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Richness, Insecurity and the Welfare State

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Abstract

Across many countries, increases in inequality driven by rising top incomes and wealth have not been accompanied by growing popular concern. In fact, citizens in unequal societies are less concerned than those in more egalitarian societies. Understanding how the general public perceive richness is an essential step towards resolving this paradox. We discuss findings from focus group research in London, UK, a profoundly and visibly unequal city, which sought to explore public perceptions of richness and the rich. Participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds discussed their views of the 'wealthy' and the 'super rich' with reference to both vast economic resources and more intangible aspects, including, crucially, security. High levels of wealth and income were perceived to be necessary for achieving security for oneself and one's family. The security of the rich was discussed in contrast to participants' own and others' insecurity in the context of a (neo)liberal welfare regime – specifically, insecurity about housing, personal finances, social security, health care and the future of the welfare state. In unequal countries, where insecurity is widespread, lack of confidence in collective welfare state provision may serve in the public imagination to legitimate private wealth accumulation and richness as a form of self-protection.

Keywords: Perceptions of inequality; richness; welfare states; welfare state attitudes

1. Introduction

Economists have established that much of the increase in inequality in liberal economies is due to the pulling away of the richest 1 percent (and even more so the top 0.1 and 0.01 percent) (Alvaredo *et al.,* 2013; Atkinson, 2015; Piketty, 2014). In sociology, there has been a corresponding turn towards studying the rich (Savage, 2015; Savage, 2021; Sayer, 2015; Schimpfössl, 2018). Yet, though there are studies of the rich themselves, we do not know much about the general public's perceptions of what it means to be rich. In contrast to a large literature on perceptions of poverty (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013 for an overview), there are few studies that focus on perceptions of the rich (McCall, 2013; Rowlingson *et al.,* 2012; Trump, 2020), and almost none that explore what richness itself is perceived to be (though see Dean and Melrose, 1999). Do people think of richness primarily in terms of economic resources and the rich as being at the top of the income or wealth distribution? Being rich may be construed in terms of absolute income or wealth thresholds (Campos Vazquez *et al.*, 2020; Trump, 2020) or as equivalent to a relative position on those distributions (for instance within the top 1%). Or is richness in the popular imagination an altogether more complex concept, incorporating considerations of power, freedom and security? Our study contributes to answering these questions and hones in on one aspect (security) that emerged as particularly significant.

Understanding public perceptions of what it means to be rich is necessary, if we are to have any hope of designing redistributive policies that will command popular support. At present, we confront a 'paradox of inequality' (Mijs, 2019, p. 1): even though inequality has increased, benefitting a small elite at the relative expense of everyone else, popular concern about inequality has not risen; and citizens in unequal societies are actually less concerned than those in more egalitarian societies. Researching perceptions of the nature of richness may point towards an explanation for this paradox: as we will argue below, in unequal contexts where insecurity is widespread, vast accumulations of wealth may be seen as necessary – a private safety net (Rodems and Pfeffer, 2021) – and therefore normatively justified.

Addressing the research question 'how do people conceptualize "richness"?' we were interested in how members of the public describe and perceive what it means to be rich. In contrast to previous research, we did not make any assumptions about how participants define or understand richness. Instead, following the Minimum Income Standards (MIS) methodology, we asked a total of 58 participants in 6 deliberative focus groups to discuss and negotiate consensus on what higher living standards meant to them. Our participants identified four levels of living standards above the Minimum Income Standard. We interpreted the two highest living standards which participants described and agreed on, the 'wealthy' and the 'super rich', as descriptions of 'richness'. Perceptions of richness are multidimensional. Rather than equating the rich with the 1% or referring to specific income or wealth thresholds, participants talked about richness as including not only economic resources but also freedom and power, as well as, crucially, security. The rich were those who were secure. Participants discussed vast accumulations of wealth as providing safety and financial security for individuals and their families. They emphasised the need for the accumulation of assets in order to be secure in an era of welfare state austerity and retrenchment. This finding has implications for normative evaluations of richness and justifications of extreme wealth.

The next section reviews existing evidence of public attitudes towards the rich and provides the policy context for the research. We then describe our methodology in more detail, before turning to our findings on perceptions of richness. We highlight the key finding that richness was considered by participants to provide security in a context of wide-ranging insecurity. The final section reflects on the possible implications of these findings for understanding why the public in a welfare state under strain may tolerate or even endorse the private accumulation of wealth.

2. The rich, insecurity and the welfare state

2.1 Perceptions of the rich

Few studies have been conducted on how people conceptualise what it means to be rich. Previous quantitative research has simply assumed that richness is best conceptualised as high income, and hence investigated the income thresholds at which respondents think that a household is rich. Research found that people in the USA view those with $200,000 annual income as rich (Trump, 2020), while participants in Mexican cities consider those with at least $51,000 (PPP) annual income to be rich (Campos Vazquez *et al.*, 2020), reflecting 10 and 0.6 percent of the population in the respective countries. However, these studies do not consider that the ownership of wealth might be important for people's perceptions of richness (Townsend, 1979). For instance, a study found that 84 percent of Germans perceive people as rich if they 'can live off capital income without working' (Bundesregierung Deutschland, 2017). Focusing on income thresholds alone is therefore an oversight.

The few qualitative studies on views of the rich suggest that perceptions of richness are not just about economic resources. In their study with British participants, Dean and Melrose (1999, p. 57-58) found that for a slight majority being rich meant 'freedom from constraint' while only a minority indicated resources above a chosen income or wealth threshold. Being free from constraint for some included not having to worry, or even think about money. Similarly, Sherman's (2017) study of wealthy New Yorkers found that participants described richness as freedom from worry, including worrying about spending. These findings point us towards how people *conceptualise* richness, highlighting that while wealth and income are relevant, so are perceptions of the rich as free from constraint or financial worry. We build on this insight in this article.

Researching how people conceptualise richness is the first step for understanding how people perceive the deservingness of the rich as a social group (Rowlingson and Connor, 2011). Much attitudinal research however has proceeded analysing such views without interrogating what richness really means to people. For instance, research shows that a majority of the UK public is concerned about the gap between the rich and the poor (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007; Rowlingson and McKay, 2011; Duffy *et al.*, 2021) but who do people mean when asked about the rich? We address this in our paper.

Though there is more research on perceptions of the deservingness of the poor, there are a handful of studies of the deservingness of the rich. In the US, the rich are perceived to be deserving if they contribute to society and offer opportunity to others (McCall, 2013). The rich themselves detract attention away from considering issues of distribution (Sherman, 2017) and whether they have 'too much' normatively speaking (Robeyns, 2017, 2019). Instead, Sherman's (2017) wealthy participants focused on affect and behaviour, distinguishing between good and bad rich people based on whether they are grateful, work hard, consume prudently, and treat other people decently. Further, Robeyns et al. (2020) found that a representative sample of the Dutch population did not perceive people becoming 'extremely rich' to be a problem. Views of whether the rich are deserving are likely influenced by media discourse. Littler (2017, p. 115) argues that in the UK, the rich are portrayed as meritocratic, 'just like us' and therefore deserving. Similarly, a US study found that the media frames the rich flatteringly, including 'admiration', 'emulation' and 'consensus' frames of the wealthy as generous and caring, meritocratic and ordinary, respectively – compared to 'pitying or derogatory descriptions' of the poor (Kendall, 2011, p. 17). Our paper contributes to this literature on deservingness of richness, by taking a step back, and exploring what people really mean when they are asked about 'the rich'.

2.2 (In)security and the welfare state

Perceptions of the rich, like perceptions of inequality more broadly (Bottero, 2019), need to be considered in the context in which people live. Though there is a universal National Health Service (NHS), the UK welfare state is usually classified as liberal, with a residual approach to social security (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Security of income and living standards are generally assumed to be an individual rather than welfare state responsibility (Heuer *et al.*, 2020). Since the 1980s, there have been neoliberal reforms, including 'marketisation' and the 're-commodification of labour' (Koch and Reeves, 2021, p. 5). Even the NHS has seen some privatisation of providers, though it remains predominantly free at the point of use (Powell and Miller, 2014). In addition to, and in line with, neoliberal reforms, the UK welfare state endured a prolonged period of austerity after the financial crisis in 2008, including social security cuts (Taylor-Gooby, 2017). The inadequacy of out-of-work social security payments is shown by comparisons with the Minimum Income Standard level (Davis *et al.*, 2021). Given the lack of security provided by Universal Credit with its conditionality and digitized sanctions, Koch and Reeves (2021) argue that social security has been converted into 'state-sanctioned insecurity'.

At the same time, workers' protections have been weakened, as indicated by the rise of zero-hour contracts (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). Wages have not kept up with rising living costs, and many workers have found themselves in a 'low pay, no pay cycle' (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012, p. 4). Being in employment is no longer sufficient to feel secure: jobs might be lost and even those in full-time work

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may still experience poverty. Approximately 2 million full-time workers were living in poverty in 2018/19 (JRF, 2021). Moreover, part of the security that traditionally came from being in work was the accumulation – through social insurance contributions – of entitlements to earnings replacement in the event of unemployment, but this principle has been whittled away to a greater extent in the UK than continental European countries (Clasen, 2000). Therefore, *employment security,* i.e. security provided from (previous) participation in the labour market, has decreased.

The decline of the social insurance function of the state may increase the significance of the insurance function of *private wealth*, with people falling back on their personal reserves when they encounter adversity (Rodems and Pfeffer, 2021). Further, the relevance of wealth is particularly pronounced now because capital's relative importance to income increased since the 1970s (Piketty, 2014, p. 173 discussed this finding as 'the emergence of a new patrimonial capitalism'). Accordingly, Adkins et al. (2019) argue that capital, capital gains, capital income and inheritances are crucial for understanding stratification. They suggest a new asset-based class scheme ranging from investors to homeowners (without and with mortgages), renters and the homeless. In this form of capitalism, wealth is crucial for security.

Perceptions of economic insecurity are widespread. While the poor have to tackle their objectively insecure livelihoods with various coping strategies (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013), subjectively even the rich perceive themselves as insecure (Cooper, 2014; Sherman, 2017). For instance, Cooper's (2014) study of families in California found that while her participants experienced vastly different levels of economic stability, the richest nevertheless saw themselves as part of a race for security. Perceptions of insecurity are widespread in the EU; insecurity is experienced even among homeowners, those with high incomes and those with permanent employment contracts (Eurofound, 2018). Though it is important to distinguish between perceived and actual insecurity (Atkinson, 2013), both may matter for people's perceptions of the rich.

3. Methods: deliberative groups

3.1 Context: Inequality in the UK and in London

The research was conducted in London, a city with vast and visible economic inequality. People who live there are exposed to the extremes of inequality in their day-to-day lives. Despite having experienced extraordinary economic growth in the last two decades and relative resilience after the 2008 recession compared to the rest of the UK, inequalities have been growing in the capital (Obolenskaya *et al.,* 2016; Trust for London, 2020). According to HMRC data, in the tax year 2016-17, the top 2 percent of highest earning Londoners (who earn a minimum of £200,000 a year), on average earned £580,000, over 30 times

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what a single person requires to reach a minimum acceptable standard of living, calculated as being £20,800 a year (Davis *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, four in ten Londoners do not earn enough to reach this minimum standard, more than any other region. Further, 'over half (53%) of all children in the capital [are] living in households with inadequate income, well above the proportion below this level in the UK as a whole (42% in 2017/18)' (Padley *et al.*, 2021, p. 46). In addition to this vast income inequality, wealth is even more unequally distributed (Hills and Bastagli, 2013), and is most concentrated in London. Specifically, in Great Britain, the richest 10 percent own 44 percent of all wealth, while in London, the richest 10 percent own 61 percent (Davis *et al.*, 2020). The vast inequalities in London may equip participants with experiential resources to draw on when discussing what it means to be rich.

3.2 Applying the MIS methodology to study perceptions of richness

To study how people in London perceive richness, we conducted six face-to-face deliberative groups with a total of 58 participants. The advantage of such groups is that they create a social setting in which communication and deliberation can take place, between strangers, with the explicit goal of trying to reach consensus. The deliberation is an important feature for a topic of this kind, which people may not have thought very much about beforehand, and so need the chance to try out ideas and listen to other points of view before coming to a more settled opinion (Burchardt, 2014). The discussion is enriched by the bringing together of different opinions and researchers 'feeding in' information – for example, issues raised by previous groups.

The focus groups were conducted between November 2018 and January 2019 adapting the 'consensual budget standards' methodology, which has been developed to identify the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) (Davis *et al.*, 2017; Padley *et al.*, 2021). The methodology for identifying MIS involves recruiting members of the public to discuss and negotiate a consensus on the needs of individuals, described in terms of a basket of goods and services, required to meet a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. These items are discussed in detail through several stages of unique groups (i.e. each participant takes part in only one group) in order to check and establish a wider consensus. Once agreed on, these items are priced up to yield a minimum income standard for different household types. Our project aimed to discover whether it is possible for groups to reach a consensus on what kinds of consumption – of goods, activities and services – are associated with higher standards of living. We described these standards as 'well above the minimum' to avoid imposing descriptors such as 'rich' or 'wealthy' on the discussions. Instead, we allowed the labels to emerge organically within the groups.

The focus groups were led by two researchers, including an expert on the MIS methodology, with observers from the wider project team. During part 1, the results of which are the focus of this paper, we explored what sorts of consumption participants thought people living at the higher end of the income and wealth distributions engaged in and the meaning it had for them (richness as *descriptive*). In part 2, not our focus here, we sought to investigate participants' value-judgements (*normative evaluations*) of richness. In part 1, the researchers firstly explained the minimum acceptable standard:

> A minimum standard for the UK today includes but is more than just food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society.

Participants were asked about the range of living standards that exist above a minimum standard, and what features or characteristics might separate one standard of living from the next 'step up'. Groups themselves defined how many classifications there were and what to call them. Starting the discussion with a definition of MIS was useful because it gave all groups a shared frame of reference as a starting point. Though we prompted participants to discuss goods, activities and services consumed at the different living standards, we found that participants described ascending levels of living standards commensurate with extremely high levels of income and wealth – and associated security.

In discussions about what living standards above MIS might look like, the first two groups identified four further levels of living standards. For ease of reference, the researchers labelled these five levels A-E, with MIS as level A. The levels B, C, D and E emerged independently in both first two groups, in that participants in the second group were not told the results of the first group's deliberations but reached agreement on very similar outlines of the different levels. These living standards were then presented to subsequent groups to see to what extent they agreed or challenged these opinions and ideas. In each case, groups were able to add more detail and clarity to what distinguished one living standard from another.

The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. The data were coded using NVivo software and thematically analysed using a coding frame developed by the researchers with both inductive and deductive codes (Boyatzis, 1998). We coded the data using an analytical framework that distinguishes between 'descriptions' and 'normative evaluations' of richness, allowing for the emergence of themes under these two main pillars, and additional codes. Quotes are presented using the following key: M (male participant), W (female participant)[1], Q (researcher).

3.3 Sample

Each group contained nine or 10 people from a range of ages among the working age population. Participants were recruited using a professional recruitment company. The recruitment process endeavoured to ensure that groups overall had a diversity that broadly reflects the London population. The six focus groups included people with a range of incomes: two groups of lower income participants (income under £30,000 per annum), two groups of higher income participants (income above £50,000 per annum) and two mixed income groups (see Table 1). For each of these types of groups – lower income, higher income and mixed income – we held one focus group with parents and one with people without children. Each group included a mix of genders, ethnicity and age (between 22 and 65, excluding people in full time education and retirement) and socio-economic groups estimated based on a combination of proxies including housing tenure and current or previous employment. Participants were paid £80 for attending a three-hour group. The research received ethical approval for the project from the research institutions of the authors (Loughborough University and the London School of Economics and Political Science).

4. Findings: Richness as security

4.1 Living standards and security

Participants engaged readily in the discussions about different living standards. In addition to describing these standards in terms of what assets, income and consumption would be typical for, or available to, a working age household at that level, participants in the groups also discussed many 'intangible' aspects enjoyed by those on higher living standards, in particular security, freedom, and power. We focus here on the particularly significant aspect of security. This theme was consistently discussed in all our groups as inherent in the living standards of the wealthy and super rich. We also note the contrast with narratives of insecurity for many people who are not rich.

When asked about living standards above level A (the Minimum Income Standard), the groups came up with four further living standards which they labelled: 'surviving comfortably' (level B), followed by the '(securely) comfortable' (level C), the 'wealthy' (level D) and, with unanimity, the 'super rich' (level E). Finding labels for the different levels was not straightforward; meanings were deliberated on (Table 2). Also, some descriptors had normative connotations, such as 'self-sufficient' or 'stinking rich'. The term 'comfortable' was often employed with living standards directly above the minimum income standard (levels B and C), although one lower income group referred to level D as 'aspirational comfortable'. Lower and mixed income groups highlighted the fact that some or many people live below MIS, but this was not a category that we sought to explore in this research.

Interestingly, participants discussed that the differences between the living standards were not 'evenly spaced' but vertiginous like the London skyscraper, 'The Shard'. The standard of living of the wealthy was described as very different from others, while the lifestyles of the super rich were considered to be even

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TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of focus groups

Group	Description	n	Incomes	Gender	Ethnicity	Median age	Age range
1	Lower income non-parents	10	up to £20k =3 £21-30k =7	5 women 5 men	1 Asian 3 Black 6 White	47	23-63
2	Higher income non-parents	9	£51-70k =5 £71-90k =3 £91-100k =1	4 women 5 men	1 Asian 1 Black 7 White	43	27-58
3	Lower income parents	10	up to £20k =6 £21-30k =4	5 women 5 men	0 Asian 3 Black 7 White	45	26-65
4	Higher income parents	10	£51-70k =6 £71-90k =3 £91-100k =1	5 women 5 men	0 Asian 1 Black 7 White 2 Mixed	50	36-60
5	Mixed income non-parents	10	up to £20k =2 £21-30k =3 £51-70k =3 £71-90k =1 £100k =1	5 women 5 men	0 Asian 0 Black 8 White 2 Mixed	45	22-59
6	Mixed income parents	9	up to £20k =3 £21-30k =1 £51-70k =5	5 women 4 men	1 Asian 3 Black 4 White 1 Mixed	43	23-59

TABLE 2. Living standards discussed in focus groups

Group	Participants	<A	Level A (MIS)	Level B (Surviving) Comfortably	Level C (Securely) Comfortable	Level D Wealthy	Level E Super rich
1	Lower income non-parents	<MIS	Definition provided	Comfortable	Well off	Luxury Living	Super rich
2	Higher income non-parents		Definition provided	Self sufficient	Comfortable	Wealthy	Super rich
3	Lower income parents	<MIS	Definition provided	Surviving comfortably	Securely comfortable	Aspirational comfortable	Super rich
4	Higher income parents		Definition provided	Not labelled (high street chains)	Flourishing, (Securely) comfortable, Well off	Wealthy	Super rich
5	Mixed income non-parents	<MIS	Definition provided	Not labelled ('fun nights in'; comfortable/ self-sufficient)	Financially (cap)able/ independent	Wealthy, flourishing, (rich)	Super rich
6	Mixed income parents	<MIS	Definition provided	Not labelled (A and B referred to together)	Comfortable	Secure, affluent	Super rich

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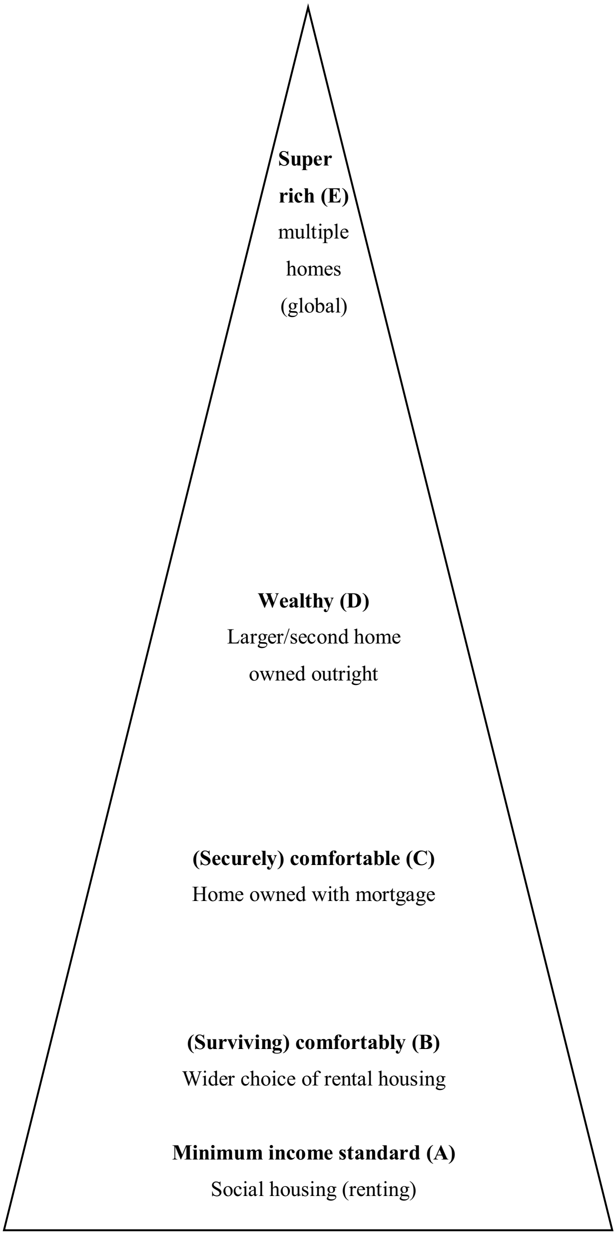

FIGURE 1. Perceptions of indicative housing at different levels for a London family

further removed from everyone else. Figure 1 illustrates one aspect of perceptions of differences at the top: groups' ideas about the type of housing wealth a London family at each level would have. Participants agreed that there were

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many Londoners 'at the bottom', some who were (securely) comfortable, few who were wealthy and even fewer who were super rich, mirroring the wider base and steep taper to a narrow point of 'The Shard' itself.

The level of security was assessed as being higher at each level and as increasing exponentially at the very top. Participants showed awareness of the precarity of employment and housing, particularly for people with lower living standards. People at MIS (level A) were agreed to have enough to just about make ends meet but not to have any protection against sudden shocks or changes in circumstances, whereas at level B, where one is (surviving) comfortably, there would be enough money for essentials each month and a small amount left over. Savings and investments entered the picture at level C for the (securely) comfortable, but their savings were thought to be unlikely to provide an adequate safety net for long in the event of loss of income through ill health or job loss.

Within the discussions the words 'secure' and 'securely' appeared organically when groups were trying to find labels to express each level.

> M: I like the 'secure' [as a label].
>
> Q: You don't have to pick any of those [labels]. If you can reach an agreement on an alternative.
>
> W: I like 'secure' as well because you're going to be safe.
>
> M: Secure, yes.
>
> W: It feels as though whatever life throws at them they've got the resources to either replace it, get over it.
>
> Q: Or cope in some way.
>
> W: It's not going to set them [a 'well off' family living at level C] back.
>
> (Focus group 4, higher income)

While the so called (securely) comfortable were considered to be somewhat secure, they were described as 'still worried about slipping back' (Woman, Group 3, lower income). Traversing the gap to being 'wealthy' was described as a 'big jump', whereby people's living standards and their security would improve still further. Being (securely) comfortable was described as 'you can keep money in your savings and have good credit', whereas being wealthy meant one had 'more savings and more investments' with a 'cushion' 'twice as thick' (Focus group 4, higher income, W, M and M). Therefore, security was discussed as an advantage of wealth, and a way of differentiating between one level and another:

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> [At level] D [wealthy] you're really secure. [At level] C you're juggling balls in the air.
>
> (Man, Group 5, mixed income)

Both across and within groups, participants discussed that it was at the level of 'wealthy' that people were 'really secure'. As we will discuss, the wealthy were described as owning their home outright, and either having larger properties, or additional property which generates rental income. Thus, the wealthy were described as having a level of certainty provided by their financial situation, protected from potential harms:

> [At level] D I think people are definitely secure. They don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow is sorted out with the money. [People at level] C are quite secure but they still have to think about retirement and things like that.
>
> (Man, Group 6, mixed income)

In summary, security and freedom from worry about finances were described as important features of being wealthy. A potential reason why participants may have perceived lower standards of living as not 'really secure' is that, as we will discuss, participants raised concerns about the affordability of housing, income and employment security, the quality and availability of the NHS and adequate childcare and educational opportunities[2]. Therefore, to be 'really secure' in the UK, according to participants, one's assets and income needed to be very high. Only those at the very top end of the combined income and wealth distribution – a tiny proportion of society – could afford such living standards, especially in London.

4.2 Housing security

Housing security in the form of home ownership was perceived as being experienced by those who were (securely) comfortable (level C) and above. However, the (securely) comfortable were discussed as likely to be repaying a mortgage and therefore less secure than the wealthy (level D) who owned their homes outright and had either larger properties ('more bedrooms than they need') or income from renting out additional property. The super rich were considered to have even higher levels of housing security, owning multiple homes across the globe. The security inherent in home ownership was key in people's discussions:

> Just following back on that security point, I guess it gives you the choice of whether you join the property ladder whether you have a home that's yours that you can pass down or whether you're renting and at risk of potentially losing it. It gives you more security.
>
> (Woman, Focus group 2, higher income).

Having complete housing security was part of participants' perceptions of what it means to be rich. Conversely, participants discussed the lack of affordable housing in London and the difficulties of housing insecurity for those who are not rich. These included accounts of personal experiences of extreme housing insecurity and of homelessness. For instance, a young father shared:

> Three or four years ago now my dad passed away and then my mum literally not long after that got evicted from her flat . . . she'd been living in London her whole life, worked her whole life . . . She couldn't afford her rent . . . got kicked out of London . . . obviously I want to live in London . . . I want to be close to my daughter, but I can't be because I can't afford to live in London myself and where I live at the moment, I can't get a job . . . There's no help for me whatsoever . . . there's been times when . . . . I've been on the streets and stuff . . . I didn't ask to be put in that position, but it just happened, with a click of a finger literally.
>
> (Man, Focus group 6, mixed income)

The discussions in the groups showed that participants were aware of the housing insecurity of many people in London. In this context, participants equated outright home ownership with security and stability – which they agreed as being part of what it means to be wealthy or super rich.

4.3 Security through private services: health care, private safety nets, childcare and education

Participants discussed that the wealthy and super rich – and to a lesser extent, the (securely) comfortable – are able to ensure their freedom from worry, and security, through paying for private services. These included private health care, child care, and (higher) education. These private services were described as necessary because public provision was either not available, not available on demand or because private provision was deemed superior. Being able to pay for private services was described as offering 'more options', more control and better life chances compared to being reliant on state provision.

The wealthy were described as being able to afford private health insurance which offers alternative or additional coverage to the NHS, and the super rich were thought to have their own private doctors who could be summoned when needed. While the NHS was described as reliable, private health care coverage was seen as providing security in the form of faster access:

> What money buys you is options and it can actually buy you health because you can see a consultant tomorrow at 9am, whereas if you wait for the NHS you might be waiting.
>
> (Man, Focus group 5, mixed incomes)

The rich were thus discussed as able to access quality health care more rapidly, and being able to circumvent waiting lists.

In addition, the (securely) comfortable, wealthy and super rich were described as being more secure when unwell because they do not have to rely on the low statutory sick pay, as they have a (privately provided) 'safety net':

> M: Also you could have the kind of job where if you're ill you'd expect to be paid a reasonable amount of sick pay rather than go on statutory. So, you could keep your lifestyle going in times of adversity.
>
> [...]
>
> W: If I were to lose my job, I wouldn't have enough of a safety net...
>
> [...]
>
> Q: So, who are the people that have that safety net, is it the well off people?
>
> W: Yes, that's what I was trying to get at.
>
> (Focus group 1, lower income)

Another service which our groups discussed when picturing higher living standards was privately provided childcare, and with it the 'freedom' of the rich to decide to have children, knowing that they can afford the expense. Participants discussed the high costs of childcare, and how those with higher living standards could pay for private services which suit their needs:

> W: Talking about childcare, a lot of people can't afford to have more than one child because of childcare, so you've got nurseries that are charging £600 to £800 a month and it's extortionate.
>
> Q: So, if we were at this level where all of this was happening, what would that mean?
>
> W: You'd be able to pay your child's fees, so you could have at least two children and not be worried about paying for childcare.
>
> W: Or you could get a nanny.
>
> M: Yes [agreement from group in the form of nodding and affirmative speech].
>
> (Focus group 3, lower income)

Hence being able to afford the services of a private nursery or a nanny was seen as offering parents greater flexibility. Only the wealthy and super rich (and to a limited extent the 'securely comfortable') were imagined to 'not be worried about paying for childcare'.

When discussing educational opportunities, the wealthy and super rich were described as having educational advantages because they are not confined to state-provided education. For instance, although only 7% of children in Britain are privately educated (The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility

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Commission, 2019), participants thought it a 'certain' and inevitable choice for the wealthy (level D) and the super rich (level E). Opinions varied on whether private education for one's children could also be part of a lower but still 'securely comfortable' living standard (level C). Some participants said that it would be possible if parents were willing to make some sacrifices, but that being relatively affluent homeowners would give them the ability to move house strategically 'to buy it next door to the best [state] school in the area' (Focus group 3, lower income).

The wealthy and super rich were also perceived as being able to access better quality higher education:

> W: Don't the super rich have the wealth and the influence to buy everything? They can probably buy their way into a very good public school one way or another, which will in turn enable them to get a place at a Russell Group, or Oxbridge[3] with relatively little effort.
>
> M: Yes. And they've got no problem paying full fees for their kids, either in the UK or overseas.
>
> W: Money is not an issue.
>
> (Focus group 4, higher income)

While accessing higher education was discussed as a serious financial decision for some families, it was seen as a more 'carefree' choice for those with higher living standards:

> [There's] something about education, so learning. So, if you're not well off it would feel like an enormous decision to not leave school at 16 and to do your A Levels. And then an even more enormous decision to take on a student loan. So, if you [are well off] it becomes a more carefree choice . . . to go and study for a higher qualification, you can just do it.
>
> (Man, Focus group 2, higher income)

The imagined ease of access to university education for the children of the wealthy and super rich contrasted with participants' own concerns about the perceived financial burdens of higher education, which were expressed in both lower and higher income groups:

> W: You know, do I want my child to finish university saddled with £30,000 of debt? No, I don't.
>
> M: More than that sometimes.
>
> W: Yeah.

W: That they're never going to pay back anyway. Because they're never going to earn enough to pay it back. So, yes education is a bit . . .

W: . . . of a minefield.

(Focus group 3, lower income)

M: There's a couple of other [costs] as well, babysitting and also university maintenance costs, so if your kids are at university the student loan isn't sufficient generally to cover accommodation and living, so you need to cover one of those as a parent.

(Focus group 4, higher income)

In sum, focus group participants were able to agree on levels of living standards above the minimum. Different examples arose spontaneously demonstrating how security increased with higher living standards, with the wealthy and the super rich described as the most secure. The ability to make choices about housing size and location, access private services including childcare, health and education as well as having savings or other types of safety net all contributed to a level of security unavailable to those at lower living standards. The wealthy were described as owning their property outright and possibly receiving rental income from additional property. They were also seen using private health care and private schooling for their children. In addition to this, the super rich had even more security with multiple properties across the globe[4]. In contrast to descriptions of the wealthy and super rich as secure, participants discussed concerns regarding the insecurity of relying on the welfare state when it comes to social housing, health care (NHS waiting lists), social security and public childcare and education.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In discussing the levels of economic resources available to the 'wealthy' and the 'super rich', security was an additional, intangible aspect of descriptions of richness. Groups discussed the accumulation of extreme wealth as allowing people to be secure. The rich were viewed as being able to cope with whatever life threw at them, having stable and secure, reliably high incomes, home ownership and immediate access to healthcare when sick due to private insurance coverage. They were described as able to access high quality private childcare and education services – seen by participants as essential to sustain parents' work and to promote children's life chances – without worrying about the cost. The theme of security was prominent in all focus groups, including the lower and higher income ones, in contrast to Dean and Melrose (1999) who found that lower income participants were more likely to focus on security when discussing what it means to be rich. We did not ask our participants to talk about their own experiences (although some voluntarily shared stories about themselves), but the imagined lives of the rich were frequently described in ways that implied a contrast with the common, assumed or personal experience of insecurity. We thus see experiences and perceptions of personal (in)security, and lack of confidence in the provisions of the welfare state, as important for perceptions of richness, and specifically for how people conceptualise what being rich means.

These findings are relevant for studies of perceptions of inequality given that the share of the richest 1 percent in terms of income or wealth is conceptualised as a measure of inequality in the economics literature (Piketty, 2014). As a measure of inequality, rising top income and wealth shares are problematised by social scientists. However, richness was not necessarily seen as a 'social problem' by our focus group participants. Our topic guide did not include questions about what a desirable distribution would look like (although some participants did spontaneously express concerns about the gap between the rich and poor or asserted that the wealthy or super rich deserve their fortune based on merit). Nevertheless, our findings may have implications for understanding how richness is normatively evaluated. In particular they may help to explain the tolerance of extreme economic inequality in Britain's society (cf. Mijs, 2019). If a core part of what 'richness' is understood to mean is being 'safe' and 'secure', the accumulation of wealth may be seen as morally justified. Being wealthy or super rich implies that one has obtained the goal of security, and this is a widely shared and therefore acceptable or even worthy aim. In the context of the UK, with its weak social insurance and increasingly inadequate safety net, and specifically in the context of London with its overheated housing market and lack of social housing, people who are accumulating wealth may be understood to be driven by a desire to be secure and perceived to be taking responsibility to provide for themselves.

The fact that our research was conducted in London, a very specific, highly unequal context, gives rise to the question as to whether members of the general public in cities and countries with more comprehensive and higher social safety nets are less likely to see the accumulation of personal wealth as necessary. Research in the Netherlands (Robeyns *et al.*, 2020) seems to suggest that this may be the case, but further international comparative research on the perceptions of richness would allow a more thorough-going test of this hypothesis.

Based on our study, we theorise that a hidden effect of weakening social protection and collective provision is that it feeds a belief in the necessity of private accumulation of wealth to safeguard one's own living standard, and because this is perceived as necessary, it may become – automatically – morally justifiable. Adding the long-established emphasis on the virtue of self-reliance in (neo) liberal ideology to the mix turns the moral dial a notch further, making richness not only justifiable but admirable. Little wonder, then, that efforts to advocate for more effective and strongly progressive taxation, especially inheritance, property or wealth taxes which would contribute to a more equal society

(Sayer, 2015), often seem to meet with popular hostility (Rowlingson *et al.*, 2012). The same may apply to maximum pay rates (Sayer, 2015) which are not popular (Robeyns *et al.*, 2020), and to proposals for very high top tax rates and 'blocking asset-based unearned income' (Sayer, 2015, p. 366). Given the findings of our pre-pandemic study, we would not expect a consensual appetite for such policies.

Nevertheless, a study carried out during the pandemic (Rowlingson *et al.*, 2021) found relative support for a wealth tax compared to other taxes, suggesting that a new window of opportunity may be opening. To strengthen and broaden support for wealth-limiting redistribution, we argue that people need to be given confidence that their own standard of living, including housing and access to good-quality services, will be secure even in the absence of personal wealth. Would a wealth tax tied to a specific 'living standards and services' guarantee garner greater public support? That remains to be investigated but our analysis suggests it is a hypothesis worth interrogating.

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Competing interests

The author(s) declare none.

Notes

1 'M' and 'W' do not denote unique individuals.
2 One group also discussed the (un)affordability of social care in old age for themselves and their parents.
3 'Oxbridge' refers to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the most prestigious universities in the United Kingdom. The Russell Group has 24 members; these are research-intensive, leading universities (including Oxford and Cambridge).
4 They were also seen to have a portfolio of business interests and capital income streams.

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