

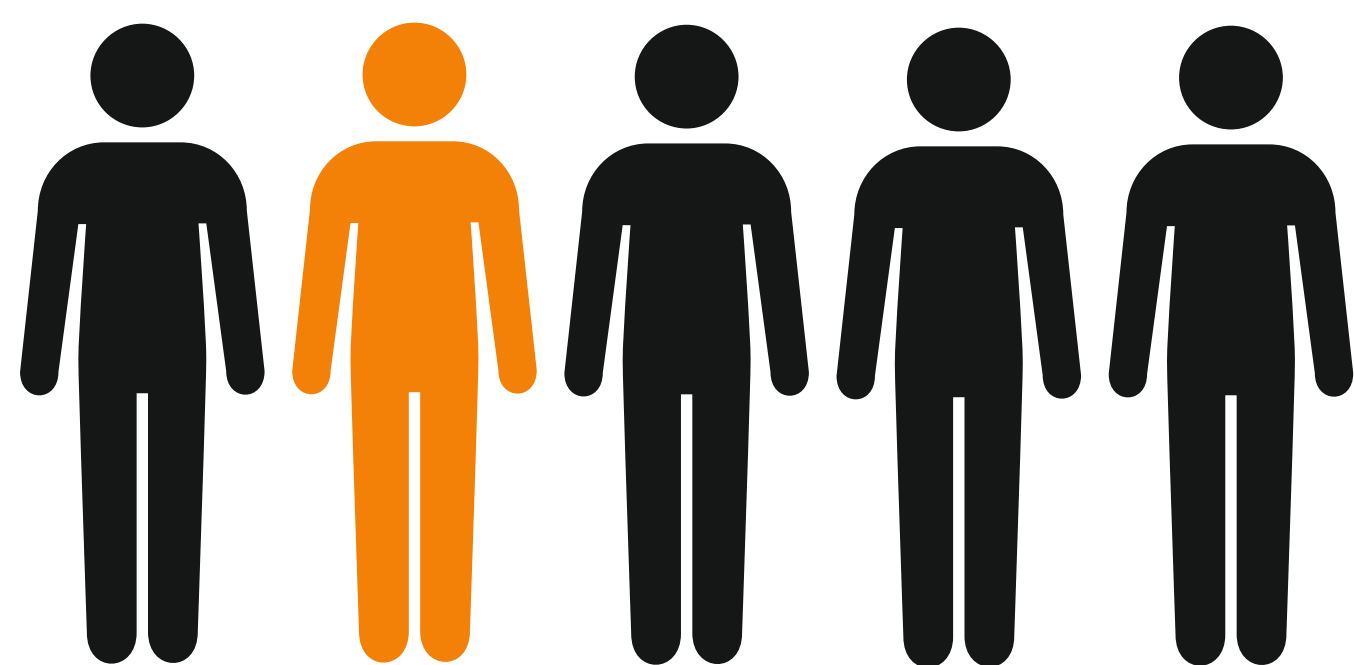
# How do migrants judge inequality?



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS  
AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Margherita Cusmano (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity)

## Why migrants?



Migrants and their descendants make up a sizable proportion of Germany's population. 18.4% of the population has moved from abroad. The second generation, those born in Germany with migrant parents, make up an additional 5.9% (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023).

Germany is a country of immigration. To understand how the population judges inequality, we need to consider migrants. But does a migration background make a difference for the way people judge inequality?

## Methods

This study explores whether migrants and their descendants judge economic inequality differently than non-migrants. Integrating insights from migration scholarships that age at migration and generation matter (Rumbaut 2004), it distinguishes three migrant generations:

- First generation (moved after age 12)
- 1.5 generation (moved before age 12)
- Second generation (born in Germany to migrant parents)

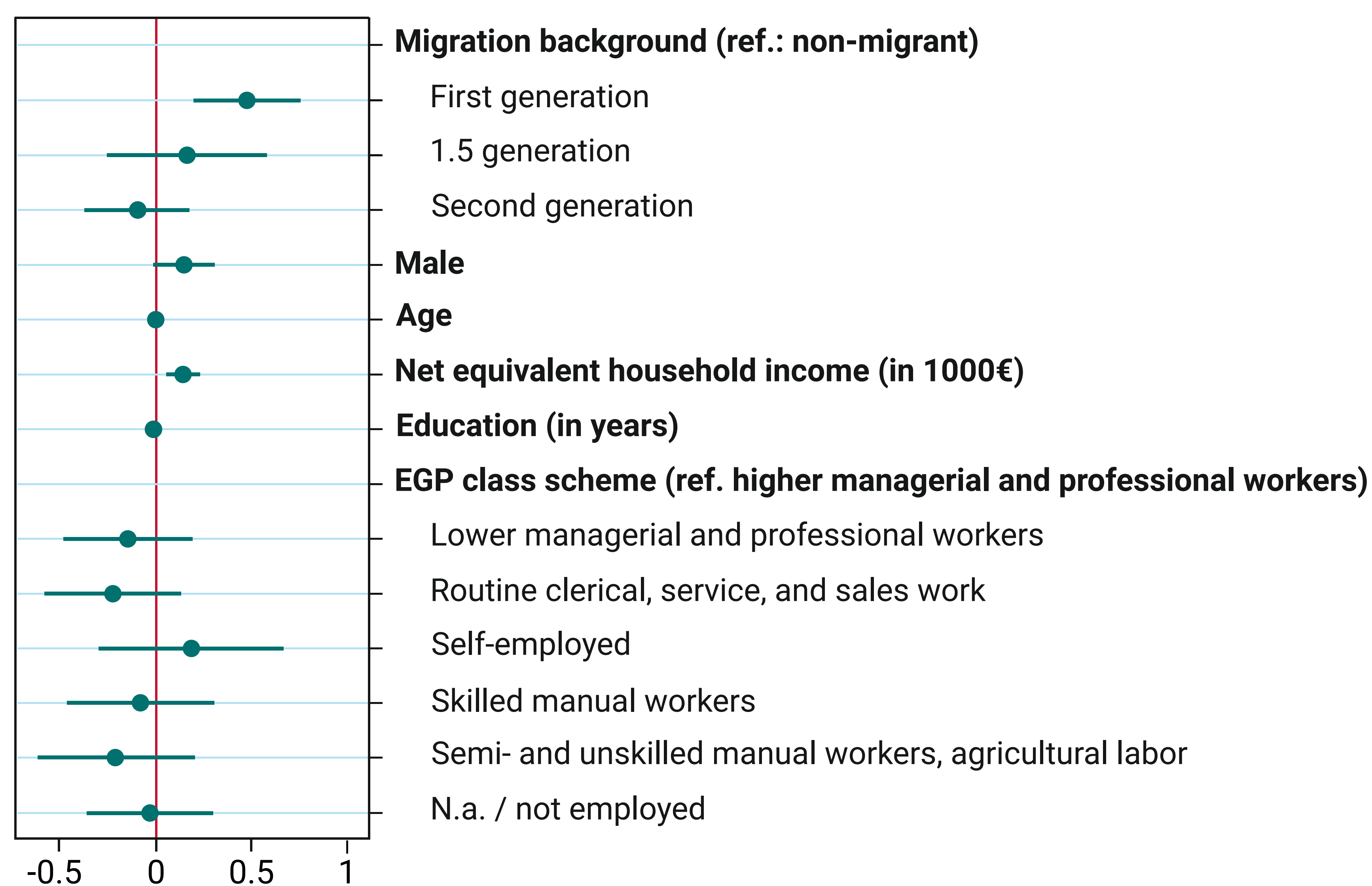
This study is based on the German Socio-Economic Panel Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS). It explores whether there are differences along four dimensions: a judgement on the fairness of life circumstances, as well as perceptions of equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and the fulfillment of basic needs. These dimensions were captured through the following questions:

- "How do you assess the fairness of life circumstances in Germany?"
- "In Germany people have the same chances to thrive"
- "In Germany one is rewarded for one's performance"
- "In Germany everyone gets what he/she needs to live"

## Generation and age at migration matter

**First-generation migrants** (i.e., those who moved after age 12) are the only generation that significantly differs from non-migrants across all four dimensions. Namely, they tend to judge life circumstances as **fairer** compared with non-migrants, and perceive more **equality of opportunity**, **meritocracy**, and fulfillment of **basic needs**.

"How do you assess the fairness of life circumstances in Germany?"  
(1 = very unfair, 5 = very fair)



Unstandardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from an OLS regression model. Data from the German Socio-Economic Innovation Sample, weighted, with robust standard errors.

**76%** of first-generation migrants find life circumstances in Germany fair, compared with 53% of non-migrants.

51% of first-generation migrants believe people have the **same chances to thrive**, compared with 34% of non-migrants. 58% of first-generation migrants believe one is **rewarded for one's performance**, compared with 46% of non-migrants. 68% of first-generation migrants believe **everyone gets what they need to live**, compared with 52% of non-migrants.

## Theoretical explanations

### MIGRANT OPTIMISM

People who move to another country tend to be inherently optimistic, or would not have left their country of origin in the first place (Arce, Bañales, and Kuperminc 2022). People with migration aspirations have a more positive view of the prospective country of immigration than people who do not want to emigrate (Lapshina and Düvell 2018). This self-selection effect is arguably more relevant for individuals who move as adolescents or adults because they generally have more agency over their migration.

### TRANSNATIONAL COMPARISONS

People who move to another country tend to compare it favourably with their country of origin, thus generally having a positive impression of the country of immigration. This is known as "dual frame of reference" in migration scholarship (Suárez-Orozco 1991). This comparison framework is arguably more salient for people who left their country of origin after childhood.

### BEHAVING LIKE A GOOD MIGRANT

The population of the country of immigration expects newcomers to adopt a meritocratic worldview (Testé et al. 2012). Thus, migrants might feel compelled to express a belief in meritocracy to position themselves as hard-working, good migrants, and to express acceptance of the immigration country.

## References

Arce, M. Alejandra, Josefina Bañales, and Gabriel P. Kuperminc. 2022. "Incorporating Immigrant Optimism into Critical Consciousness and Civic Development Models: An Integrative Review and Synthesis of Civic Action among Immigrant Youth of Color in the United States." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (Online publication).  
Lapshina, Iryna, and Frank Düvell. 2018. "We Can Only Dream about Europe": Perceptions of Social Policy as a Driver of Migration Aspirations. The Case of Ukraine." *Journal of Social Policy Studies* 16(4):661–76.  
Richter, David, and Jürgen Schupp. 2015. "The SOEP Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS)." *Journal of Contextual Economics – Schmollers Jahrbuch* 135(3):389–99.

Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2004. "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States." *International Migration Review* 38(3):1160–1205.  
Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. 1991. "Immigrant Adaptation to Schooling: A Hispanic Case." In: *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities*, edited by Margaret A. Gibson and John U. Ogbu (pp. 37–61). New York, NY; London: Garland Publishing.  
Statistisches Bundesamt. 2023. "Statistischer Bericht – Mikrozensus – Bevölkerung nach Einwanderungsgeschichte – Erstergebnisse 2022" (URL: <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/statistischer-bericht-einwanderungsgeschichte-erst-5122126227005.html>); retrieved on 18/03/2024; own calculations.

Testé, Benoît, Christelle Maisonneuve, Yvette Assilaméhou, and Samantha Perrin. 2012. "What Is an 'Appropriate' Migrant? Impact of the Adoption of Meritocratic Worldviews by Potential Newcomers on Their Perceived Ability to Integrate into a Western Society." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42(2):263–68.