

Inequality, Power, and Happiness

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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?

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

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?

- 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. The happiness-income paradox revisited. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 107:22463–22468, 2010.
- S. Oishi, S. Kesebir, and E. Diener. Income inequality and happiness. *Psychological Science*, 22: 1095–1100, 2011.
- 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.
- S. Oishi, U. Schimmack, and E. Diener. Progressive taxation and the subjective well-being of nations. *Psychological Science*, 23:86–92, 2012.
- 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.

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*?

- L. S. Gottfredson. Life, death, and intelligence. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 1: 23–46, 2004.
- 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.
- M. Altman. Implications of behavioural economics for financial literacy and public policy. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 41:677–690, 2012.
- R. A. Easterlin. Explaining happiness. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 100:11176–11183, 2003.
- A. Mani, S. Mullainathan, E. Shafir, and J. Zhao. Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*, 341: 976–980, 2013.
- J. Haushofer. The psychology of poverty: Evidence from 43 countries, 2013
- J. Haushofer and E. Fehr. On the psychology of poverty. *Science*, 344:862–867, 2014

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*?

- N. J. Boogert, T. W. Fawcett, and L. Lefebvre. Mate choice for cognitive traits: a review of the evidence in nonhuman vertebrates. *Behavioral Ecology*, 22:447–459, 2011.
- F. Mateos-Gonzalez, J. Quesada, and J. C. Senar. Sexy birds are superior at solving a foraging problem. *Biology Letters*, 7:668–669, 2011.
- M. Fieder and S. Huber. An evolutionary account of status, power, and career in modern societies. *Human Nature*, 2012.
- 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. 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.
- 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.
- B. W. Dominguea, J. Fletcher, D. Conley, and J. D. Boardman. Genetic and educational assortative mating among US adults. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 111:7996–8000, 2014.

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?

- S. R. Khan. The sociology of elites. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2012.
- 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.
- 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.
- V. J. Roscigno. Power, revisited. *Social Forces*, 90:349–374, 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.
- 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.
- M. Gilens and B. I. Page. Testing theories of American politics: elites, interest groups, and average citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12:564–581, 2014.
- 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.
- U. K. Le Guin. The ones who walk away from Omelas. In R. Silverberg, editor, *New Dimensions 3*, pages 1–8. Nelson Doubleday, 1973.

2.6 The psychology of morality

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

- 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.
- S. Edelman. *Computing the mind: how the mind really works*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2008. Chapter 10.2: Ethics.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- S. Atran and J. Ginges. Religious and sacred imperatives in human conflict. *Science*, 336:855–857, 2012.
- F. Solt, P. Habel, and J. Tobin Grant. Economic inequality, relative power, and religiosity. *Social Science Quarterly*, 92:447–465, 2011.

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?

- R. H. Frank. Positional externalities cause large and preventable welfare losses. *The American Economic Review*, 95:137–141, 2005.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- J. Haidt, P. Seder, and S. Kesebir. Hive psychology, happiness, and public policy. *Journal of Legal Studies*, 37:S133–S156, 2008.
- 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.
- 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.
- K. Savani and A. Rattan. A choice mind-set increases the acceptance and maintenance of wealth inequality. *Psychological Science*, 23:796–804, 2012.
- T. Piketty and E. Saez. Inequality in the long run. *Science*, 344:838–843, 2014.
- 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 hasnt democracy slowed rising inequality? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27:103–124, 2013.

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- M. Altman. Implications of behavioural economics for financial literacy and public policy. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 41:677–690, 2012.
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- 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.
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