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 advertised in the United States’ Declaration of Independence. 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 \cite{Edelman2008,Edelman2012}. The human potential for happiness, such as it is, cannot, however, be realized if circumstances consistently oppose it. Contrary to the popular myth of the happy pauper, studies show that widespread chronic financial hardship and insecurity and the inequality in power and in income and wealth distribution — two systemic/structural characteristics that define the American political economy and that the recent Great Recession has merely 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 our “democracy,” and the continued attacks on science and the erosion of public education all ensure that the people’s attention is diverted away from the root causes of society’s 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 \ref{reading-list} following some important notes for seminar participants.

2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: the inclusion statement\footnote{For a personal, psy-phi/sci-fi (psychological-philosophical science fiction) take on these matters, see my book, \textit{Beginnings}.} 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.\footnote{The remarks in section \ref{diversity-and-inclusion} 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: \url{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 two to 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 Tuesday, Sept. 10. To sign up for presentation, 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 Introduction and an overview of the readings (Sept. 9)

The American pipe dream?

Readings:


Optional:


3.2 Happiness: an overview (Sept. 16)

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:


Optional:


3.3 Inequality and happiness (Sept. 23)

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

Readings:


Optional:


3.4 The poverty trap (Sept. 30)

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:


Optional:

- J. Haushofer. The psychology of poverty: Evidence from 43 countries, 2013
3.5 Class, elites, and inequality (Oct. 7)

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:


Optional:


3.6 Power and inequality (Oct. 21)

What is power? How does it affect inequality?

Readings:


Optional:

3.7 Morality and religion: power, class, and inequality (Oct. 28)

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

Readings:


Optional:


3.8 Morality and religion: some empirical findings (Nov. 4)

Some empirical findings on morality, inequality, and religion.

Readings:


Optional:


3.9 Evolutionary factors (Nov. 11)

How is evolution relevant to power and politics?

Readings:


Optional:


### 3.10 The dynamics of inequality: individual views and interventions (Nov. 18)

Inequality and happiness, revisited. Attitudes toward inequality.

**Readings:**


Optional:


3.11 The dynamics of inequality: development, action, and change (Nov. 25)

How do people’s views on inequality develop? Can the effects of inequality on happiness be alleviated through public policy? Through collective action?

Readings:


Optional:


3.12 The dynamics of inequality: prospects (Dec. 2)

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

Readings:


Optional:


3.13 Closing remarks and discussion (Dec. 9)

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

Readings:


References


