Inequality, Power, and Happiness

Shimon Edelman
Department of Psychology
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
http://kybele.psych.cornell.edu/~edelman

August 9, 2015

1 The motivation: determinants and dynamics of (un)happiness

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). 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.

2 Ideas and questions to explore

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

2.1 Happiness: an overview

How can happiness be usefully defined and measured? Why should people expect to be happy?


2.2 Inequality and happiness

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

2.3 Cognitive factors and the psychology of poverty

What can intelligence differences do to a “level playing field”? And what does socioeconomic disparity do to cognitive functioning?

- J. Haushofer. The psychology of poverty: Evidence from 43 countries, 2013

2.4 Evolution, inequality, and politics

How might evolutionary factors such as assortative mating contribute to changes in inequality in the long run? Is evolution relevant to politics?

2.5 The psychology of class and power

What does it mean to be part of an *elite*? Does elite status encourage deference? Does it make the person more *moral*? How do in-group/out-group dynamics affect people’s *trust* in each other and their perception of inequality? Is inequality moral?


2.6 The psychology of morality

What is *morality*, anyway? How can moral behavior be promoted? Does *religion* help?

2.7 The dynamics of power and inequality

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?

References


