

Inequality, Power, and Happiness

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1 Motivation

Our present understanding of how the mind works and how minds evolve suggests that the pursuit of happiness is a basic human right in a deeper sense than warranted by the United States' Declaration of Independence. Indeed, our capacity for moment-to-moment emotional well-being and our ability to appreciate life as a whole are both rooted deep in the human nature (Edelman, 2008, 2012).¹ The human potential for happiness cannot, however, be realized if circumstances oppose it. Indeed, contrary to the popular myth of the happy pauper, studies show that widespread chronic financial hardship and insecurity and the inequality in power and wealth distribution — two chronic aspects of American socioeconomic malaise that the Great Recession has greatly exacerbated — are both detrimental to happiness.

A reflection on the dynamics of this predicament indicates that it may be self-reinforcing. A panoply of factors act not just to preserve the status quo, but to deepen the existing divides. Some of these factors are psychological. For instance, research findings show that inequality is associated both with increased illusory self-enhancement and with increased system justification, which in turn help perpetuate inequality. Moreover, both attention to in-group/out-group distinctions and the possession of personal power over others strengthen the perception of “the other” as less human, which may reduce the motivation of those in power to share it more equitably.

Other factors acting to preserve or exacerbate a skewed distribution of power are political. Corporate control of the media, the unbridled influence of private money on the machinery of democracy, and the continued attacks on science and erosion of public education all ensure that the society's attention is diverted away from the root causes of its ills. Instead of being encouraged to think, the average consumer of the news, increasingly deprived, through the lack of education, of cognitive tools for critical analysis, is lured into acquiescence with the status quo by Newspeak-like memes, which pretend that freedom to die from lack of health insurance is the epitome of freedom, or that everyone in this country can “make it” if only they work hard enough.

In this seminar, we shall read and discuss a selection of academic papers that examine the cognitive, social, and political psychology of the American polity, with a particular stress on understanding the dynamics of socioeconomic inequality and on identifying possible ways, if any, of bringing about change to the better. An annotated reading list, with the readings grouped by weekly theme, appears in section 3, following some important notes for seminar participants.

2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: the inclusion statement,² ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

2.1 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are required to speak in front of the class

¹For a personal, psy-phi/sci-fi (psychological-philosophical science fiction) take on these matters, see my book, *Beginnings*.

²The remarks in section 2.1, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: <http://diversity.cornell.edu/>.

(when presenting) and are expected to contribute to the discussion on other occasions. Because *your* informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I'll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

2.2 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this seminar:

1. Attend and contribute to the discussion during the weekly meetings.

Whether or not you're presenting in a given week, please come prepared with questions or comments regarding the readings.

2. Participate in two separate weekly presentations. Each presentation/discussion will be led by a team of three or four students. The presenters should be ready for clarification questions and interruptions at any time during the presentation.

IMPORTANT: please choose your two topics and co-presenters by Labor Day (Sept. 4). To sign up for one of the presentation slots, follow this link.

A typical presentation should include

- a brief introduction to the theme and an overview of the background to each paper and its methodology;
- the findings, as illustrated by the plots or (in the absence of graphics) by a concise verbal description;
- a critique of the paper's approach;
- a summary of the paper's conclusions and their significance for the weekly theme and for the seminar's topic at large.

The presenting teams are required to meet with the instructor ahead of their presentation, to address any questions and coordinate the details.

3. A week after the last meeting, submit a written summary of your impressions and lessons from the seminar, in a short-essay form (about 1000 words).

Final grade components:

Presentations:	70%
Participation in the discussions:	10%
Final essay:	20%

3 Weekly themes and readings

Representative readings, grouped by topic, are listed below. They also appear in alphabetical order at the end of the document.

3.1 Happiness: an overview (August 28)

How can happiness be usefully defined and measured? Why, or why not, should people expect to be happy? And what does this have to do with power and money?

Readings:

1. R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci. On happiness and human potentials: a review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52:141–166, 2001.
2. R. M. Nesse. Natural selection and the elusiveness of happiness. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, series B*, 359:1333–1348, 2004.
3. Y. Gao and S. Edelman. Between pleasure and contentment: evolutionary dynamics of some possible parameters of happiness. *PLoS One*, 11(5):e0153193, 2016.
4. R. A. Easterlin. Does money buy happiness? *The Public Interest*, Winter:3–10, 1973.

Optional:

- S. Edelman. *The Happiness of Pursuit*. Basic Books, New York, NY, 2012.

3.2 Inequality and happiness (September 11)

Does *growth* lead to increased personal well-being? What about *comparative* wealth? How does *inequality* in wealth and power affect happiness?

Readings:

1. R. A. Easterlin. The happiness-income paradox revisited. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 107:22463–22468, 2010.
2. J. Delhey and U. Kohler. Is happiness inequality immune to income inequality? New evidence using instrument-effect corrected standard deviations. *Social Science Research*, 40:742–756, 2011.
3. S. Oishi, S. Kesebir, and E. Diener. Income inequality and happiness. *Psychological Science*, 22: 1095–1100, 2011.
4. E. Diener, L. Tay, and S. Oishi. Rising income and the subjective well-being of nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104:267–276, 2013.

Optional:

- R. A. Easterlin. Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence. In P. A. David and W. R. Melvin, editors, *Nations and households in economic growth*, pages 89–125. Academic Press, New York, NY, 1974.

- R. A. Easterlin. Explaining happiness. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 100:11176–11183, 2003.
- S. Oishi, U. Schimmack, and E. Diener. Progressive taxation and the subjective well-being of nations. *Psychological Science*, 23:86–92, 2012.

3.3 The poverty trap (September 18)

In light of the inter-individual differences in *intelligence*, can there be a “level playing field” in economics? What does socioeconomic disparity do to *cognitive functioning* and emotional well-being?

Readings:

1. L. S. Gottfredson. Life, death, and intelligence. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 1: 23–46, 2004.
2. A. Mani, S. Mullainathan, E. Shafir, and J. Zhao. Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*, 341: 976–980, 2013.
3. J. Haushofer and E. Fehr. On the psychology of poverty. *Science*, 344:862–867, 2014
4. G. W. Evans. Childhood poverty and adult psychological well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 113:14949–14952, 2016. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1604756114.

Optional:

- R. E. Nisbett, J. Aronson, C. Blair, W. Dickens, J. Flynn, D. F. Halpern, and E. Turkheimer. Intelligence: new findings and theoretical developments. *American Psychologist*, 2012.
- J. Haushofer. The psychology of poverty: Evidence from 43 countries, 2013
- M. Altman. Implications of behavioural economics for financial literacy and public policy. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 41:677–690, 2012.
- S. Loughnan, P. Kuppens, J. Allik, K. Balazs, S. de Lemus, K. Dumont, R. Gargurevich, I. Hidegkuti, B. Leidner, L. Matos, J. Park, A. Realo, J. Shi, V. E. Sojo, Y. y. Tong, J. Vaes, P. Verduyn, V. Yeung, and N. Haslam. Economic inequality is linked to biased self-perception. *Psychological Science*, 22: 1254–1258, 2011.

3.4 Class, elites, and inequality (September 25)

What does it mean to be part of an *elite*? Does elite status encourage deference? Does it make the person more *moral*? What is the political role of economic elites in the U.S.?

Readings:

1. S. R. Khan. The sociology of elites. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2012.
2. P. K. Piff, D. M. Stancato, S. Côté, R. Mendoza-Denton, and D. Keltner. Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 2012.

3. M. Gilens and B. I. Page. Testing theories of American politics: elites, interest groups, and average citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12:564–581, 2014.
4. M. W. Kraus, J. W. Park, and J. J. X. Tan. Signs of social class: the experience of economic inequality in everyday life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12:422–435, 2017.

Optional:

- A. N. Doob and A. E. Gross. Status of frustrator as an inhibitor of horn-honking responses. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 76:213–218, 1968.
- A. Guinote, I. Cotzia, S. Sandhu, and P. Siwa. Social status modulates prosocial behavior and egalitarianism in preschool children and adults. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 112: 731–736, 2015.

3.5 Power and inequality (October 2)

What is *power*? How does it affect inequality?

Readings:

1. V. J. Roscigno. Power, revisited. *Social Forces*, 90:349–374, 2011.
2. P. K. Smith and W. Hofmann. Power in everyday life. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 113:10043–10048, 2016.
3. J. K. Dubrow. Political inequality is international, interdisciplinary, and intersectional. *Sociology Compass*, 9:477–486, 2015. doi: 10.1111/soc4.12270.
4. J. Gaventa and B. Martorano. Inequality, power and participation — revisiting the links. *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, 47:5, 2016.

Optional:

- B. Mahault, A. Saxena, and C. Nisoli. Emergent inequality and self-organized social classes in a network of power and frustration. *PLoS One*, 12(2):e0171832, 2017.

3.6 Morality and religion: power, class, and inequality (October 16)

What is *moral*? How does *religion* weigh in on morality and inequality?

Readings:

1. J. Haidt and S. Kesebir. Morality. In S. Fiske, D. Gilbert, and G. Lindzey, editors, *Handbook of Social Psychology*, pages 797–832. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 2010. 5th Edition.
2. F. Solt, P. Habel, and J. Tobin Grant. Economic inequality, relative power, and religiosity. *Social Science Quarterly*, 92:447–465, 2011.
3. S. McCloud. Putting some class into religious studies: resurrecting an important concept. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 75:840–862, 2007.

Optional:

- M. van Zomeren, T. Postmes, R. Spears, and K. Bettache. Can moral convictions motivate the advantaged to challenge social inequality? Extending the social identity model of collective action. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 14:735–753, 2011.

3.7 Morality and religion: some empirical findings (October 23)

Some empirical findings on morality, inequality, and religion.

Readings:

1. L. D. Ross, Y. Lelkes, and A. G. Russell. How Christians reconcile their personal political views and the teachings of their faith: projection as a means of dissonance reduction. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 109:3616–3622, 2012.
2. L. R. Saslow, R. Willer, M. Feinberg, P. K. Piff, K. Clark, D. Keltner, and S. R. Saturn. My brother's keeper? Compassion predicts generosity more among less religious individuals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2012.
3. M. J. Brandt and P. J. Henry. Psychological defensiveness as a mechanism explaining the relationship between low socioeconomic status and religiosity. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 22:321–332, 2012. doi: doi:10.1080/10508619.2011.646565.

Optional:

- N. Epley, B. A. Converse, A. Delbosc, G. A. Monteleone, and J. T. Cacioppo. Believers' estimates of God's beliefs are more egocentric than estimates of other people's beliefs. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 106:21533–21538, 2009.

3.8 Evolutionary factors (October 30)

How is *evolution* relevant to power and *politics*?

Readings:

1. M. Fieder and S. Huber. An evolutionary account of status, power, and career in modern societies. *Human Nature*, 2012.
2. D. S. Rogers, O. Deshpande, and M. W. Feldman. The spread of inequality. *PLoS ONE*, 6(9):e24683, 2011. doi: doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0024683.
3. A. Kong, M. L. Frigge, G. Thorleifsson, H. Stefansson, A. I. Young, F. Zink, G. A. Jonsdottir, A. Okbay, P. Sulem, G. Masson, D. F. Gudbjartsson, A. Helgason, G. Bjornsdottir, U. Thorsteinsdottir, and K. Stefansson. Selection against variants in the genome associated with educational attainment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, pages E727–E732, 2017. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1612113114.

Optional:

- J. R. Alford, P. K. Hatemi, J. R. Hibbing, N. G. Martin, and L. J. Eaves. The politics of mate choice. *The Journal of Politics*, 73:362–379, 2011.
- C. A. Klobstad, R. McDermott, and P. K. Hatemi. Do bedroom eyes wear political glasses? The role of politics in human mate attraction. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 33:100–108, 2012.
- C. Kandler, W. Bleidorn, and R. Riemann. Left or right? Sources of political orientation: The roles of genetic factors, cultural transmission, assortative mating, and personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102:633–645, 2012.

3.9 The dynamics of inequality: individual views and interventions (November 6)

Is inequality actually desirable? Can its effects be mitigated?

Readings:

1. R. H. Frank. Positional externalities cause large and preventable welfare losses. *The American Economic Review*, 95:137–141, 2005.
2. T. Saguy, N. Tausch, J. F. Dovidio, and F. Pratto. The irony of harmony: intergroup contact can produce false expectations for equality. *Psychological Science*, 20:114–121, 2009.
3. K. Savani and A. Rattan. A choice mind-set increases the acceptance and maintenance of wealth inequality. *Psychological Science*, 23:796–804, 2012.
4. M. L. Sands. Exposure to inequality affects support for redistribution. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 114:663–668, 2017. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1615010113.

Optional:

- J. Delhey, K. Newton, and C. Welzel. How general is trust in “most people”? Solving the radius of trust problem. *American Sociological Review*, 76:786–807, 2011.
- T. L. Stewart, I. M. Latu, N. R. Branscombe, and H. T. Denney. Yes we can! Prejudice reduction through seeing (inequality) and believing (in social change). *Psychological Science*, 21:1557–1562, 2010.

3.10 The dynamics of inequality: public policy (November 13)

Can the effects of inequality on happiness be alleviated through *public policy*? Are things only going to get worse, or is *change to the better* possible?

Readings:

1. C. Starmans, M. Sheskin, and P. Bloom. Why people prefer unequal societies. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1:0082, 2017. doi: 10.1038/s41562-017-0082.
2. J. Haidt, P. Seder, and S. Kesebir. Hive psychology, happiness, and public policy. *Journal of Legal Studies*, 37:S133–S156, 2008.

3. A. C. Kay, D. Gaucher, J. M. Peach, K. Laurin, K. Friesen, J. Friesen, M. P. Zanna, and S. J. Spencer. Inequality, discrimination, and the power of the status quo: Direct evidence for a motivation to see the way things are as the way they should be. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97:421–434, 2009.
4. A. Madestam, D. Shoag, S. Veuger, and D. Yanagizawa-Drott. Do political protests matter? Evidence from the Tea Party movement. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128:1633–1685, 2013. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjt021.

Optional:

- R. Veenhoven. Is happiness a trait? Tests of the theory that a better society does not make people any happier. *Social Indicators Research*, 32:101–160, 1994.
- K. Savani, N. M. Stephens, and H. R. Markus. The unanticipated interpersonal and societal consequences of choice: victim blaming and reduced support for the public good. *Psychological Science*, 22:795–802, 2011.

3.11 The dynamics of inequality: prospects (November 20)

Are things only going to get worse, or is change to the better possible?

Readings:

1. D. S. Rogers, A. K. Duraiappah, D. C. Antons, P. Munoz, X. Bai, M. Fragkias, and H. Gutscher. A vision for human well-being: transition to social sustainability. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 4:61–73, 2012.
2. A. Bonica, N. McCarty, K. T. Poole, and H. Rosenthal. Why hasn't democracy slowed rising inequality? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27:103–124, 2013.
3. T. Piketty and E. Saez. Inequality in the long run. *Science*, 344:838–843, 2014.
4. F. Alvaredo, L. Chancel, T. Piketty, E. Saez, and G. Zucman. Global inequality dynamics: new findings from WID.world. Technical report, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017. URL <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23119>.

Optional:

- A. Banerjee, E. Duflo, N. Goldberg, D. Karlan, R. Osei, W. Parienté, J. Shapiro, B. Thuysbaert, and C. Udry. A multifaceted program causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries. *Science*, 348:772, 2015.
- A. Carnevale and J. Strohl. How increasing college access is increasing inequality, and what to do about it. In R. D. Kahlenberg, editor, *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*, chapter 3, pages 71–207. The Century Foundation Press, 2010.

3.12 Closing remarks and discussion (November 27)

Is the status quo acceptable? If not, what *should* be done? Is there anything that *can* be done?

Readings:

1. U. K. Le Guin. The ones who walk away from Omelas. In R. Silverberg, editor, *New Dimensions 3*, pages 1–8. Nelson Doubleday, 1973.
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References

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- F. Alvaredo, L. Chancel, T. Piketty, E. Saez, and G. Zucman. Global inequality dynamics: new findings from WID.world. Technical report, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017. URL <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23119>.
- A. Banerjee, E. Duflo, N. Goldberg, D. Karlan, R. Osei, W. Parienté, J. Shapiro, B. Thuysbaert, and C. Udry. A multifaceted program causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries. *Science*, 348:772, 2015.
- A. Bonica, N. McCarty, K. T. Poole, and H. Rosenthal. Why hasn't democracy slowed rising inequality? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27:103–124, 2013.
- M. J. Brandt and P. J. Henry. Psychological defensiveness as a mechanism explaining the relationship between low socioeconomic status and religiosity. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 22:321–332, 2012. doi: doi:10.1080/10508619.2011.646565.
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- J. Delhey and U. Kohler. Is happiness inequality immune to income inequality? New evidence using instrument-effect corrected standard deviations. *Social Science Research*, 40:742–756, 2011.
- J. Delhey, K. Newton, and C. Welzel. How general is trust in “most people”? Solving the radius of trust problem. *American Sociological Review*, 76:786–807, 2011.
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- S. Edelman. *Computing the mind: how the mind really works*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2008.
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- C. Kandler, W. Bleidorn, and R. Riemann. Left or right? Sources of political orientation: The roles of genetic factors, cultural transmission, assortative mating, and personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102:633–645, 2012.
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- C. A. Klofstad, R. McDermott, and P. K. Hatemi. Do bedroom eyes wear political glasses? The role of politics in human mate attraction. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 33:100–108, 2012.
- A. Kong, M. L. Frigge, G. Thorleifsson, H. Stefansson, A. I. Young, F. Zink, G. A. Jonsdottir, A. Okbay, P. Sulem, G. Masson, D. F. Gudbjartsson, A. Helgason, G. Bjornsdottir, U. Thorsteinsdottir, and K. Stefansson. Selection against variants in the genome associated with educational attainment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, pages E727–E732, 2017. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1612113114.
- M. W. Kraus, J. W. Park, and J. J. X. Tan. Signs of social class: the experience of economic inequality in everyday life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12:422–435, 2017.
- U. K. Le Guin. The ones who walk away from Omelas. In R. Silverberg, editor, *New Dimensions 3*, pages 1–8. Nelson Doubleday, 1973.
- S. Loughnan, P. Kuppens, J. Allik, K. Balazs, S. de Lemus, K. Dumont, R. Gargurevich, I. Hidegkuti, B. Leidner, L. Matos, J. Park, A. Realo, J. Shi, V. E. Sojo, Y. y. Tong, J. Vaes, P. Verduyn, V. Yeung, and N. Haslam. Economic inequality is linked to biased self-perception. *Psychological Science*, 22:1254–1258, 2011.
- A. Madestam, D. Shoag, S. Veuger, and D. Yanagizawa-Drott. Do political protests matter? Evidence from the Tea Party movement. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128:1633–1685, 2013. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjt021.
- B. Mahault, A. Saxena, and C. Nisoli. Emergent inequality and self-organized social classes in a network of power and frustration. *PLoS One*, 12(2):e0171832, 2017.
- A. Mani, S. Mullainathan, E. Shafir, and J. Zhao. Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*, 341:976–980, 2013.
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