

The Inequality Mirror: Using a Student Survey to Teach Social Stratification

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Abstract

Social inequality is a central theme in sociology study plans (both in research and education), but it is often one of the most difficult topics to teach. This article presents an innovative student-centered strategy for teaching social inequality that uses a survey to collect data on students' socioeconomic characteristics and perceptions of inequality. To stimulate reflection and discussion on the social mechanisms that reproduce inequality, this information is subsequently presented to them in conjunction with a comparative analysis to general population data. The exercise seeks to make social inequality less abstract for students by involving them in the research process and by using data relative to their own lives and families. Ultimately, the strategy boosts students' sociological imagination and their capacity for critical thinking by encouraging them to see the connections between individual biographies and broader social forces.

Keywords

inequality, social stratification, sociological imagination, cultural capital, classroom-based exercises.

Inequality and social stratification occupy a central position in sociology study plans and in introductory courses to the discipline. However, despite the importance of inequality and stratification to social dynamics and personal biographies, the teaching of this topic can often seem overly abstract and far removed from students' day-to-day lives. On the one hand, this has a lot to do with the difficulty of making sense of increasingly abundant and detailed data and the problem of how to make such data relatable to students. On the other hand, a significant part of the problem also pertains to the fact that the principal theories of inequality often appear to stand in opposition to students' own preconceived beliefs that individuals have the power to overcome social forces (Davis 1992; Garoutte and Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Goldsmith 2006).

In this article, we present a teaching strategy designed to address these difficulties, which is based on a survey that gathers information on students' lives and a classroom-based discussion of the

results. The objective is to connect concepts and phenomena of inequality, specifically economic and cultural inequality, to students' day-to-day reality so that they develop a fuller understanding of the underlying issues and their implications.

Specifically, the teaching strategy aims to facilitate the process of learning about inequality by confronting students with their own (mis)perceptions and the differences between their personal situation and the broader reality of the society that they live in. The purpose is not only to facilitate the learning of particular facts and sociological concepts but

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also to encourage critical reflection on the social processes that shape their life trajectories, which are often advantageous compared to other social groups. In other words, the strategy attempts to develop their sociological imagination by helping them to grasp how social forces and personal biographies are interconnected. To this end, the technique was designed to be carried out in three steps. First, to gather information on students' perceptions of inequality and their personal (or family) circumstances, we carried out a survey of participating students during class. Second, these data were analyzed and compared to general population data from other sources. Finally, the results of these comparisons were used in the classroom as the basis of an in-depth discussion on the social processes that were in play and how this related to students' own social positions.

The purpose of this teaching note is to explain our motivation for developing the strategy, the design process, our experience of applying the technique, and contemplating its replication in other contexts. The rest of the article is divided into four parts. To start, we provide a brief overview of the general question of (mis)perceptions of inequality and the impact this has at a didactic level. In the second section, the project design and the questionnaire are discussed. Subsequently, we discuss some of the more telling results of the survey that were used during classroom discussions, the themes they addressed, and the discussions they provoked. To finish, we report the results of an assessment of the exercise based on students' feedback and some reflections aimed at making improvements for future applications.

(MIS)PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

As suggested previously, despite the centrality of inequality in sociology, teaching this subject can be challenging because of the difficulty of making abstract data meaningful and relatable to students (McCammon 1999). With certain frequency, teaching can be further complicated by some students' responses when presented with sociological data on inequality because they often demonstrate resistance, paralysis, or even anger at the ideas (Davis 1992; Kleinman and Copp 2009). In this respect, widespread meritocratic ideology can be seen as the opposite of the sociological imagination because it attributes responsibility for success and

failure to the individual while losing sight of the social forces that influence their journey.

Sociological investigation has excelled at uncovering some of the mechanisms that (re)produce social inequality and that tend to go unnoticed. Be it empirically grounded theories on the familial transfer of cultural capital and the formation of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) or the effects of social class on child-rearing and individuals' future trajectories (Lareau 2003), among many others, sociological research undermines the belief that personal success comes uniquely from personal effort. However, meritocratic ideology, often embedded in common-sense knowledge, provides a simple and intuitive framework for interpreting reality such that in the classroom students tend to offer individualizing explanations for social phenomena (Renzulli, Aldrich, and Reynolds 2003), which impedes them from recognizing the impact of inequality (Kleinman and Copp 2009). These dispositions are often magnified by the social distance born of privilege and limited experience of diversity (Hoop 2009). Frequently, this vision of the world is supported by personal stories, but as the aphorism goes: "The plural of anecdote is not data."

That these cognitive biases are not exclusive to university students is clear from a recent line of research that centers on ideological representations and cognitive misperceptions of inequality and its effect on social behavior (Janmaat 2013; Loughnan et al. 2011; McCall 2013). To illustrate, it is known that people, in general, tend to underestimate the level of wealth inequality (Norton and Ariely 2011) or that they tend to think that they are situated in intermediary positions of income distribution (Fernández-Albertos and Kuo 2015). This kind of "stratification innumeracy"¹ often affects a diverse range of social behaviors and processes, such as support for specific public policies or the parallel growth of income inequality and the popular belief in meritocracy (Mijis 2021).

To overcome these difficulties and obstacles, various exercises, games, and experiments have been developed to aid the teaching of inequality. One of the most celebrated is Jan Pen's Income Parade: a mental experiment, conducted over the period of an hour, that requires participants to imagine that 100 different social groups (represented as individuals) have a height proportional to their income and to arrange them from lowest to greatest (Rendueles 2017). Similarly, Errante, Godwin, and Buffington's (2019) technique involves teaching students to calculate the income gap between CEOs and average workers and then to contrast this with

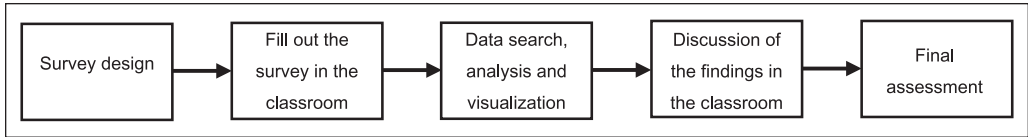


Figure 1. The five steps of the teaching strategy.

what they think the ideal ratio should be. Other teaching exercises rely on experiential and active learning techniques. Well-known examples include the “hunger banquets” technique (Harris, Harris, and Fondren 2015), the “stratification puzzle” (Wills, Brewster, and Fulkerson 2005), and a role-play that requires students to imagine themselves as extraterrestrials that must grasp how inequality is reproduced (Parrotta and Rusche 2011). The didactic power of games has also been harnessed. Some popular methods include the Star Power simulation (Prince, Kozimor-King, and Steele 2015), a game of Monopoly rigged to reflect the structural nature of inequality (Coghlan and Huggins 2004), a stratification game designed to demonstrate the arbitrariness of inequality (Andrews 2013), and another that requires participants to draw with different sized crayons to see how the quality of the resource reflects the image outcome (Wetcher-Hendricks and Luquet 2010). Finally, university students’ own biographical circumstances have been used as a basis for teaching inequality. One exercise, designed by Biggert (2020), uses college admissions as a tool to explore income inequality and the role of higher education in its (re)production. Chan’s (2020) technique requires students to interview some of their classmates to see how students of different races and/or genders have different experiences of university. Similarly, other authors have drawn on students’ biographical circumstances to exercise and develop their sociological imaginations (Hoop 2009; Kebede 2009).

The strategy that we have developed follows the aforementioned approaches in the sense that we use real data and the method is experiential and demands active learning, has a play-based dimension, and draws on students’ own lives and experiences of inequality in the setting of the university. The main aspect of the technique that distinguishes it from other methods is the use of a survey to collect real data on students’ perceptions of inequality and a subsequent comparison to real general population data, which is presented in class and forms the basis of a discussion on economic and cultural inequality.

In this sense, our teaching strategy has a double objective: first, to confront students with some frequent misperceptions about the facts of inequality and to point out the sociological effects that they can have, and second, to use some elements of their personal biographies (family income, number of books in the home) as a basis to encourage the development of their sociological imaginations and to help them grasp the processes that generate inequality. Placing students at the center of the exercise facilitates reflection on inequality by connecting personal experience with longer-term social processes, for example, by contemplating how their achievements (getting into university) and attitudes (asking a professor to increase a grade) could be related to their family’s economic and cultural capital. Through this process, the foundation is laid for a reflection on the degree to which students’ social situation depends on social processes beyond their control. The use of a questionnaire involves students in data collection and also makes statistical analysis and visual presentation more relatable. This also has the added benefit of introducing them to social research methods.

METHOD: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TEACHING STRATEGY

The project was developed and implemented over five principal phases, including: survey design, survey fieldwork, analysis of the survey data and comparative analysis to general population data, presentation of the results and a classroom discussion, and postexercise questionnaire to generate student feedback (see Figure 1). The project was implemented in two waves during the first and second semesters of the 2019–2020 academic year.²

Description of the Participating Students and Faculty

The project was developed by a group of seven sociology professors at the Complutense University

of Madrid, one of the oldest public universities in Spain and also its largest (71,000 students).³ A total of 600 students enrolled in various social science degree courses that were taking Introduction to Sociology or Research Methods with at least one of the seven participating professors took part in the exercise.⁴ Enrollment in these subjects is compulsory for first- and second-year students in these degree courses, and as such, there are no prerequisites for access. Class sizes varied from 40 to 80 students. Further information on the composition of the participating students, such as the degree they were taking, nationality, and gender, is detailed in Note 3.

Survey Design and Fieldwork

The questionnaire was prepared over the course of 2 months through four meetings of the participating professors. A key issue in the development of the instrument was comparability between the student data and national data sets or other relevant information. For this reason, we first had to identify appropriate measures. The majority of the measures employed were standard and widely used methods for measuring social stratification that are included in the standard curriculum. In our judgment, they also are effective at a teaching level for introductory courses. To ensure comparability to the general population data, we replicated the question wording and response options in the questionnaire. In this respect, we should point out that the strategy is highly flexible, and the wording of questions can be modified on the basis of the availability of data or the themes that the teaching strategy wishes to address. The final survey instrument contained 22 questions. In the second wave of sampling, some minor adjustments were made to two questions, and two other questions were added, a point we return to in a moment. All survey variables are presented in Table 1, and the complete questionnaire is available from the authors on request.

The survey was implemented during class. Prior to completing the questionnaire, either in the same class or a previous one, the students were explained key aspects of the syllabus related to inequality that were necessary to understand and respond to the questionnaire, such as the difference between income and wealth and the use of distribution quintiles or deciles as indicators. The questionnaire was anonymous (no identifying information was collected or required to participate) and took about 15 minutes to complete. Participants responded during class using a free

online application (Limesurvey) that they could access on their laptops or smartphones through a link provided by the professor. Almost all students in the seven participating courses took part in the exercise: 366 students in the first semester and 234 in the second. There was a slightly lower participation rate during the second wave because of student absences during the COVID pandemic, when classes moved to online platforms.

There are some important observations and learning points in relation to the implementation of the questionnaire, which have we already mentioned. Although it worked very well overall, we encountered a number of issues that could be improved for future applications. In particular, despite pre-preparing students, many found it difficult to get a full grasp of wealth distribution quintiles, which led to some inconsistency in responses. We found a similar problem with net household income. Because of this, we made adjustments to the questionnaire in the second wave, such as providing examples of average annual income for two families based on differing types of employment. Overall, we feel that because the purpose of the exercise is didactic and not the collection of statistically reliable and publishable data, such small inconsistencies do not greatly impact the effectiveness of the tool in demonstrating differences (or not) between students' families and the general population. We would also advise that students are well prepared beforehand to acquire family income data because many will not be aware of this information. Placing a strong emphasis on the anonymous nature of the study is also recommended to ensure candor.

Analysis of the Survey Data and Comparison to National Data Sets

Once the questionnaire was completed by all participating groups, the data were analyzed and compared to the general population data (see Table 1). Subsequently, we developed the graphs to visualize the comparisons and for use in class (see Figures 2–9).

Design of the Presentations and Classroom Discussions

A 90-minute session was dedicated to presenting the results and the subsequent discussion with students. Following the presentation of the results, the discussion was initiated by the professor using open-ended prompts, such as “What do you think

Table 1. Topics of the Questionnaire, Data Sources, and Discussion Questions.

Topics	Sources for data in Spain	Sources for data in the United States	Discussion questions
Perception of wealth distribution (the percentage of wealth held by each quintile)	Global Wealth Report, published by the Credit Suisse Research Institute	Global Wealth Report, published by the Credit Suisse Research Institute	How are these biased beliefs formed? What effects could these misperceptions have on social beliefs, preferences, and behaviors?
Preferences for wealth distribution (what percentage should be in each quintile in a just society)	National Statistics Institute	U.S. Census Bureau	What role has your family's income level played in your personal life story (e.g., getting into university)? Why do people believe they are in intermediate positions rather than at the extremes of income distribution? What effects could this have on social beliefs, preferences, and behaviors?
Annual net family household income (weighted by size) and subjective self-location on the income distribution scale (in deciles) based on family income level			
Family occupational class	Centre for Sociological Research	U.S. Census Bureau	What role has your family's occupational class played in your opportunities and personal life story (e.g., getting into university or choosing an education)?
Parents' educational level	Centre for Sociological Research	OECD: Survey of Adult Skills	How has your family's cultural capital influenced your opportunities and personal life story?
Number of paper books in the respondent's family home			How important is cultural capital compared to economic capital (for achievements such as getting into university)? Do you think cultural capital has influenced your choice of career?
Frequency that respondents talk to their family about politics	Centre for Sociological Research	Pew Research Center	How does the availability of economic and cultural resources influence political interest and participation?
Participation in socio-political activities			
Perception of the percentage of the general population that engage in the same socio-political activities	European Social Survey	World Values Survey	What are the possible effects of misperception of the population's political participation? Could it lead to biases when contemplating political reality?
Participation in socio-political activities and perception of the percentage of the general population that engage in the same socio-political activities			
Willingness of the respondent to ask a professor to increase their grade from a B+ to an A	No comparison	No comparison	What kind of mechanisms can explain this correlation (disposition to ask, information, entitlement, etc.)? To what extent can such phenomena reproduce or amplify inequality in the educational system?
Other sociodemographic data: nationality, age, gender, city of origin			

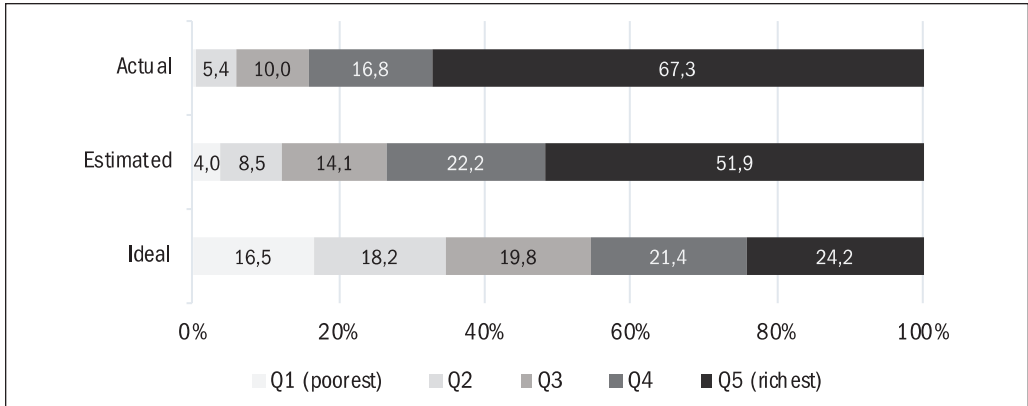


Figure 2. Actual compared to estimated and ideal wealth distribution.

Source: Project Survey and Global Wealth Databook del Credit Suisse (2019).

about the results?” or “What do you think might cause or explain the results?” In this respect, the objective was to stimulate “problem posing” rather than the “banking” (Freire 1993) of predetermined knowledge. This active engagement with the research results was designed to encourage the development of ideas and hypotheses about the social processes in play and the mechanisms that could explain the results. In cases where the discussion was stalling or the students were having difficulty, the professors used more directed prompts. Table 1 details some of the prompts/questions that were used by the professors, which had been agreed beforehand.

Postexercise Evaluation (Student Feedback)

To gather feedback from the students on the usefulness of the strategy as a learning process and students’ perceptions of its benefits, we carried out a postexercise survey with a subgroup of students. The questionnaire contained some closed-end rating scale type questions to measure overall evaluations of the exercise, their interest in the concepts presented, and their degree of surprise at the results and two open-ended questions. This survey was not intended to be a systematic analysis of the 600 participating students and was complicated by the disruptions caused by COVID pandemic because all classes were taking place online. For this reason, the postexercise survey, which was anonymous and administered online, was conducted with only two groups and resulted in 66 completed responses. So, although the response rate was high within the two

groups, this sample is not representative of all participating students. Although this clearly introduces the possibility of bias, based on observations of students’ spontaneous and informal reactions during class, we believe it to be broadly indicative of students’ experiences with the strategy.

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS AND CLASSROOM DISCUSSION: THE INEQUALITY MIRROR

At an overall level, it was apparent that for most of the students, the results of the survey were astounding and clearly encouraged reflection on their own social position through the inequality mirror and therefore to engage in processes of critical thinking that develop their sociological imagination. This was evident in the animated discussions following the presentation of the results.

Specifically, we started the classroom discussion by focusing on wealth distribution (see Figure 2). As happened in the experiment conducted by Norton and Ariely (2011), the students tended to underestimate the magnitude of inequality in wealth distribution. One of the questions for the students to consider was how to explain this cognitive misperception (the formation of this belief) and the effects that it could have on behavior such as voting and support for specific public policies.

Subsequently, we presented students’ families’ actual household income position (by deciles) compared to the position that they thought they occupied (Figure 3). Following the same approach,

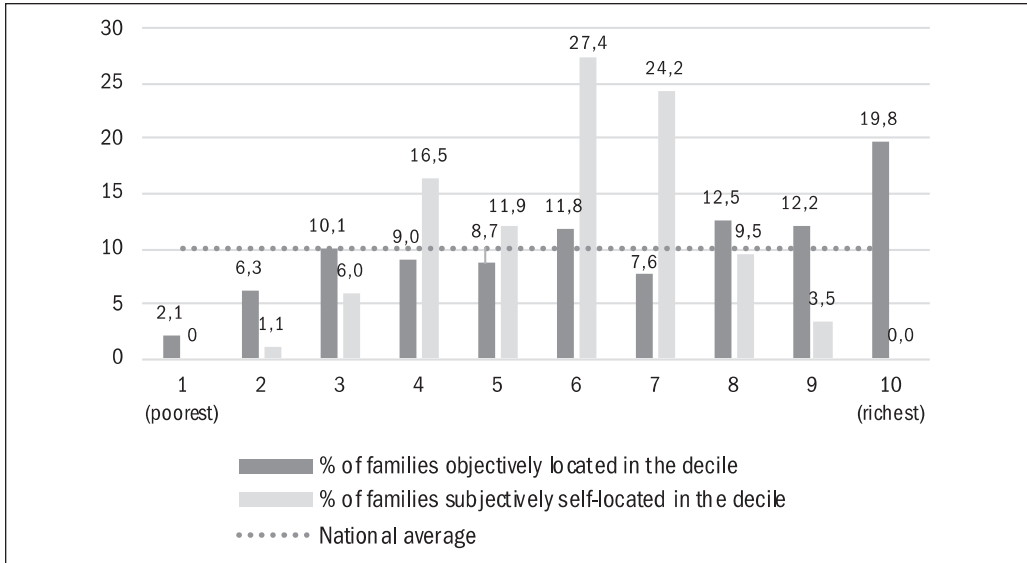


Figure 3. Actual versus perceived family social position based on household income.
 Source: Project Survey and Life Conditions Survey of the National Institute of Statistics (2019).

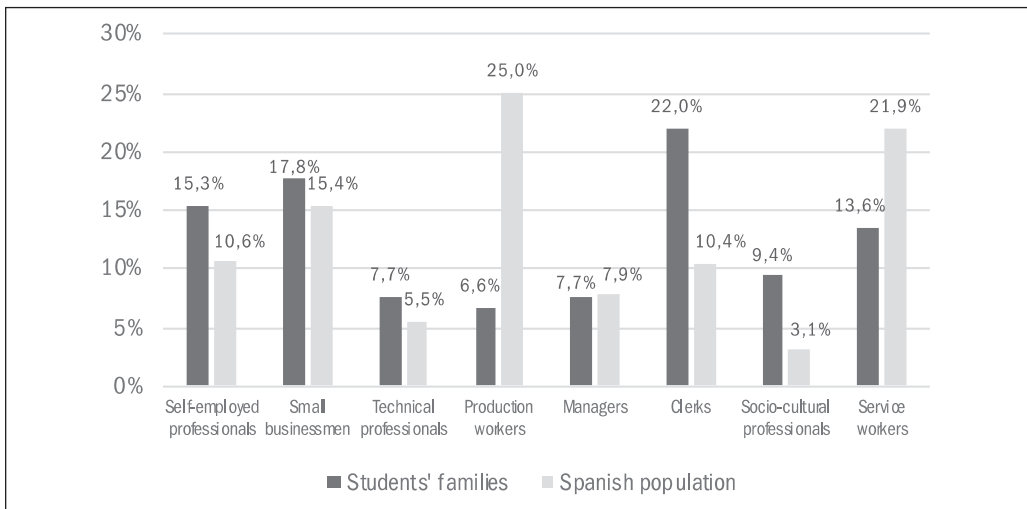


Figure 4. Population occupational class compared to students' families.
 Source: Project survey and Centre for Sociological Research Study No. 2905.
 Note: For the Oesch's class schema, see: <https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts/>.

using Oesch's (2006) class schema, students were then shown the percentage of their families that belonged to each occupational class compared to the percentages in the general population (Figure 4). As expected, their families were overrepresented in high-income deciles and middle-class occupations, especially those employed as professionals or

office clerks. However, in the case of income, the students tended to perceive that their families occupied positions that were closer to the middle of household income distribution; to illustrate, 27.4 percent believed that their families were in the sixth decile, when in reality, it was only 11.8 percent. Almost none of them thought that their

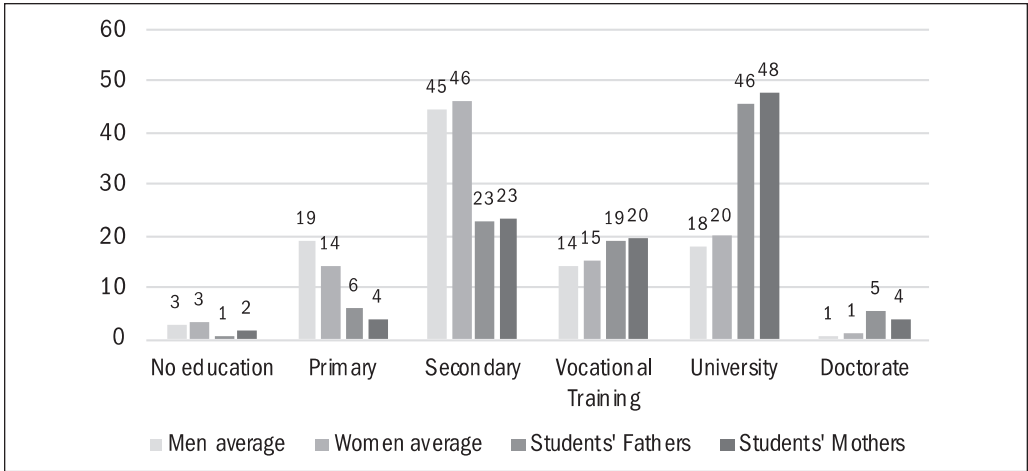


Figure 5. Actual population educational level compared to students' families.
 Source: Project Survey and Centre for Sociological Research Study No. 3248.
 Note: The national average refers to a sample of people of a similar age (48–62) to students' parents.

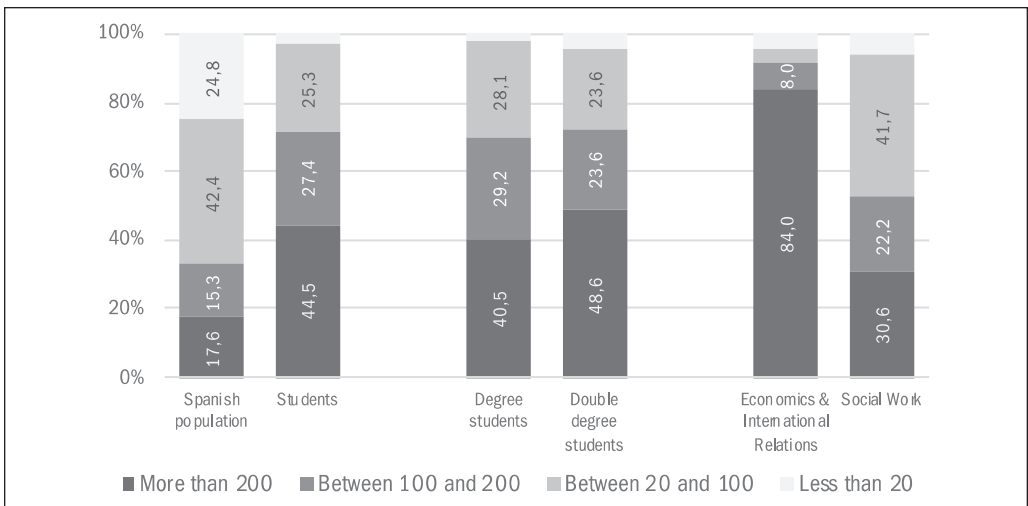


Figure 6. Number of paper books in the respondent's family home.
 Source: Project Survey and Centre for Sociological Research Study No. 3149.

families occupied the richest income decile despite the fact that one in five of students' families belonged to that category. In this case, one of the topics that we asked the class to discuss was the role that income and class had played in their trajectories as students and access to university. Another topic of discussion centered on the possible causes and effects of the (mis)perception that led them to believe that they were in a more disadvantaged position than reality.

The position of relative advantage that most students' families occupied was confirmed when we presented data on two indicators of cultural capital: parents' educational level and the number of books in the family home (see Figures 5 and 6). In both indicators, the cultural capital of students' households was greater than the general population. This raised a similar question to the previous one: To what degree does this factor favor access to university, and how does it contribute to the

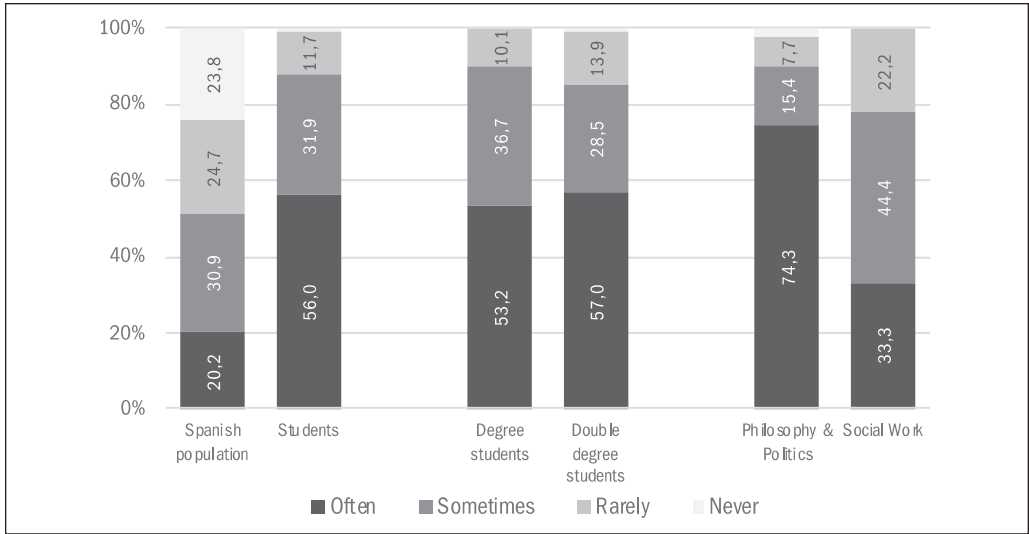


Figure 7. Frequency of talking about politics with family members.
 Source: Project Survey and Centre for Sociological Research Study No. 3149.

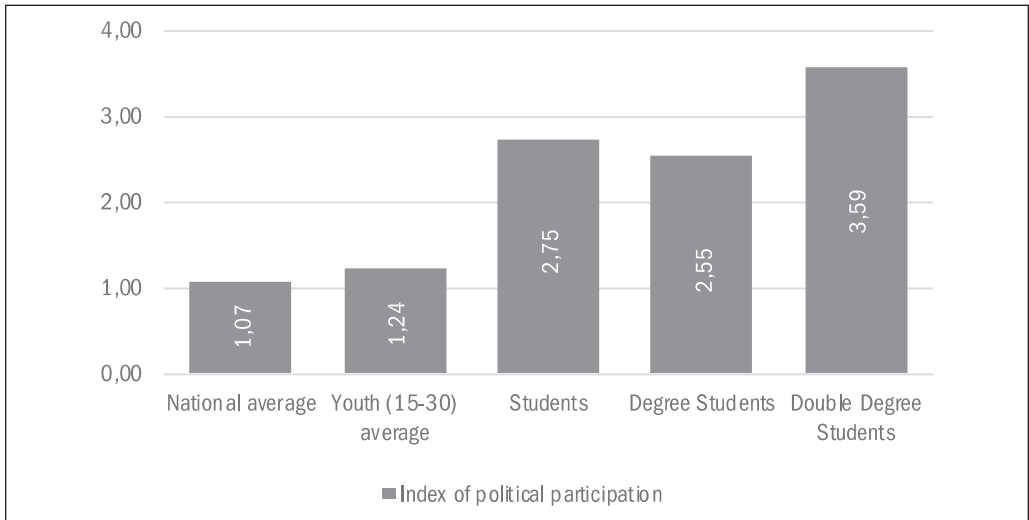


Figure 8. Rates of students' political participation compared to national averages.
 Source: Project Survey and European Social Survey (2007).

Note: The index computes the total number of political actions taken by respondents, including contacting a politician; working in a political party, working in any other association; taking part in a lawful public demonstration; boycotting certain products; and publishing or sharing something about politics on the Internet.

reproduction of inequality and its relative importance to economic capital?

Furthermore, in the case of both measures, differences were also apparent within the sample of students, as opposed to just between students' families and the general population. Students' cultural

capital varied according to the degree course they were taking (the data include students from the economics and international relations and social work degree courses) and was particularly evident among those that were doing double degrees.⁵ These results were especially relevant because it

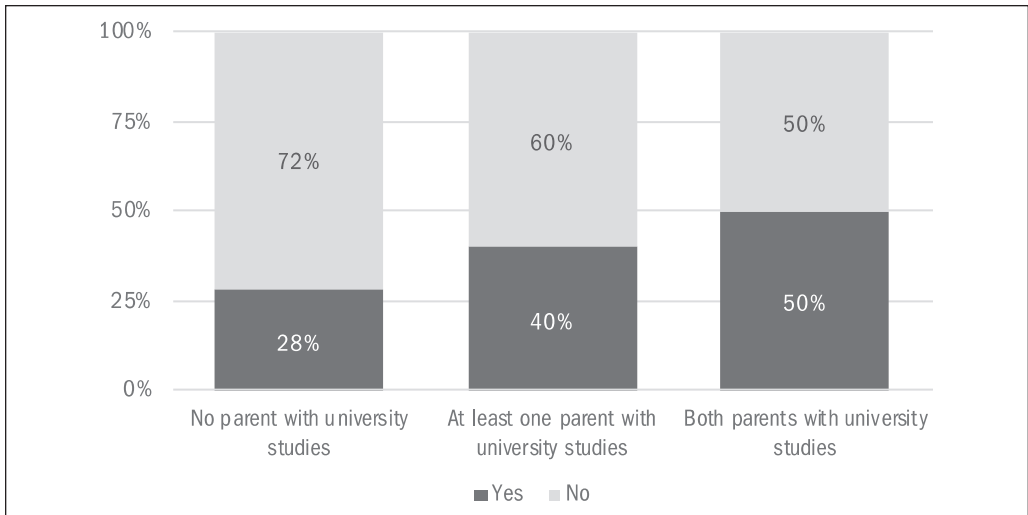


Figure 9. Willingness to ask a professor to change a grade from a B+ to an A, by parent's education level.

Source: Project survey.

Note: $R = .2$; $p < .1$.

permitted us to confront the students with the following question: To what degree is an apparently personal decision, such as choosing a career, conditioned by the economic and cultural capital of a family? It also provoked a discussion on the mechanisms and causes that could influence this correlation.

In the following, we present some other striking results on students' behavior that illustrate the effects of inequality: frequency of talking about politics with family members and the degree of participation in political activities (see Figures 7 and 8). As expected, given their status as social science students, in both cases their engagement in these activities was far higher than the general population for their age range. But the results also suggest that this form of family-based transmission of cultural capital could also operate as an exogenous factor in access to university or choice of degree or that greater political engagement is mainly due to students' relatively privileged social status. In fact, it is worth pointing out that participation in political activity was greater among students taking double degrees.

It was also interesting to observe misperceptions regarding political participation. In general, the students believed that people were more involved in politics than is actually the case. This suggests that students inhabit a kind of bubble that

biases their perception of the relationship between political participation and inequality.

Finally, we presented results on students' willingness to ask a professor to increase a grade from a B+ to an A. This question is interesting because it concerns an act that is, at first glance, trivial and personal. However, students' disposition to attempt to acquire an advantage by improving their academic grades also exposes the existence of a habitus of self-confidence and ambition acquired within their families. The analysis found a small positive association between parents' educational level and students' willingness to ask for an increase in their grade, which is similar to the results found by Jessica Calarco, from whom we took the question wording.⁶ Again, the most interesting aspect of the classroom discussion was the debate around the social mechanisms that make such an act possible. The discussion provoked students to ask questions such as: Does everyone know that they can request an increase in their grade? Does everyone feel equally entitled to make such a request? Does everyone give it the same importance? Are some students just used to getting what they ask for? As a learning exercise, the most important aspect was not to determine a correct answer but to stimulate reflection and discussion and to enhance students' capacity to formulate explanations based on different causal mechanisms.

To summarize, the comparative analysis of the survey results provided two types of findings that were interesting for the students: first, their relative misperception of inequality, in particular their social position in relation to household income, and second, their relatively well-off position in terms of economic and cultural capital compared to the general population. Nevertheless, from the perspective of teaching sociology, the most interesting aspect of the exercise was using these comparative data as points of departure for reflecting on and discussing the processes that underscore these misperceptions and so to develop students' capacity to think critically.

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND DISCUSSION

According to Kaufman (1997:309), one of the primary tasks of the sociology professor is "to encourage students to develop a critical awareness of how their lives are influenced by the society in which they live." Predicated on the principles of active learning, the didactic strategy we have presented aims to facilitate the teaching of social inequality on the basis of students' own experience and how their social situation, behaviors, and attitudes are shaped by broader social forces.

In terms of students' opinions on the effectiveness of the strategy as a means to understand inequality, the results were very positive: On a semantic differential scale from 1 (not at all interesting) to 5 (very interesting), 23 percent rated the exercise as a 4 and 76 percent as a 5. The results were similar, although not quite so high, when we asked them to rate how surprised they were by the contrast between their perceptions and the reality of social inequality on a scale from not at all surprised (1) to very surprised (5): 24 percent responded 3 out of 5, 44 percent responded 4 out of 5, and 30 percent responded 5 out of 5. Finally, 97 percent responded positively when asked if they had found the exercise useful as a way to develop their sociological imagination.

Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of the student feedback was from the two open-ended questions, which asked students to state which part of the exercise they found most interesting and if it had any impact on their way of seeing inequality. At an overall level, the main message was that grounding the exercise in students' personal situations motivated their involvement and increased their curiosity. Many of the students highlighted

the novelty of the exercise and its dynamism, practicality, and enjoyment: "[It was a] different type of exercise and dynamic in the way that it relates the content of the subject by making it interesting and accessible"; "it was very practical and fun and educational and it has helped me to develop a more critical and realistic way of thinking about inequality (and it tends to come up constantly in conversations and discussions)."

Other students valued "open participation," "being part of the study as an interviewee," "being involved in the development of a sociological study," and "the classroom discussions." In relation to the presentation in class, the use of real data and graphics was valued positively: "[S]eeing the reality [of inequality] displayed on graphs and with percentages has a really big impact"; "before seeing it represented on the graphs I didn't see the reality of existing inequalities as something that was so severe."

For the students, many of the results were surprising, which helped to dismantle some of their preconceptions. In fact, during subsequent classes, a number of students said that they had told family members about the exercise and that they had also received skeptical responses, for example, in relation to their families' position in terms of average household income. Some students remarked that the exercise served as a way to see the world from the perspective of others: "in some ways it opens your eyes," "[seeing] the difference between our perception and our reality," "[seeing] things from other people's point of view and their experiences." Others added a dimension of self-reflection on their own social position and that of their families, commenting that it helped "to visualize the reality of our own position" or that the exercise opened up "the possibility of having a much more realistic perspective of the reality of our own lives (which we don't realize)." Many students focused on how surprised they were by income levels: "[I]t was surprising that the income level of students' families was much greater than what I expected"; "[seeing] what we thought was middle-class was really in the seventh or eighth decile [of wealth distribution]." As another student summed up: "[I]t helped to make me aware of the reality of my socio-economic situation and gave me a different understanding of it." These reflections make it clear, as Goldsmith (2006) argues, that the student-centered model of learning can be very effective for challenging ideological prejudices and overcoming students' cognitive resistances.

The feedback also shows how the exercise stimulated reflection, for example, on the effects that a family's economic and educational level can have on access to university, which in many cases led to significant surprise about how deterministic this was. In their responses, the students made statements such as: "It's very interesting that in spite of having the possibility of choosing any course at all in a public university, the choice of career depends largely on a family's economic and educational level"; "I was very surprised to see the economic level of university students' families, [and to discover] that even today students from the lowest classes are less present in universities." However, the strategy also allowed them see the more subtle connections between other factors (e.g., cultural capital) and their own career choices: "[I]t was really interesting to see the relationship between the number of books in a house or the frequency that families talk about politics and the choice of a degree"; "understanding that our career choice probably wasn't our own decision, but was actually influenced by our direct social environment." In summary, the exercise helped them to grasp the connection between individual biographies (in this case their own) and the social processes that surround them.

The majority of students highlighted that the exercise had changed their way of seeing inequality: "For sure it has changed my way of thinking... I've realized that I wasn't fully aware of how immersed we are in social inequality in our day-to-day lives"; "it has made me see that inequality is much greater than I thought"; "how untrue [the idea of] meritocracy is"; "I thought that inequality wasn't so drastic and that most people were middle-class." Another student said that mostly it "reaffirms their understanding that accomplishments are not in the least based on individual merits." The following testimony could serve as a general summary of the benefits of the exercise: "being able to see the great inequality that exists in a more realistic way." The following final comments illustrate how students' perception of their own situation has changed: "[N]ow I have a greater appreciation for how lucky I am to belong to a family with a good income"; "it has made me more conscious of my how privileged I am socioeconomically and the great differences in the situations of some of my classmates compared to others."

These final testimonies suggest that the analysis of the data and the discussion around the processes of inequality can be beneficial for ethical reflection on what types of inequalities are just and to what

point people are responsible for their own fate. In a way, the data help to question the hegemony of meritocratic ideology. Additionally, many students seem to find it enriching to gain a broader and more balanced perspective of the world and the relative advantages that they enjoy even in the apparently meritocratic setting of the university.

In terms of future applications, it should be stressed that the exercise is open to a wide range of innovations and modifications, particularly for its replication and adaptation to different contexts (countries, universities, subjects, studies, etc.). For one, the focus of the strategy can be reoriented on the basis of the university or college in question and students' backgrounds. The number of participating students can be reduced to just one class, if necessary, or amplified to various classes, subjects, or distinct universities. The questionnaire can also be modified in accordance with teaching objectives and the availability of secondary data. Additionally, even though we limited students' participation to answering the survey and taking part in the classroom discussion, students could also be included in other phases of the process, such as the design of the questionnaire, conducting secondary data searches, analysis, and presentation of the results. This would have benefits for teaching students about research methods but would also mean extending the exercise over a longer time period and require two to three extra sessions to cover the necessary tasks.

Lastly, one of our future objectives is to develop a digital application that can automatically compare the results of the student survey with general statistical data, similar to Student Response System applications (see Herda 2016 or Hoekstra 2015). This would make the implementation of the strategy more dynamic and reduce the amount of time required for preparation.

In summary, the teaching strategy presented in this article is designed to facilitate the teaching of inequality and social stratification. The use of the survey helps to activate and retain students' interest, whereas the analysis of the data confronts them with their own misperceptions and the differences between their personal situation and broader social reality. The ultimate objective, therefore, is to encourage critical reflection on the social processes that shape their own life trajectories. Students' surprise at seeing their own misperceptions seems to facilitate the development of their sociological imagination, as seen in their feedback on the exercise. Apart from the positive results in this particular exercise, the broader potentiality of the strategy

lies with its capacity for multiple modifications on the basis of teaching objectives and student contexts.

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NOTES

1. Inspired by the Herda's (2017) concept of "population innumeracy," which reflects people's tendency to overestimate the demographic weight of racial or religious minorities, we coined the term "stratification innumeracy" to refer to the tendency to incorrectly perceive (normally, underestimate) levels of inequality.
2. There was no review by an ethics board because it was not required by the University Complutense of Madrid for this type of study.
3. University Complutense of Madrid is ranked between 201 and 300 on the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities. Because the Spanish university system is not highly segregated (students tend to choose a center on the basis of its geographic proximity to their place of residence), it is not characterized by high selectivity, which means that the socioeconomic profile of students is similar to other public universities, although there may be some variation in certain courses/faculties. Most probably, in other contexts, the main results would vary

in the degree of difference but not in their direction. This is to say, the situation of relative privilege (economic and cultural) of students would be maintained, but it could be smaller or greater (as might be the case in a country such as the United States). The same might occur with misperceptions in relation to level of inequality. In this sense, the usefulness of the teaching strategy could be reinforced in other contexts.

4. The students who participated in the teaching exercise were in the following degree courses: political science (17 percent), sociology (9 percent), anthropology (5 percent), international relations (10 percent), social work (11 percent), labor relations (15 percent), philosophy and political science (7 percent), sociology and international relations (11 percent), law and political science (8 percent); in Spain, there is no majors and minors system, but it is possible to take a double degree (see Note 5). In relation to the sociodemographics of the students, 90 percent were Spanish nationals, 3.9 percent were from other European countries, and 4.3 percent from Latin America. In terms of gender, 68.3 percent were women, 30.7 percent were men, and 1.1 percent were nonbinary. The average age of students was 27, although 82 percent were under 23 years old. Although we did not systematically explore the influence of these variables on students' perceptions, we believe that any variation would not have had a substantial impact on the usefulness or effectiveness of the teaching exercise.
5. Recently, double degrees have been extended in Spain. These permit students to obtain two separate 4-year degrees in 5 or 6 years (for example, sociology and international relations or law and political science). In practice, this works as a segregation mechanism because students with better academic records or greater expectations tend to take this option.
6. The results are available on the following Twitter thread: <https://twitter.com/JessicaCalarco/status/1184921191200546817>. The question was based on the findings presented in Calarco's (2018) book.

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