summer of 2013 the Dutch minister of education asked 26 managers of large organizations in the broad area of science, culture and education to voluntarily give up part of their income. Nineteen managers agreed, four refused (the others have not responded up till now). These four were invited by the minister for a heart-to-heart at the department (BN/De Stem August 20, 2013).

In the same fashion, the minister and the junior minister of justice made a similar request to the best-paid chiefs of police falling under his department. Many of them agreed, five refused to go along (NRC, July 31, 2013).

The ministerial requests were inspired by a recently adopted law on top incomes in the public sector, in which the upper salary is declared to be that of the prime minister (the Balkenende norm, named after former prime minister Balkenende, 2002-2010). The law on top incomes was approved unanimously in both houses of Parliament (HTK 6 December 2011; HEK 13 November 2012). The law sees to it that future employment contracts in the public sector will adhere to this maximum salary. However, present top managers were hired before the law was adopted; thus cannot be bound by the new rules. Hence the appeal to their moral conscience.

Although public debate about wages in the Netherlands is usually focused on public sector salaries (people who are paid with tax or social premium money in one way or another), the private sector is occasionally drawn into the discussion as well. The coverage of the subject in the media is characterized by structural reports (monthly, annual, biennial) on the rise and decline of incomes, and incidental ‘outbursts’ of indignation about, for instance, a bonus for a badly performing CEO while his employees face a wage decline or dismissal (De Volkskrant, June 15, 2013: 2, 24-25; De Volkskrant, June 17, 2013: 6).

Since the financial crisis bankers’ salaries and bonuses have been widely disapproved in the media. The minister of social affairs has urged companies to be transparent about rewards in their annual reports and to adhere to their corporate governance code (TK June 21 2013, Kamerbrief beloning van topbestuurders in de private sector). Moreover the minister announces that he will consider other measures to ensure that in the future income differences between the top and the bottom of companies will not be too large.

Consultancy firm Capgemini started a debate about income differences between older and younger employees, based on age rather than performance (De Volkskrant, January 8, 2013: 21; NRC, January 8-9 2013: 22-23). Capgemini’s main interest is the firm’s profit and organizational continuity, but the newspapers put

the issue in a broader perspective, arguing that perhaps we ought to have a bigger debate about demotion for older workers who could be ushered into less demanding jobs and thus be able to work past retirement age but at a lower salary (cf. also Vrij Nederland 2-11- 2013: 10-12).

The debate about just wages is not a Dutch phenomenon only. Switzerland recently held a referendum in which the Swiss decided to impose strict controls on executive pay, in what Euronews calls “an anti-fat cat vote” (Euronews 2013). The Belgian government recently reached an agreement to limit the salaries of top managers in a number of government financed organizations to € 290,000 per year. Although strictly not defined as wage, the European Parliament passed rules to cap bankers’ bonuses in July 2011 (ec.europa.eu). In 2009 the G-20 in Pittsburgh endorsed plans to limit bankers’ bonuses and variable remuneration, since this reward structure was assumed to have led to excessive risk taking among bankers in the past (Leaders’ statement, Pittsburgh summit 2009). Teun Dekker organized a discourse analysis of public debate in many Western countries on top wages in the public sector. He derives from this research a large number of standard arguments pro and against high wages for public officials that come up in many countries (Dekker 2013).

It is not just high wages that attract attention. In 2010 cleaners went on strike in The Netherlands demanding a wage rise of 4% in two years (NRC, April 13, 2010). They succeeded after laying their work down for weeks. In 2011 school teachers protested against measures that stopped wage correction for inflation, the so-called zero line (Trouw, January 17, 2011). The same zero line was imposed on wages for civil service and police. These measures of wage constraint are accompanied by a general decrease in real income since 2008 of 4% (CBS 2013). Attention for the highly paid seems to go hand in hand with attention for the lowly paid, focusing on high wages in the light of declining low wages and vice versa. Therefore, income *differences* and income *inequality* are the main topics of interest in this paper. This choice is supported by the observation that in the last 35 years the income inequality in The Netherlands has not been this high (Salverda 2013).

Since high *and* low wages are under discussion ‘who should earn what’ seems to be a question in many people’s minds. It is interesting to observe in many of the examples mentioned above that they do not just talk about governmental policies taxing away excessive incomes and bonuses. They also address the highly paid themselves, who are asked to practice restraint and to be content with a more modest salary. And not just the extremely highly paid. The older employees at Capgemini were accosted by their boss who explicitly asked them to reconsider their own income and subsequently to agree that they did not really deserve what they earned. In our opinion that is a worthwhile approach. Income policy is not just a matter of govern-

ments deciding on appropriate levels of taxation, the beneficial and perverse effects of interfering in the market of supply and demand or – in the public sector – on how much tax payers' money should go to civil servants and managers in public organizations. It is also about us, about employees earning wages and reflecting on them. Do we deserve what we earn? Do other people deserve what they get at the end of each month? And what should determine the level of the wages? In this paper we intend to find out how people feel about wages and wage differences. What do they consider a just wage? How does a just wage relate to the character of the work, training and studies, responsibilities, visibility of the job, uncertainty of the job etcetera? In this paper we will use Q methodology to establish patterns in people's thoughts on wage differences.

In the next two theoretical sections we start by giving a theoretical background on just income differences and income distribution, which is mostly inspired by political philosophy (section 2). We shift our focus to empirical research from social psychology and political science to find insights in people's views and judgments on just wage differences (section 3). In section 4 we explain Q-methodology as well as the set-up of this research. In section 5 we present the results and our findings are discussed in section 6.



2 Background theory: political philosophy and income distribution

A lot of research on the justice of wages and wage differences is based on or inspired by political philosophy. In the nineteen seventies and eighties, following up on the famous book *A Theory of Justice* by Rawls (1971), other philosophers such as Nozick, Dworkin, Walzer and Miller all designed all-encompassing frameworks of justice for nation states. Rawls's theory argues that justice is a combination of equality and efficiency/incentives. In Rawls's hypothetical bargaining situation, the 'original position', aspiring citizens – who have to disregard their own talents and characteristics – have to develop principles of justice for their community. They first consider pure income equality but then they realize that perhaps talented individuals will not be prepared to work long and hard if this does not pay off in any way. Hence Rawls's negotiators accept income inequality but only if inequality would benefit all and first and foremost the least advantaged (this is the so-called difference principle). Rawls assumes that people in his hypothetical bargaining situation will try to maximize the position of the least advantaged, because they might end up belonging to that group.

Rawls's theory has been tested by social psychologists in a number of experimental studies with various outcomes. Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1992) found that people were less risk averse than Rawls seemed to posit in his theory. Rather than maximizing their position should they happen to be the worst off, they chose to install a floor to ensure that nobody would have to live below the poverty line. Above that floor efficiency considerations should rule supreme; laboratory subjects did not come up with Rawls's difference principle. However, Michelbach et al. (2003) asked respondents (undergraduate students) to rank order various income distribution graphs (top quintile should earn ... of total income, bottom quintile ..., average wage dollars). They found more support for the Rawlsian maximin approach.

Political philosophers after Rawls sometimes rejected the Rawlsian approach outright, if always very respectfully (e.g. Nozick 1974; Walzer 1983; Miller 1976 and 1999). Others were much more sympathetic to the Rawlsian project and set out to refine or amend it (e.g. Barry 1989 and 1995; Dworkin 2000; Cohen 2000 and 2008). But both types of political philosophers drew attention to the role of merit in distributive justice which seemed to have gone lost in Rawls's theory. Rawls argues that our talents and inclinations are “arbitrary from a moral point of view”, we do not deserve to be born intelligent, pretty or physically strong, we just happen to have these character traits. Hence it would seem unfair to reward us according to intel-

ligence, beauty or muscle power. After all, the dumb, the ugly and the weak cannot help being born the way they were. According to Nozick this is undoubtedly true but such coincidences influence our fate anyhow in numerous ways; it is impossible to correct them all (we were born as humans rather than wasps or rabbits by sheer coincidence, but we do not oppose to this stroke of fortune determining our lives). According to Nozick we are allowed to keep whatever goods and advantages market forces steer in our direction as long as we do not cheat, steal or murder anyone. This may lead to large inequalities and if we do not like that we can practice charity to help the less fortunate.

According to Dworkin the institutional make up of a state should be ‘endowment insensitive’, just like Rawls suggested, but in addition it should be ‘ambition sensitive’. We should not suffer because our talents were meagre but if we work hard and study a lot it seems fair that we are rewarded for these efforts rather than be treated the same way as our equally talented citizens who chose to be lazy and watch television. Cohen introduces an element of self-reflection or a first person perspective into justice thinking. In Rawls’s theory we all seem to argue from an impersonal standpoint. We want to maximize the well-being of the worst off and if this can be done by rewarding the talented for being a surgeon, a banker or prime minister with excessive incomes and bonuses, then so be it. According to Cohen the surgeon, banker and prime minister should pause and ask themselves: do I deserve this huge income? They should not present themselves as objects driven by an incentive structure; they should think and speak as moral subjects with a conscience. According to Cohen such an approach might reduce income differences substantially.

Walzer and Miller both argue that theories of justice should take into account what real existing people (as opposed to hypothetical subjects in Rawls’s original position) think is right and just. According to Walzer real people hold a pluralistic view of justice. Different principles of justice apply in different societal spheres. Thus the market generates differences in income according to the laws of supply and demand and this is as it should be because in the sphere of the market we (citizens) endorse the principle of free exchange. However, free exchange should not be the distributive principle in the spheres of education, medical care or political office. Places in university, chemo therapy treatments and positions on the city council must not be for sale.

Miller argues that we distinguish between three different modes of relationship. In (1) solidaristic communities such as the family we distribute according to need (pocket allowance, musical lessons, attention for the old and frail); in (2) citizenship communities (the state) we believe in equality; voting rights, jury duty and free speech hold for each citizen equally, at least at the level of normative beliefs and in (3) instrumental

associations (where people ‘relate to one another in a utilitarian manner; each has aims and purposes that can best be realized by cooperation with others. Economic relations are the paradigm case of this mode’ (Miller 1999: 27)) we distribute according to merit. The best qualified candidate should get the job, and the most talented student should go to university if places are scarce.

Miller studied a large number of empirical studies in an article entitled ‘Distributive justice: what the people think’ (1992). He concludes that desert is a much favoured criterion of distribution: ‘large majorities of people cross-nationally have a favourable attitude toward economic inequalities that serve to reward and motivate people and that recognize skill and training’ (1999: 68). However, although citizens seem to value merit as criterion of justice much more than Rawlsian imbued political philosophers, they are often decidedly unhappy with large income differences. Reward according to merit does not simply reflect the status quo or legitimize whatever inequality markets may produce.

Later studies confirm this observation by Miller. People seem to prefer a situation with a certain inequality over a totally egalitarian income distribution. At the same time the outliers at the top and the bottom of the income distribution are disapproved. People think no one deserves to live below a certain income level, and find it unfair when the very rich can set themselves apart from society because of their wealth. Norton and Ariely (2011) found this pattern among American respondents; Sachweh (2011) found a similar pattern in a German study. Following Miller two kinds of opinions might explain this phenomenon. Perhaps people think about economic rewards as members of an instrumental association but shift to the citizen mode once they have to reflect on huge income differences. Thus, Alves and Rossi (1978) and Miller (1992) conclude that people have a normative framework to judge individual wages and apply varieties of the merit principle to the question who should get what on the one hand and have principles of macro justice on the other hand. The split level phenomenon might also be explained by people’s conviction that certain high salaries are far beyond anything that anyone could possibly deserve, in which case the argument would stay – in terms of Miller - within the realm of instrumental association. The two pronged verdict on income differences (on the one hand in favor of reward according to merit, on the other hand a negative assessment of large income differences) seems to be a robust finding.

3 Theory and previous research: social psychology and political science

3.1 Social psychological research on justice of wage differences

Philosophical texts and the empirical evidence (combined and provided by Miller) hint at a general consensus in people's views on a just income distribution. When we shift our scope specifically to what people think of wage differences and the wage distribution we see that the tradition of empirically studying notions of justice is continued. Recent studies show that, when focusing on very specific research topics such as CEO rewards, pay procedures, pay raise and views on the rich and the poor, slightly different notions of justice are found for men and women, for different ethnic groups or for people with different socio-demographic backgrounds (Dulebohn and Martocchio 1998; Jones et al. 1999; Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Hunt 2004; Jasso and Meyersson Milgrom 2008). Most of these studies were performed by social psychologists and were based on experiments or vignettes.

For example Jasso and Meyersson Milgrom (2008) found that American and Swedish MBA students generally agreed on the fair median compensation for CEOs with different professional and personal characteristics, but the same MBA students think the just pay for female CEOs should be significantly lower than for otherwise identical male CEOs. Hunt (2004) studied ethnic differences in attitudes toward the wealthy and the poor. The general observation is that people attribute wealth to individual (opposed to structuralist) reasons. Poverty is attributed to structuralist reasons. These findings hold even stronger for ethnic minorities.

In this paper we are interested in different patterns of thought rather than the relation between background characteristics and notions of justice. Therefore Dulebohn and Martocchio (1998) could be more helpful. They performed a vignette study among employees of an American public university. Respondents were presented with little stories about hypothetical employees who differed in four ways: their performance at the job, the effort they put in their work, their responsibilities at work and their household needs. For example: 'H. has performed above average but with a minimum of effort. His income is enough for his household. He has been given an above average pay raise.' Subsequently respondents had to state their opinion on the fairness of a pay raise on a 5 point Likert scale. Dulebohn and Martocchio performed a cluster analysis of the answers. They found three clusters of respondents. For the first cluster need, job

performance and effort were good motives for a pay raise, but not responsibility. Responsibility was the dominant reason for a pay raise for respondents in cluster 2, alongside job performance. For the third cluster the height of the pay raise seemed most important in determining its fairness.

As mentioned before, most of the previous studies are based on experiments and vignettes that confront respondents with hypothetical situations. In other words, respondents are asked, in one way or another, to give their view on a just or ideal income or wage distribution. The experimental research in a laboratory situation and vignettes about hypothetical countries, hypothetical people and hypothetical incomes befit the philosophers' assumption that there is such a thing as a just society and that we could reach agreement on that by disregarding our personal characteristics in a hypothetical situation, by focusing on certain dimensions of justice and fairness while disregarding others as non-important, or by critically examining our own core beliefs on the issue. Although some studies show that differentiation exists in people's views on just wage differences, a broad consensus among subjects and respondents – reward according to merit, income differences should be moderate – seems to confirm the political philosophers' approach.

3.2 Political science: opinions on current wage differences

However, there is another body of literature dominated by political scientists that studies judgments and perceptions of citizens about the current and real life income and wage differences, rather than hypothetical situations. Several opinion surveys show a more or less similar degree of discontent with the current income differences. The Dutch National election study shows that a fluctuating but in the last decade slightly declining percentage of respondents agrees with the statement that 'income differences should be smaller': 54 percent in 1989, 67 percent in 2006, 63 percent in 2010 and the most recent study (2012) has found a percentage of 58. (Van Holsteyn and Den Ridder 2008; CBS 2013).

The best long term measure of (dis)content with the income distribution is provided by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). The most recent survey indicates that two thirds of the Dutch population thinks income differences are too large (67%, SCP 2013). When one looks at the long term results of opinions on this question one can see that, after an all-time low in 1991, the percentage of discontent is back on the level of 1980 and growing (see figure 1). The GINI country report of The Netherlands (Salverda et al. 2013) confirms this general observation: the percentage of people who want smaller income

differences and who think the differences are too large was at the lowest point in the early nineties and rose to around 60 percent in 2005. From that year on the percentages stabilize.

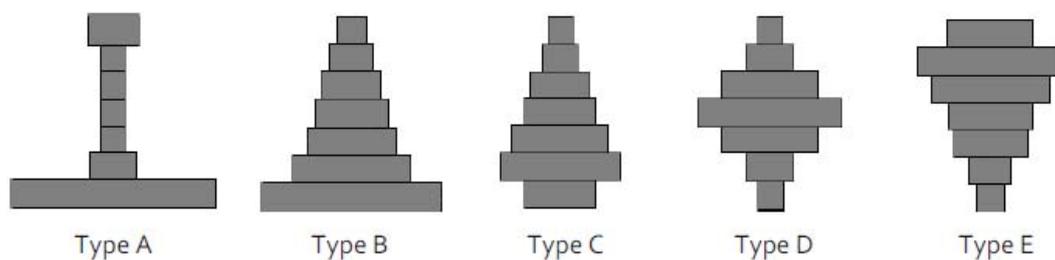
Figure 1. Percentage that agrees with the statement 'income differences are too large' (1975-2011).



Source: SCP (2013)

Similar to the previous, the most recent International Social Survey Programme survey (2013, based on the ISSP module 2009 Social Inequality IV) for the Netherlands suggests that Dutch citizens think the income differences are slightly too high.¹ Furthermore, by questioning what people expect the income distribution in the Netherlands looks like and what they think the income distribution ought to look like, the ISSP survey shows interesting results. Most people expect Dutch society to be pyramid shaped with the largest part of the population at the bottom of the income distribution (see figure 2, type B: 35.4%, type C: 24.6%). In contrast, by far the most respondents think Dutch society *ought to* have the largest part of the population in the middle of the income distribution and only small parts at the top and at the bottom (type D: 58,1%).

Figure 2. Types of society (income distribution).



Type A: small elite, very few in the middle, large mass at the bottom.
 Type B: pyramid shaped distribution, small elite, more in the middle, largest part at the bottom.
 Type C: pyramid with only few people at the bottom.
 Type D: society with the most people in the middle.
 Type E: many people close to the top, only few at the bottom.

Source: ISSP (2013)

1 'The income differences in The Netherlands are too high' (M=2.28 on a 5 point Likert scale, 1=strongly disagree – 5=strongly agree).

These results teach us that there is a slight, in different surveys growing, stabilizing or declining, popular discontent when people's ideas of a just income distribution are applied to the current distribution. The general discontent contains a wish for smaller differences and a more equal distribution than is now the case in the respondents' perceptions. Nevertheless, the Dutch tendency to wish to level the income distribution is relatively low compared to other countries. In many developed countries – except for Scandinavia where income differences are already very low and the US where there is still a strong belief in the American Dream – much more people advocate a leveling of the income distribution. Percentages range from 58% in Norway to 91% in France, 92% in Spain and 95% in Italy (SCP 2013).

One could only have slight feelings of discontent with the current income distribution, but still have strong feelings of injustice about (high or low) wages that are paid for certain occupations. Survey results become more interesting for this paper when we look at job specific wages and see if these are justified by the tasks and responsibilities of the jobs. The ISSP (2013) has asked their Dutch respondents in general terms what they think are important determinants for a fair wage. Responsibility, job performance and to a lesser degree effort proved to be the most important determinants. The number of years spent in training, what is needed to support a family or whether someone has children to support are seen as less important determinants for a fair wage. More specifically, the same group of respondents was asked to estimate the net monthly incomes for five occupations. They were also asked to indicate what they thought is a fair income for these occupations. The SCP added the best possible approximation of the real net income for the five occupations. This results in the table below (table 1).

Table 1. Approximate, estimated and desirable incomes for five occupations.

	Approximation of the real mean net monthly income	Mean estimated income	Mean desired income	Desired income change: desired income-estimated income
Doctor in general practice	€4.661	€5.374	€5.072	-€302
Chairman of a large national corporation	€24.281	€15.654	€8.777	-€6.876
Shop assistant	€1.456	€1.453	€1.685	+€232
Unskilled worker in a factory	€1.409	€1.367	€1.618	+€251
Cabinet minister	€6.541	€11.088	€8.210	-€2.879

Source: ISSP (2013), SCP (2013).

A couple of results are noteworthy. First, the incomes of the doctor and in particular the shop assistant and the factory worker are estimated accurately, while the income of the minister is strongly overestimated and the income of the chairman is largely underestimated. Second, the rank order for all columns is the same. The chairman earns the most, followed by the minister, the doctor, the shop assistant and the factory worker. The same order holds for the estimated incomes and the desired incomes. Third, however, when one looks at the desired change in relation to the estimated income the three highest incomes ought to be paid less and the lowest two incomes ought to be paid somewhat more. Finally, it is remarkable that the mean desired income is situated in between the estimated income and the approximate income for both the doctor and the minister. This means that people think these occupations should earn less, while in fact these occupations earn less than is desired. A totally different story holds for the chairman. The estimated income already is far below the approximate income, but the desired income is three times lower than what chairmen of large corporations actually earn.

Political science research has shown a great deal of surveys on opinions about income differences and job specific wages. Nevertheless there is still room for better understanding the combination of conclusions we derive from the literature. Our puzzle for this paper is to better understand in what, possibly multiple, ways the slight discontent with the general income distribution is connected to the diverse judgments of job specific wages and the general consensus on a just and ideal wage distribution.

Research that is similar to ours has been done in the US and is instructive for our puzzle. Thomas and Baas' (2013) Q methodological study into notions of justice of economic inequality resulted in three patterns of opinions. The first is characterized by egalitarian sentiments, with empathy for the unfortunate poor and dissociation from the last 30 years of capitalism. The fairness of economic inequality and belief in the American Dream is emphasized in the second viewpoint. At the same time inequality is seen as inevitable because of the combined forces of technology and globalization. A third viewpoint is characterized by individualistic optimism. According to respondents adhering to this viewpoint at present ability and effort are rewarded as they should be and the poor have no one to blame but themselves. Hence, high rewards are not a problem, although for some occupations the wage is judged as too low (social workers, teachers and nurses).

The specifically American characteristics of this research urge us to be very cautious to apply these results to the Dutch case. Wage differences, factual inequality and the debate on economic inequality all take different shapes in the US. What interests us nevertheless is that the traditional left right dimension, that is

often used by political scientists to interpret political opinions, is again under scrutiny. There is an ongoing debate among political scientists leading to an ongoing body of research about the question whether or not the left right divide is withering away, still going strong or even gaining strength recently. Political scientists sometimes point at the rise of other cleavages replacing the left right divide or at least reducing its significance compared to new cleavages such as the one about immigrants in general and Muslim immigrants in particular and about the European Union (mainstream parties versus populist parties) (cf. De Lange 2012; Bovens, Pellikaan and Trappenburg 1998; Pellikaan and Trappenburg 2003; Houtman, Achterberg and Derks 2008). Other political scientists point out that people still steadily cluster in the traditional left right divide.

The findings of Thomas and Baas (2013) seem to suggest there is more to the left right dimension when dealing with economic inequality and a just income distribution. In line with their research we should rather speak of a triangular division between egalitarians, people who believe in the fairness of economic inequality and individualistic optimists, instead of a linear left right dimension.

3.3 Concluding theoretical remarks

In short, starting from a background of philosophers who wrote and debated about a just income distribution, via more recent empirical research on notions of justice, we have come to the conclusion that a general and robust consensus exists on what we, the people, think is a fair wage distribution. However, when this consensual notion of justice is applied to the current and actual wage differences, surveys indicate that there is disagreement on whether our society contains a just wage distribution as yet. Most people claim to be slightly dissatisfied, which also means there is a large group in society that more or less thinks the current wage differences are fair. To our knowledge, except for the American based Q study, the way in which these findings relate to each other have not been studied in depth. Our paper will hopefully make a start here by letting our participants combine their notions of just wage differences with judgments on the *current* wage distribution. We will use the research method used by Thomas and Baas (2013), Q methodology, to make more sense of people's opinions on the merit criterion and wage differences. Q methodology leaves more room for nuance in respondents' opinions than survey research. At the same time it can be used to discuss and evaluate real life dilemmas and examples unlike laboratory experiments. It might thus produce useful results in between or in addition to the bodies of knowledge identified above.

4 Method: a Q methodological approach

4.1 Q methodology: what is it?

To be able to find patterns in the notions of justice of wage differences we used Q methodology, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods invented by statistician William Stephenson (1936; 1952). Q is often described as alternative for R methods (Brown, 1980). R methods compare a few tests (e.g. income – attitude to welfare state) with many people (hundreds or thousands), while Q methodology, by making participants sort a number of statements, compares many tests (>35) with only a few people (30-80) and analyzes (calculates) what patterns exist between people.

Q methodology is designed to research subjectivity (opinions, preferences, notions of justice). An inverted factor analysis is applied to find patterns of opinions and preferences on a certain topic that can be attributed to groups of persons (Brown 1980). In ‘normal’ factor analysis patterns are explored within a set of statements. Factor analysis in Q methodology is meant to explore patterns within a set of participants.

‘Q methodology begins with the notion of finite diversity [in opinions/preferences], the aim not to obtain the truth, but to collect and explore the variety of accounts people construct’ (Cross 2005: 209). The notion of finite diversity justifies the use of only small numbers of participants, since ‘one quickly reaches the point where the testimony of great numbers of additional informants provides no further validation’ (Benedict 1946: 16; in Brown 1980: 194) and a saturation point is reached. An often posed critique on Q methodology is the unknown reliability of the sample items (Thomas and Baas 1992). However, the most important form of reliability in Q methodology is replicability (De Graaf and Van Exel 2009), and tests-retests of the same sample of statements on different groups of participants resulted in a reliability of 0.8 or higher (Brown 1980; Dennis 1988 and 1992). Concerning the generalizability of the results it is important to mention that ‘[w]hat proportion of the population belongs to one factor rather than another is a wholly different matter and one about which Q technique as such is not concerned’ (Brown 1980: 192). With only a small number of participants it is impossible to make claims about interpersonal differences that hold for an entire population.

Among the great strengths of Q methodology is the interaction between sample elements. In surveys statements could be given the same score (e.g. ‘totally agree’) to all statements by the same respondent. Although this is perfectly legitimate and useful data, in many topics one cannot totally agree with every

statement. In Q methodology, ‘the subject, while performing a Q sort, [is] constantly making comparisons between statements’ (Brown 1980: 51). This results in a sort or score of statements that is completely connected, though not necessarily coherent, providing the researcher with data on choices, priorities and preferences.

Instead of using survey data one might of course also take recourse to qualitative interviews. Why choose a Q sort research over regular qualitative interviews? First, usually – and also in this case – a Q-sort study is accompanied by a qualitative interview. Participants (sorters) are not just asked to sort statements, they are asked to explain their choices. These accompanying interviews are transcribed and form an important source for interpreting the data later on. The rich data on motivations and underlying principles of justice that can be gathered with interviews is not discarded or put aside by structurally sorting the statements, rather they complement and reinforce each other. Second, sorting a set of fixed statements enables us to correlate the scores and use a factor analysis, which is a very effective way of reducing the data, making the data easier to interpret. Third, by using a fixed set of statements it is assured that the statements and arguments that are most important in the public and scientific debate on wage differences are included in every interview.

A Q-sort study consists of five consecutive steps (Brown 1980; Van Exel and De Graaf 2005). First, an exhausting overview of existing opinions and arguments on the topic is gathered, typically from newspapers, newsmagazines, interviews with experts or stakeholders and scientific literature. This is called the *concourse*. Second, a representative selection of statements (Q set) is made, possibly by categorizing the *concourse* and selecting a number of statements per category, making sure every category of the *concourse* is reflected in the Q set. Third, the participants are selected by purposive sampling (P set). The selection is based on maximum diversity in relevant characteristics (e.g. gender and income). To find the variety of accounts people construct it is not important to increase the number of respondents, but to select them in a way that the most different opinions are captured. Fourth, in one-on-one interviews the participants are asked to sort the statements according to their opinions, preferences or priorities (Q sorting). Typically this is done on a score sheet shaped as a quasi-normal distribution. The Q sorting is accompanied by an interview to identify the motivations of the participants. Fifth, in software programs like PQMethod the factor analysis is executed, so that participants with similar views end up in the same factor.² Possibly the factors can be rotated objectively or theoretically. The output that is produced by the software contains a normalized factor score per statement, an idealized or composite Q sort per factor, the defining statements

2 PQMethod can be downloaded from <http://schmolck.userweb.mwn.de/qmethod/downpqwin.htm>.

per factor, and the distinguishing and consensus statements. The motivations given in the interviews are consulted to finalize the interpretation of the factors and illustrate them.

4.2 Step 1. The concourse

The concourse's most important goal is to gather a large number and a wide variety of relevant opinions and arguments about wage differences. We used a digital Dutch newspaper and newsmagazine database and extracted statements from recent news articles, after which we completed the concourse by gathering statements from a review of the literature and conversations with labor studies experts. We categorized our final concourse in five main categories: (1) views on the current wage differences (satisfied, dissatisfied, indifferent); (2) views on the lowly and the highly paid (who are they, what is the cause of their (mis)fortune?); (3) views on the role of different actors in society (market, individual, state, society/societal actors) with regard to wage determination; (4) views on different types of merit as determinants for wages (performance, talent, education, effort, risk, responsibilities, attractiveness, publicity, tenure, age and the public or private character of the work); and (5) views on alternative rewards (such as honor, flexible hours, extra vacations). Categorizing the statements helped us to make a representative selection.

4.3 Step 2. The Q set

First, we removed the statements that were too similar to others and combined several similar statements into fewer more distinct statements. Statements that were too vague or abstract or too specific (concerning specific occupations) were removed as well. From the remaining set we selected the statements that were most relevant or most salient according to labor studies experts so as to reach an acceptable number of 35-40 statements and make sure that every category was represented in the Q set. We edited the statements in such a way that participants of every level of education and intelligence would understand them, using the specific occupations only as examples or illustrations.

We tested the initial Q set of 40 statements on three persons with different wages to get familiar with the sorting, to observe the responses to the statements and to clock the whole procedure. This pilot phase led to minor reformulations and simplifications and the removal of three statements that were still too similar to other statements. The statements were then randomly assigned numbers and printed on cards. The final 37 statements are categorized as in table 2 and fully displayed in table 3.

Table 2. Categories and statement numbers referring to table 3.

Categories	Statements
Views on current wage differences	1, 2, 3, 10, 22, 28, 30, 31
Views on the lowly and highly paid	8, 23, 34, 36
Views on different actors in society	5, 6, 7, 25, 27, 29, 32, 33, 35
Views on different types of merit	4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 26, 37
Views on alternative rewards	24

Source: Q-set; translated

Table 3. Q set

Statements
1 I think the ratio between the highest wages (of for example top athletes and CEO's of large companies) and the lowest wages (of for example super market cashiers and cleaners) is right the way it is now.
2 In The Netherlands there is a large group that earns too much for the work these people do.
3 Large wage differences are part of life, we just have to learn to live with them.
4 Working in a mentally and/or physically heavy job (like nurses and construction workers) is someone's own choice, I don't think it should be better paid than a 'light' job (like a receptionist).
5 I think the government should determine maximum wages, so that too large wage differences can be prevented.
6 People with very high wages should take care themselves that the wage differences don't become too large, for instance by not demanding very high wages or by not accepting very high wages.
7 According to modern society, I am only successful in life when I earn much money.
8 People that complain about their wage are primarily jealous of people with higher wages.
9 Large wage differences within the same occupations reflect what is a good and bad performance.
10 I am jealous of people who earn much more than me.
11 People who have studied a lot should earn much more than people who haven't studied at all.
12 Working in a mentally and/or physically dangerous job (like construction workers, police officers or soldiers) is someone's own choice, I don't think it should be better paid than a job that is not dangerous (like a schoolteacher).
13 It doesn't bother me that occupations leading to a lot of fame and extras anyhow (like travelling abroad) are also highly paid (like football players, actors and pop idols).
14 When the whole country is watching over your shoulder, thus adding much pressure to your work, you should be paid more than when it's not the case.
15 Two employees that do the same work in the same organization should earn the same, even when one has a much longer tenure.
16 There should be a maximum wage for chief executives of organizations that are paid by taxes, like education and health institutions.
17 I think that dirty work (like collecting garbage) should be rewarded better than 'clean' work (like scientific research or secretarial work).
18 When a younger person would do my job, I think he should earn less than me.
19 Someone with irregular work hours and night shifts should earn more than someone without.
20 I think that work with great responsibilities and a high risk of something going wrong (like a surgeon or a fire fighter) should be rewarded much better than work where little can go wrong (like a personnel advisor).
21 I don't think that innate talents, like intelligence or athletic prowess, should be rewarded with a high wage.
22 The system of bonuses at large companies should be adjusted thoroughly.
23 The highly paid earn their money at the expense of others.
24 I think it's better to reward people with flexible working hours, days off, prizes, compliments and/or appreciation than with money.
25 People who are in the spotlights (like TV show hosts at public broadcasting or politicians) should lead by example by not demanding or accepting very high wages.
26 The more subordinates, the more one should earn.

27	I think it's fair when wages are determined by the number of people that are suited for a job. When few people are suited, they may as a consequence earn high wages.
28	What someone earns is of nobody's business, not even friends' and relatives'. Nobody should interfere with that.
29	Trade unions should not only fight for higher wages, but even more for smaller wage differences.
30	To my opinion, in the Netherlands, there is only a small number of people that earns too little for the work that they do.
31	The gap between the wage of a CEO and the wage of the least earning employee is too big in many Dutch organizations.
32	I am afraid that it's bad for the economy when wage differences are being decreased.
33	I think organizations perform better when the government doesn't interfere with wages and wage differences.
34	When someone earns too little he is allowed to make some extra money by, for example, moonlighting or by on purpose paying too little taxes.
35	Right now, the wages of many occupations aren't equal to the appreciation there is for those occupations.
36	People who earn very little money often can be blamed for it themselves.
37	When one has performed well, one deserves a high reward, even if that leads to high wage differences.

Source: *Q set. List of statements, translated from the Dutch*

4.4 Step 3. The P set

For the purpose of finding a great variety of opinions on the justice of wage differences we selected our respondents on the basis of diversity in a number of characteristics. Taking into account motives of financial self-interest we reckoned wage would be the main determinant in opinions on wage differences. Therefore we selected the P set based on the occupations of possible participants. We could then make an educated guess about their wage. Other characteristics we included were gender, age, education, political preference, religion and employment in the public or private sector. A final number of 35 respondents participated in the research.

We asked the participants about their personal characteristics and based our selection of the next respondents on the diversity (or homogeneity) of the previous respondents (e.g. when our first participants turned out to be non believers we sought for religious participants in the next batch). The composition of respondents shows that there is high diversity in all variables, although the distribution of wages and education might be somewhat skewed towards high wages and high education. Nevertheless, a sufficient number of lowly paid and lowly educated respondents are included in this study (see appendix 1).

4.5 Step 4. The Q sorting

The Q sorting consisted of three parts. First, the participant was asked about his or her personal characteristics described at step 3 and the interviewer gave an introduction on the topic, explaining the goal of the Q sort and drawing a picture of the current wages per standard occupation with the use of a wage chart (Elsevier 2012). Second, the participant was asked to sort all 37 statements on a score sheet with compartments forming a fixed quasi-normal distribution (see figure 3, 3=most agree; -3=least agree). It is important to note that the statement scores are no absolute scores, but should be regarded as positions relative to other statements. We chose for a rather flattened distribution because we expected that the participants would have strong opinions on the statements. A flatter distribution leaves more room for strong (dis)agreement (Van Exel and De Graaf 2005).

Figure 3. Q score sheet (with filled in statement numbers)

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
1	8	4	17	20	13	2
18	3	10	33	6	23	31
26	12	11	35	14	19	22
	28	37	9	7	16	
		25	27	34		
		36	21	5		
		15	24	32		
			30			
			29			

Because sorting 37 statements at once proved to be difficult, an intermediate step was added, in which the participant sorted the statements in three piles: agree, neutral and disagree. Third, the interviewer asked the participant to explain the choices for the seven statements he/she most agreed with and the seven statements he/she most disagreed with. The interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace, home or at 'neutral ground'. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

4.6 Step 5. The analysis and interpretation

As described before, the factor analysis used in Q methodology is based on the correlation of persons, not statements. For the factor analysis we used the software program PQMethod 2.33. Every factor analysis described below was conducted with a centroid factor extraction and varimax rotation.

The initial factor analysis, using the maximum number of 7 possible factors, provided an outcome with 3 factors, of which 2 were only represented by 1 respondent. We compared this quantitative outcome with the interviews and had to decide that this factor solution did not correspond with the qualitative stories that accompanied the Q-sorts. Therefore we tried to conduct the factor analysis with a smaller maximum number of factors (4). This resulted in three relevant factors, that generally matched the content of the interviews. We used automatic pre-flagging within PQMethod to let the program decide which participant loaded on which factor (table 4).

Table 4. Factor loadings per respondent (an asterisk (*) indicates pre-flagging for the column factor).

Respondent number	Factor loading factor 1	Factor loading factor 2	Factor loading factor 3
1	0.4200*	-0.0309	0.3125
2	0.1447	0.8598*	0.1786
3	0.7917*	0.1868	0.1121
4	0.0744	0.6264*	0.3871
5	0.0720	0.1596	0.5058*
6	0.7111*	0.2494	0.1806
7	0.6236*	0.2428	-0.0297
8	0.4563*	0.0388	0.1341
9	0.1362	0.4832*	0.0910
10	0.7490*	0.0178	-0.1677
11	0.2443	0.6589*	-0.0119
12	0.5988*	-0.0681	0.3611
13	0.1855	0.5530*	0.0783
14	-0.1178	0.3197	-0.0508
15	-0.2288	0.6795*	0.3770
16	0.2641	0.3717*	-0.0864
17	0.0005	0.5004*	0.3553
18	0.5420*	0.1924	-0.0703
19	0.7989*	-0.0368	0.1449
20	0.6696*	0.3727	0.0218
21	-0.2149	0.1900	0.4574*
22	0.5130*	-0.0977	0.4963
23	0.0139	0.3450*	0.1729
24	0.4639*	0.2803	0.0559
25	0.2646	0.6827*	0.1080
26	0.7677*	0.2312	-0.0023
27	0.8740*	-0.0510	0.0976
28	0.5167*	0.1990	-0.3075
29	0.6522*	0.1652	-0.0661
30	0.7056*	0.1965	0.0801
31	0.2738	0.5599*	0.0850
32	0.4100	0.4743*	-0.1955
33	0.1743	0.2683	0.4688*
34	0.6814*	0.1274	-0.0478
35	0.1719	0.6204*	-0.0307

Source: Dataset Q sorts; factor analysis PQMethod, with a maximum of 4 factors.

Table 5. Q set including composite factor scores

Statements	1	2	3
1 I think the ratio between the highest wages (of for example top athletes and CEO's of large companies) and the lowest wages (of for example super market cashiers and cleaners) is right the way it is now.	-3	-1	0
2 In The Netherlands there is a large group that earns too much for the work these people do.	2	1	-1
3 Large wage differences are part of life, we just have to learn to live with them.	-1	1	2
4 Working in a mentally and/or physically heavy job (like nurses and construction workers) is someone's own choice, I don't think it should be better paid than a 'light' job (like a receptionist).	0	-2	1
5 I think the government should determine maximum wages, so that too large wage differences can be prevented.	1	-2	-3
6 People with very high wages should take care themselves that the wage differences don't become too large, for instance by not demanding very high wages or by not accepting very high wages.	1	-1	-1
7 According to modern society, I am only successful in life when I earn much money.	0	0	0
8 People that complain about their wage are primarily jealous of people with higher wages.	-1	0	1
9 Large wage differences within the same occupations reflect what is a good and bad performance.	-2	0	0
10 I am jealous of people who earn much more than me.	-3	-3	-3
11 People who have studied a lot should earn much more than people who haven't studied at all.	0	-1	-1
12 Working in a mentally and/or physically dangerous job (like construction workers, police officers or soldiers) is someone's own choice, I don't think it should be better paid than a job that is not dangerous (like a schoolteacher).	0	0	1
13 It doesn't bother me that occupations leading to a lot of fame and extras anyhow (like travelling abroad) are also highly paid (like football players, actors and pop idols).	0	1	1
14 When the whole country is watching over your shoulder, thus adding much pressure to your work, you should be paid more than when it's not the case.	0	3	-1
15 Two employees that do the same work in the same organization should earn the same, even when one has a much longer tenure.	0	0	3
16 There should be a maximum wage for chief executives of organizations that are paid by taxes, like education and health institutions.	3	3	1
17 I think that dirty work (like collecting garbage) should be rewarded better than 'clean' work (like scientific research or secretarial work).	1	-1	0
18 When a younger person would do my job, I think he should earn less than me.	-1	-2	-3
19 Someone with irregular work hours and night shifts should earn more than someone without.	2	2	1
20 I think that work with great responsibilities and a high risk of something going wrong (like a surgeon or a fire fighter) should be rewarded much better than work where little can go wrong (like a personnel advisor).	1	2	2
21 I don't think that innate talents, like intelligence or athletic prowess, should be rewarded with a high wage.	0	-1	0
22 The system of bonuses at large companies should be adjusted thoroughly.	3	2	0
23 The highly paid earn their money at the expense of others.	2	-3	-2
24 I think it's better to reward people with flexible working hours, days off, prizes, compliments and/or appreciation than with money.	1	0	3
25 People who are in the spotlights (like TV show hosts at public broadcasting or politicians) should lead by example by not demanding or accepting very high wages.	1	-1	0
26 The more subordinates, the more one should earn.	0	1	-2
27 I think it's fair when wages are determined by the number of people that are suited for a job. When few people are suited, they may as a consequence earn high wages.	-1	3	1
28 What someone earns is of nobody's business, not even friends' and relatives'. Nobody should interfere with that.	-2	-1	-1

29	Trade unions should not only fight for higher wages, but even more for smaller wage differences.	1	0	-1
30	To my opinion, in the Netherlands, there is only a small number of people that earns too little for the work that they do.	-2	0	-2
31	The gap between the wage of a CEO and the wage of the least earning employee is too big in many Dutch organizations.	3	1	0
32	I am afraid that it's bad for the economy when wage differences are being decreased.	-2	1	-1
33	I think organizations perform better when the government doesn't interfere with wages and wage differences.	-1	0	2
34	When someone earns too little he is allowed to make some extra money by, for example, moonlighting or by on purpose paying too little taxes.	-1	-3	-2
35	Right now, the wages of many occupations aren't equal to the appreciation there is for those occupations.	2	1	3
36	People who earn very little money often can be blamed for it themselves.	-3	-2	0
37	When one has performed well, one deserves a high reward, even if that leads to high wage differences.	-1	2	2

Source: PQMethod factor analysis of dataset. Loading of statements on each of the three factors

The first outcome to look at are the composite scores per factor (shown in table 5). The composite score is the score of a hypothetical participant that would have a loading on a factor of 1. For the purpose of further interpreting the factors, all interview fragments per characterizing statement per factor were analyzed. We did not only use the composite scores to make sense of a factor, but also the distinguishing and consensus statements and their corresponding motivations.

5 Results: three patterns of thought

5.1 Three factors

The factor analysis resulted in three factors. Factor 1 is defined by 18 Q-sorts and has an explained variance of 24%. 13 Q-sorts loaded on factor 2, which explains 15% of the variance. The third factor added a relevant deviation from the first two factors and is therefore included despite its relatively low explained variance of 6% and 3 representative Q sorts. Factor 2 shows a moderate correlation with factor 1 ($r=0.35$) and a stronger correlation with factor 3 ($r=0.47$). The correlation between factor 1 and 3 is low ($r=0.12$). These correlations indicate that consensus about wage differences exists alongside the differences.

5.2 Similarities

Despite the moderate and strong correlations between the factors, only four statements show statistical consensus for the three factors. The most remarkable similarity is that the three factors all agree strongly that they are not jealous at people who earn much more than they do [statement 10] (-3, -3, -3).³ The most heard explanation is the following: *‘sometimes I think it would be nice to have a little bit more on my bank account. But I am not jealous at all, that’s just not me’* (graphic designer, 26, low wage). Respondents claim jealousy *‘is just not in [their] nature’* (local government advisor, 46, high wage). It is an unknown emotion. At other times the lack of jealousy is attributed to the respondent’s high wage and a few respondents are not jealous themselves but do witness jealousy in others: *‘in The Netherlands we’re still somewhat easily hurt’* (vice president multinational, 55 high wage). Not being jealous also has something to do with the deservingness of others, according to this consultant (31, medium wage): *‘people who earn more money generally deserve it’*. Other respondents are not jealous of people who make more money because they are not keen to do what is necessary for that wage: *‘those people are under a lot more pressure. That bit of money isn’t worth it’* (website content employee, 55, medium wage). The only respondent who admitted to be jealous once in a while explained it as follows: *‘I would mainly be jealous of people who earn less. [...] [My job] is pretty tiring. I would like to work as a bus driver for a couple of weeks’* (local government advisor, 33, high wage). On the other three consensus statements the respondents have mean scores close to 0, which means that their opinion is not strong. The respondents neither agree nor disagree

3 (-3, -3, -3) are the composite or ideal type score of all three profiles, in this case meaning that they disagree with this statement strongly. (3, -1, 0) would, for example, mean then that profile 1 strongly agrees, profile 2 disagrees slightly and profile does not have a strong opinion on this statement. Numbers in bolt indicate that the number represents the profile currently described.

strongly that, according to modern society, one is only successful in life when one earns much money [7] (0, 0, 0), that people who studied a lot deserve a significantly higher wage than people who did not [11] (0, -1, -1) and that dirty jobs should pay better than ‘clean’ jobs [17] (1, -1, 0).

Other noteworthy similarities exist only between two of the three factors. The groups of respondents in factors 1 and 2 both agree strongly that there should be a maximum wage for chief executives of organizations that are paid by taxes [16] (3, 3). The representatives of factor 1 and 2 further have no strong feelings about rewarding people with flexible working hours, days off, compliments and appreciation instead of money [24] (1, 0).

Profile 1 and 3 both moderately disagree with the statements that there is only just a small group that earns too little [30] (-2, -2) and that what someone earns is of nobody’s business, not even friends’ and relatives’ [28] (-2, -1). The similarity between profile 2 and 3 is also expressed by two statements. The respondents do not think that the highly paid earn their money at the expense of others [23] (-3, -2), but do agree that someone who performs well deserves a high reward, even when that leads to large wage differences [37] (2, 2).

However, the main consensus between the factors cannot be found in the statistics. It holds a rejection of total wage equality together with a preference for wage differences on the basis of meritocratic terms, which means that almost every respondent agrees that wage differences in more or lesser degree are useful and fair. Even the most equality driven respondents state that *‘there are always slight differences, and I think that’s fine* (student individual healthcare, 59, low wage), *‘it does not have to become a communist country’* (public servant/team coordinator, 38, high wage) and *‘certain responsibilities come with a reward, [...] I don’t have any problems with that’* (teacher, 45, medium wage). In short, the starting point for the results of this study is that a fair wage distribution is based on merit. The degree and meritocratic terms in which the differences take shape are points of dissensus, that will be explained hereafter in the descriptions of the three profiles.

5.3 Profile 1: Complaint & compassion

Profile 1 is characterized by three distinctive views on the highly paid, the lowly paid and wage differences in general. First, the representatives of this profile have a negative notion of the highest paid of whom they say earn their money at the expense of others [23] (2, -3, -2), not only employees, but also clients, as is claimed by this lowly paid citizenship for immigrants course teacher (48): *‘In healthcare for example, managers run off with bonuses big enough to run an entire unit, or to hire an extra employee so elderly people actually can get a shower every day’*. Furthermore, representatives of this profile eagerly want to put a halt to excessive wages and

bonuses. They plea for a maximum wage for chief officers in organizations that are paid by taxes [16] and a thorough adjustment of the system of bonuses at large companies [22] (3, 2, 0), most commonly because of the height ('it is just absurd' (nurse, 43, medium wage)) and the wrong (short term) incentive, according to this teacher (27, medium wage): *When the basic salary is 1.5 million and eventually grows to 11 million through bonuses alone, that's not right. [Bonuses] are often based on the figures of this year or maybe last year, but what happens in ten years? One just doesn't know. And now it appears that after a couple of years the policies at many companies just don't work [...] and the bonuses have already been given*. Other respondents put emphasis on the short term incentive of bonuses as well, including a lack of attention for sustainability: *chief executives are stimulated to do the wrong things for the organization, and actually don't look at the long run. [...] I would appreciate it if bonuses were paid to do sustainable things with a company*' (public servant/team coordinator, 38, high wage).

Second, this view is accompanied by compassion for the lowest paid employees, who according to profile 1 respondents cannot be blamed for their low earnings [36] (-3, -2, 0). An NGO-director (60, high wage) points out: *It really bothers me that, especially the liberals I fear, think one can be blamed if one didn't take his opportunities. Look around. [...] People are in a certain situation, a certain segment of society with a set of skills and end up in a certain position, but they cannot be blamed for it most of the time, [...] the social environment is very determining*'.

Third, this profile is characterized by a general discontent and sometimes frustration ('it annoys me extremely' (architect/entrepreneur, 57, high wage)) with the wage differences in society, constituted by four statements. The representatives have the strong opinion that there is a large group that earns too much [2] (2, 1, -1) and there is more than just a small group that earns too little for the work they do [30] (-2, 0, -2). Employees in healthcare, education and the police are most often mentioned in the latter statement. For the next two statements the representatives agree that the gap between the director and the lowest paid employee in many organizations is too high [31] (3, 1, 0) and disagree that the ratio between the highest wages and the lowest wages in society are right the way it is now [1] (-3, -1, 0): *I think that ratio is not right at all. When you look around, you can see that the lowest paid just cannot get by. [...] I would equalize wages, no doubt about it*' (citizenship course teacher, 48, low wage).

Respondents in this profile have little attention for the kind of work (hard work, high levels of pressure and responsibilities for example) and performance within the job. This leads to the observation that equality, much more than merit, is the main principle of justice in this profile. As discussed before, total or absolute equality is rejected, but still a much more equal wage distribution is wished for, for example by this nurse (43, medium wage): *I understand that someone with a high responsibility should earn more, but I don't think the*

differences should be this large'. The representatives of profile 1 give priority to a more equal wage distribution than to wage differences based on meritocratic terms. For them the present situation leads to discontent and frustration.

Although the overall present wage distribution can be frustrating for the respondents, their own wage is not a big part of their frustrations in life. They do not think that what someone earns is nobody's business not even friends' and relatives' [28] (-2, -1, -1). Sometimes the representatives of profile 1 observe this taboo in other groups, but never in their own environment. They are not ashamed: *'even if I earned 1250 Euros [per month], I wouldn't mind'* (metal worker, 38, medium wage). Even more so, they are not jealous at people who earn much more than they do [10] (-3, -3, -3). It is remarkable that, when the respondents of this profile talk about themselves, they claim that money is not a big item, but when they look at others (e.g. the highly paid, the lowly paid) money and wage are suddenly the entities in which inequality and unfairness are expressed, like this statement of a citizenship course teacher (48, low wage): *'it makes the opportunities for children unequal. I think that is my main point'*. Wage distribution is an important issue, but not one's own wage is important, it's the wage of others that cries out for action.

5.4 Profile 2: Merit & market

Profile 2 is characterized by two main elements of justice regarding wage distribution. The first element focuses on the kind of work and performance within the job. The representatives of this profile judge high levels of pressure [14] (0, 3, -1), responsibilities and risk [20] (1, 2, 2) (*'if someone carries responsibilities every minute of every day, that may be rewarded if it was up to me'* (banker, 30, medium wage)), irregular working hours [19] (2, 2, 1) and physically/mentally hard work [4] (0, -2, 1) as fair determinants for the height of wages. Like the other representatives of this profile this local government staff member (30, medium wage) states that performing well justifies high wages, even when it causes large wage differences [37] (-1, 2, 2): *'I think it's fair that when my husband sells well and his colleague doesn't that he gets a performance bonus and a higher salary. Well, I think that is just'*. In line with the previous statements age is of no importance for performance and therefore the wage [18] (-1, -2, -3).

The second element relates to the presumed fairness of the free market [27] (-1, 3, 1) (*'scarcity may be paid for'* (regional bank board president, 49, high wage)), a maximum wage for tax paid chief officers [16] and the reluctance toward a state regulated wage system [5] (1, -2, -3): *'we live in a free market, so I don't think the government can intervene in all kinds of things'* (manager HR services, 54, high wage). These statements all point to a

(classical) liberal notion of the justice of wage differences. It is in line with this notion that the representatives of profile 2 are more afraid that diminishing wage differences have a negative effect on the economy [32] than their counterparts of profile 1 (-2, 1), because *'people put more effort into it, are more inclined to perform better when there is a wage difference'* (manager HR services, 54, high wage).

Compared to profile 1, the group of respondents in profile 2 is more satisfied (or less dissatisfied) with the status quo [1], although still not very satisfied (-3, -1). This position of more satisfaction is further expressed by not being jealous at higher earners [10] (-3, -3), not claiming that the highly paid earn their money at the expense of others [23] (2, -3). Furthermore, profile 2 respondents seem to accept large wage differences as a part of life [3] (-1, 1), for instance according to this highly paid local government advisor (46): *'It's a part of life, learn to live with it. [...] Everyone is different, everyone undergoes his own development. One will earn a lot, the other will earn very little. If you are dissatisfied, you have to do something about it, but on an individual basis. Everyone has to do it himself'*. This does not mean that the respondents of profile 2 are not concerned or engaged; they rather agree with the free market as a fair, useful and inevitable process of wage distribution and therefore find it easier to accept the outcome of this process: *'it is supply and demand. That's just how it goes, and I agree with that'* (graphic designer, 26, low wage). Yet, the relative satisfaction does not come without a few critical remarks. The respondents of profile 2 do not have a problem with large wage differences, but there comes a point where they draw the line. This consultant (31, medium wage) does not mention an exact number, but draws an abstract line: *'generally speaking I think [the wage differences] aren't that bad, but in the Netherlands there really are some excesses. Sometimes there is too little attention for that'*.

As a consequence of accepting large wage differences, putting emphasis on the kind of work and performance, and seeing the free market as fair, the vocabulary of the representatives of profile 2 is characterized by *can* and *may* instead of *should*, *have to* and *ought to* (the dominant vocabulary of profile 1 respondents). The examples are numerous, for instance: *'if you are a constant object of attention and have to make important decisions, I think you may earn more'* (manager HR services, 54, high wage), *'a more complex job may be paid better'* (regional bank board president, 49, high wage). When asked if talent *should be* rewarded, again the manager HR services answered: *'one may reward it'*.

Employees are allowed to have high wages if they have large responsibilities and if their capabilities are scarce, but for profile 2 even then the lowly paid still have a reasonable income (because of the minimum wage or social security): *'I think there are only few people who earn too little.[...] In general we shouldn't be so negative in The Netherlands'* (consultant, 31, medium wage). This applies even more in an international perspective,

according to this vice-president of a multinational (55, high wage): *‘from an international perspective I think The Netherlands are quite fair’*. To keep this system running, the representatives of profile 2 are strongly against any form of disobeying the law in case of a very low wage [34] (-1, -3, -2).

Combined, the two main elements described above lead to the conclusion that merit and the market, rather than equality, can be seen as the leading principles of justice in this profile, although it certainly does not mean that the representatives of profile 2 are completely satisfied with the current wage distribution.

5.5 Profile 3: Pure meritocracy

Statistically, profile 3 can be seen as more or less the opposite of profile 1 and related to profile 2. Although the representatives of profile 3, indeed, accept merit as a just principle for wage differences (as relatively opposed to profile 1 and in correspondence with profile 2), their notion of merit is distinct from the notion of the representatives of profile 2 in two ways. First, profile 3 is more strongly focused on performance [37] (-1, 2, 2) and effort than on the characteristics of the job. Still, the representatives believe that high responsibilities [20] (1, 2, 2) legitimize higher wages, but they dismiss the number of subordinates [26] (0, 1, -2), like this director/entrepreneur (36, high wage) *‘not only because it doesn’t matter how many subordinates one has, but also because we have given up on the belief that managing subordinates means you are the boss. We don’t need people who manage, but who show leadership, which means to facilitate people to develop and perform in the best possible way’*. The profile 3 respondents also dismiss physically/mentally hard work [4] (0, -2, 1) and high pressure [14] (0, 3, -1) as determinants for high wages. Not the characteristics of the job, but effort, performance and outcome are the most important elements in their notion of merit. Age [18] (-1, -2, -3) and tenure [15] (0, 0, 3) are therefore strongly seen as unfair wage determinants. Whether one is 20 years younger and serves the organization shorter than a colleague, if the performance is the same, the wage should be the same, according to this local government advisor (33, high wage): *‘I think it’s very important that, regardless of one’s age, people should be judged upon their capacity [...] and should be valued on the basis of their effort’*.

Moreover, performing well and putting much effort in the job could better be rewarded by flexible working hours, days off, compliments and appreciation than in money [24] (1, 0, 3): *‘in our society everything is expressed in terms of money, but I think that rewards should consist of personal appreciation, compliments, flexibility, guidance and space, that is the mix’*, *‘I loathe the idea that [the appreciation] should be expressed only in terms of money’* (local government advisor, 33, high wage). This dismissal of money as the most important way of rewarding corresponds with a more general focus on other elements in work than money (e.g. social relevance of the

work, performing well, personal growth, putting effort in the job and social respect and appreciation). A carpenter (60, low wage) said: *'what others earn doesn't interest me that much. I am preoccupied with my profession, and I do it because it interests me. Why should that be rewarded with high wages?'* Another respondent put more emphasis on personal development: *'an education was what I needed, more money wouldn't help at all. You have to be fulfilled by your own development'* (local government advisor, 33, high wage). A third respondent described this position more powerfully: *'money is a means, not an end'* (director/entrepreneur, 36, high wage).

In relation to the previous paragraph, the representatives of profile 3 think that the wage of many occupations is not consistent with the social respect and appreciation there is for these occupations [35] (2, 1, 3). For other occupations the respect and appreciation are too low according to the representatives of this profile, like this director/entrepreneur (36, high wage): *'in healthcare and education, I think some people have to carry an enormously heavy load, but all they get is small thanks for their pains'*. This means that these occupations do not get paid enough and that the social respect should be higher. For profile 3 respondents these two observations go hand in hand.

It can be concluded that the representatives of profile 3 are moderately dissatisfied with the current wages, especially for certain occupations where the wages do not match the social importance or appreciation. Mostly, these are lowly paid jobs [30], for example in healthcare and education. Respondents do not have many problems with high earners when they perform well [37] (-1, 2, 2): *'I don't mind large wage differences. When people do their job well or excellent they may be valued for that'* (local government advisor, 33, high wage). Furthermore, they do not judge the highly paid as earning their money at the expense of others [23] (2, -3, -2). Rather, the highly paid add something to society or the economy with their work, according to a director/entrepreneur (36, high wage): *'the amount of wealth isn't an issue of communicating vessels. When I get richer, you do not become, as a consequence, poorer. By working together well, we can both get richer'*.

Agreeing with the representatives of profile 2, the representatives of profile 3 do not think the government is the right actor to act if wage differences are too high. The government could make organizations perform less by intervening [33] (-1, 0, 2) and the government is certainly not legitimized to set a maximum wage for occupations [5] (1, -2, -3). Although these maximums should be free, the free market is not seen as the right and fair way to overcome the qualms of this profile. The respondents rather look at the transparency of wages: *'I think eventually it all comes back to break open the taboo on wages. That many people should know what others earn. And I think that when that is implemented the market is well able to determine who should get what'* (director/entrepreneur, 36, high wage). Also a certain organizational responsibility is mentioned: *'the responsibility of*

organizations is very important [...], I think it is more the responsibility of the organization than of the individual' (local government advisor, 33, high wage).

On the one hand representatives of profile 3 feel that wages should become more equal, because one's performance and effort simply cannot be 50 or 100 times bigger than someone else's as one respondent noted about a CEO who earned 11 million in a year (including bonuses): *I make 40.000 euros in one year, [that CEO] didn't do 100 times as much as me. Obviously that's impossible, since he too only has 24 hours in a day'* (carpenter, 60, low wage). On the other hand it would mean another life wage development than is common now. Solely focusing on performance and effort, would probably lead to lower wages as people grow older.

6 Discussion and conclusions

We started this paper with the public debate on just wage differences. In sections 2 and 3 we derived two conclusions from the different bodies of literature. First, there is consensus that a just society rewards according to merit and income differences should not be too high. Second, surveys suggest that this view of a just society is challenged when applied to the current and actual wage differences. We tried to understand how these two different views on the wage distribution can be combined, using Q methodology.

Q methodology enabled us to combine the participants' notions of justice with the participants' judgment of the current situation. Since we made use of Q methodology the expected outcome was a number of distinctive factors. Nevertheless, Q methodology is able to indicate similarities and consensus as well. Besides, the qualitative interviews enabled us to analyze the data at a deeper level, looking for ways in which the general consensus is connected to the discontent with the actual wage differences.

Our findings correspond with the political philosophical observation that the debate on just wage differences is embedded in a general consensus about the application of the merit principle within boundaries. All three profiles believe merit, in more or lesser degree, is a just principle of rewarding people for the work they do, and all three profiles set limits to the outliers at the top and the bottom of the wage distribution.

The nuances within this bigger picture, as Miller (1992) and Dulebohn and Martocchio (1998) try to lay bare, correspond to a certain degree with our results. In his meta analysis of empirical research Miller found that ability is of less importance than performance and effort. Our respondents in all three factors seem to share that point of view. It is not deemed fair to reward one's capacity as such; only when it is combined with performance and effort. The clusters of Dulebohn and Martocchio seemed to show similarities as well as differences. One could argue that their cluster 1 (positive effect for need, effort and performance, negative effect for responsibility) more or less corresponds with our profile 3 ('pure meritocracy'). Adherents of pure meritocracy believe in rewarding performance and, to a lesser degree, effort. However, need does not fit into that picture. Dulebohn and Martocchio's cluster 2, with its positive influence of responsibility and job performance on pay raise decisions, seems to resemble our profile 2 ('merit and the market'), although the focus on the pay raise *amount* does not correspond with the laissez-faire vocabulary of profile 2, accepting high wages to a higher level. In both profile 1 ('compassion and complaint') and cluster 3 of Dulebohn and Martocchio the height of the wages and pay raises play defining roles in the principles of justice. Too much is rapidly judged as unfair.

When comparing our results with the American Q study of Thomas and Baas (2013) we see remarkable similarities as well. Their egalitarian driven profile overlaps with our profile of compassion and complaint. These two patterns of thought have in common a sympathy for the very lowly paid and antipathy towards the highly paid of whom it is thought that they prosper at the expense of others. The profile of Thomas and Baas is, unlike our first profile, eager to look at and blame rightist (republican) policies for the growing inequalities and their discontent. Our merit and the market profile (2) resembles their profile that believes in the fairness of inequality. The profile, which Thomas and Baas called ‘fair play’ (as opposed to ‘fair shares’), sees inequality as inevitable. Our profile 2 would go along with this reasoning, claiming it is just the way it is. However our third profile seems to differ somewhat from Thomas and Baas’s third pattern. We found a third profile that is more concerned with effort and performance, contributing to society, and that advocates to add more value to societal appreciation than to money. In this sense the participants of our third profile are more involved in their community than the individualistic optimists of Thomas and Baas. Nevertheless, the two profiles agree on rewarding performance and effort and have little problems with high rewards. At the same time they see several professions being underpaid and getting too little recognition, whether in terms of money or appreciation. The main difference between these profiles is the focus on the individual (in the case of Thomas and Baas) and the ultimately communitarian or societal motivations in our profile of pure meritocracy.

The puzzle we described was to find patterns of thought that could link the consensus on a just wage distribution with the figures we provided from surveys on satisfaction with the current wage differences. We found three profiles that could provide this link on three main topics. The first topic is the contrast between preferences for more equality (profile 1) and preferences for a differentiation within the wage distribution (profiles 2 and 3). Although the three profiles agree on a merit based distribution within boundaries, for one pattern of thought these boundaries have been passed severely, for others only very few excessive wages have crossed these limits of the acceptable. Second, there is a contrast between combativeness to change the world (profile 1 and 3) and a more laissez-faire attitude (profile 2). When studying dissatisfaction with the current wage distribution one should have a close look at profile 1 and 3 what characterizes this discontent. The third topic is the contrast between the focus on money (profile 1 and 2) and the focus on (societal) appreciation and recognition of quality (profile 3). Views on a just wage distribution and its application to the actual situation for profiles 1 and 2 is mostly defined in terms of money. The main problem with the current wage distribution for profile 3 is that it is too much defined in terms of money and not enough attention is

paid to contributions to society and societal appreciation.

Remarkably, one major contrast in the traditional left right dimension mentioned earlier, is only slightly touched upon by the three profiles. Their views on the market and the state (fairness, responsibility) do not seem to contrast as much as the contrasts described above. Although profile 2 is a rather strong ‘believer’ in the mechanism of supply and demand, profile 1 and certainly profile 3 are no great advocates of state intervention either. Interestingly, when we look at the political preferences of the representatives of our profiles (see appendix 1) a great diversity exists for every profile. In comparison, the composition of Thomas and Baas’ first profile was entirely liberal democratic, while the major part of their second profile claimed to be conservative republican. This hints at a more traditional left right dimension in American opinions on wage differences and more room for possible other political dimensions in our research.

Our findings suggest that the notion of merit, mainly represented by profile 3, and the thin contrast between the state and the market shed a new light on the left right dimension, moving it away from the traditional state-market continuum toward by the desired outcomes of the merit based wage distribution. The debate on income moderation might continue in terms of merit as this is for all profiles an acceptable criterion, although they have different ideas on what merit consists of. For some the meritocratic society has been carried too far resulting in unacceptable wage differences between the talented/fortunate and the untalented/unfortunate. For others the limits of the tolerable have not yet been crossed (except for some excesses) and the market is still an acceptable and fair mechanism to reward merit. Yet others feel that meritocratic society is still to be perfected, and it can be as long as it maintains a communitarian and non-materialistic element.

Limitations

The main limitation of Q research is that although it contains a quantitative element, the results have a strong qualitative character. It means that we cannot argue that one profile is represented stronger in society than another profile. This study can be used as exploration for a larger survey to find how strongly each profile is represented in society. Further, we acknowledge that altering wage differences and the wage distribution is in many ways more complex than it might have appeared in this paper or in our interviews. What we tried was to think and let others think about gross wage differences without embedding it too much in the institutional framework of collective employment agreements, productivity, social security, taxes and the invisible hand of the market. Nevertheless, people inevitably think within normal basic frameworks which

we did not discourage. The participants in this research should think of just wage differences without too many obstacles, while maintaining a connection with the reality or their perceptions of reality. In doing this we could not totally prevent that participants sometimes intertwined notions of justice of (gross) wage differences and their notions of justice of the (net) income distribution (e.g. including tax). This is understandable since the two are strongly related.

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Appendix 1: P set composition

No.	Sex	Age	Occupation	Wage ^I	Education ^{II}	Political preference	Religion	Public or private
1	F	55	Website content employee	Medium	Low	Liberal	None	Private
2	F	26	Graphic designer	Low	High	Social-liberal	None	Private
3	M	27	Teacher	Medium	High	Social-democrat	None	Public
4	F	46	Local government advisor	High	High	Progressive	Catholic	Public
5	F	33	Local government advisor	High	High	Liberal	None	Public
6	M	38	Local gov. team coordinator	High	High	Social-liberal	None	Public
7	M	38	Metal worker	Medium	Medium	Liberal	None	Private
8	F	24	High school janitor	Low	Medium	Progressive	None	Public
9	M	31	Consultant	Medium	High	Social-liberal	Protestant	Private
10	M	32	Plumber	Medium	Medium	Nationalist	None	Hybrid
11	F	30	Private banker	Medium	High	Social-liberal	None	Private
12	F	45	Teacher	Medium	High	Social-democrat	None	Public
13	M	54	HR services manager	High	High	Liberal	None	Private
14	M	43	Private banker	High	High	Social-liberal	Catholic	Private
15	M	49	Regional bank board president	High	High	Liberal	None	Private
16	M	48	Artist	Low	Medium	Left	None	Private
17	F	55	Vice president multinational	High	High	Non	Oecumenical	Private
18	F	48	Nurse specialist	Medium	High	Progressive	None	Hybrid
19	F	43	Nurse	Medium	Medium	Confessional	Protestant	Hybrid
20	M	57	Architect/entrepreneur	High	High	Social-democrat	None	Private
21	M	60	Carpenter	Low	Low	Social-democrat	None	Private
22	M	56	Expert district police officers	Medium	Low	Social-liberal	None	Public
23	F	28	Police officer in training	Low	High	Left	None	Public
24	M	60	Police project manager	High	High	Confessional	Protestant	Public
25	F	30	Local gov. staff member	Medium	High	Left	None	Public
26	M	62	Nurse	Medium	Medium	Confessional	Protestant	Hybrid
27	F	59	Student individual health-care	Low	High	Socialist	Protestant	Hybrid
28	M	60	NGO-director	High	High	Non	None	Hybrid
29	F	48	Citizenship course teacher	Low	High	Progressive	Spiritual	Hybrid
30	M	56	Unemployed/physically unfit	Low	High	Left	Jewish	-
31	M	61	Medical specialist	High	High	Social-liberal	None	Hybrid
32	M	62	Carpenter	Medium	Low	Nationalist	None	Private
33	M	36	Director/entrepreneur	High	High	Non	Bahai	Private
34	F	56	Medical specialist	High	High	Social-democrat	None	Hybrid
35	M	54	Medical specialist	High	High	Liberal	None	Hybrid

*I*All wages are gross year incomes based on a full time contract, without bonuses. *Low*= <30,000 euro, *medium*= 30,000-50,000 and *high*= >50,000.

*II**Low*=only high school and lower professional education, *medium*= middle professional education, *high*=higher vocational education and academic education.

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ISSN print 1570-3185

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