

SOP77162 — Social Inequality in Comparative Perspective

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Module Information	
Module Code	SOP77162
Module Title	Social Inequality in Comparative Perspective
Department	Sociology
Year Group	PG, MSc Comparative and Social Change
Module Personnel	Dr Jan Skopek
Academic Year	2026-27
Credit Weighting	10
Semester	Hilary Term
Contact Hours	22

Module Content	
Module Description	Social inequality has re-emerged as a central concern in contemporary societies. In many advanced economies, income and especially wealth inequalities have increased, while labour market polarisation, rapid and partly disruptive technological change, and globalisation have reshaped the distribution of risks and opportunities. At the same time, inequalities in life chances, particularly those linked to family background, remain persistent, raising concerns about social mobility and equality of opportunity. These developments have renewed attention to the role of institutions in mitigating or reinforcing inequality. Comparative perspectives are essential for understanding these dynamics. This module examines the structure, mechanisms, and institutional foundations of social inequality from a cross-national perspective. It introduces students to key theoretical approaches alongside the methodological challenges of comparative research, including issues of measurement, equivalence, and research design, as well as the tension between case-based qualitative (Weberian) and variance-based quantitative (Durkheimian) approaches.

Module Content

A central focus is on how societal and national institutions shape inequality, with particular emphasis on welfare state regimes. Drawing on Esping-Andersen's framework and subsequent developments, the module explores how configurations of state, market, and family relations structure the distribution of resources and opportunities. It examines intergenerational social mobility and intra-generational life-course dynamics, as well as the persistence of social advantage across generations. The final part of the module focuses on education as a key stratification system, analysing how it may both reproduce and mitigate inequality across institutional contexts.

Overall, the module equips students not only with knowledge on contemporary sociological debates on social inequality but also with the conceptual and analytical tools to understand how institutional variation shapes social inequality and to critically evaluate comparative empirical research.

Module Learning Aims

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

- Critically evaluate major theoretical approaches to social inequality, including class-based, institutional, and life-course perspectives.
- Analyse and compare patterns of social inequality across countries and time, with particular attention to the role of welfare state regimes and institutional contexts.
- Distinguish and assess key dimensions of inequality, including intergenerational mobility and intragenerational life-course dynamics.
- Examine the role of education systems in reproducing and mitigating social inequality in comparative perspective.
- Apply and critically reflect on methodological approaches in comparative research, including issues of measurement, equivalence, and research design.

Indicative Reading / Resources

- Barone, C., & Ruggera, L. (2018). Educational equalization stalled? Trends in inequality of educational opportunity between 1930 and 1980

Module Content

	across 26 European nations. <i>European Societies</i>, 20(1), 1–25. • Blossfeld, H.-P., Buchholz, S., Skopek, J., & Triventi, M. (Eds). (2016). <i>Models of Secondary Education and Social Inequality: An International Comparison</i>. Edward Elgar. • Breen, R. (Ed.) (2004). <i>Social Mobility in Europe</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • DiPrete, T. A. (2020). The Impact of Inequality on Intergenerational Mobility. <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i>, 46(1), 379–398. • Esping-Andersen, G. (1999). <i>Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Immerfall, S., and Therborn, G. (2010). <i>Handbook of European Societies. Social Transformations in the 21st century</i>. New York et al: Springer. • Kohn, M. L. (1987). Cross-national research as an analytical strategy. <i>American Sociological Review</i>, 52(6), 713–731. • Mau, S., and Verwiebe, R. (2010). <i>European Societies. Mapping Structure and Change</i>. Bristol: Policy Press. • Pfeffer, F. T., & Killewald, A. (2018). Generations of Advantage. <i>Multigenerational Correlations in Family Wealth. Social Forces</i>, 96(4), 1411–1442. • Ragin, C., & Zaret, D. (1983). Theory and Method in Comparative Research: Two Strategies. <i>Social Forces</i>, 61(3), 731–754.
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Assessment

Assessment Components	100% Coursework (presentation, in-class discussion, essay)
Assessment Details	

Additional Information

Prerequisites	<i>List any prerequisites, or enter 'None'</i>
Co-requisites	<i>List any co-requisites, or enter 'None'</i>
Any other information	<i>Anything else that should appear on the website (optional)</i>



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