

GES1041 / GESS1029

Inequality in Perspective

LECTURE 3

DARYL OOI

Week 3: Inequality in perspective

Required reading:

- *T.M. Scanlon. 1997/2003. 'The diversity of objections to inequality'. *The Lindley Lecture*. Excluding section II.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615153.012>

Supplementary resources:

- Institute of Policy Studies 30th Anniversary Panel: 'Unequal and immobile structures'
'<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/events/details/ips-30th-anniversary-diversities-new-and-old>
- Thomas Christiano. 2013. 'Equality'. In *Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
<http://linc.nus.edu.sg/record=b3590782>
- Jonathan Wolff. 2015. 'Social equality and social inequality'. In *Social Equality: On What It Means to be Equals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
<http://linc.nus.edu.sg/record=b3498859>



File: Scanlon (2003), The diversity of objections to inequality.pdf (322.47 KB)

Overview

1. **Review: moral values and social structures**
2. Analysis: objections to inequality
3. Exercise: 'Inequality per se'
4. Assignment: Reading Quiz 1

‘The self-reliant Singaporean’

- **Self-reliance and social support:** ‘Self-reliance is highly valorized as a trait Singaporeans should strive to maintain. It is defined around continuous employment and lifelong savings; self-reliance is about accumulating money from employment to pay for housing, healthcare, and education. Self-reliance is about not relying on the state or on society for these needs.’ (Teo 2017, 3-4)
- **Hidden dependence:** ‘While people who are employed are working outside the home, there are people who are doing housework, running errands, caring for children and the elderly. People doing wage work are highly dependent on people doing unpaid labor.’ (4)
- **Individual failure:** ‘Applying for aid therefore involves a strong assumption of individual failure. One has to admit that they or their family members have failed in this basic requirement of them as members of society.’ (5)

‘Helping families’

- **Healthcare and childcare subsidies:** ‘They say the poor are struggling because help often comes with onerous conditions; that people do not go to work because they cannot find suitable childcare arrangements, and that they do not qualify for childcare subsidies because they are not working. But the facts disprove these claims. There are extensive healthcare and childcare subsidies available to mothers in low-income households, including those who are not working.’ (Osman 2018, 2)
- **Social structures:** ‘I disagree. I believe, like other families in Singapore, that these research respondents also have hopes and dreams, and they too appreciate the value of work, can acquire self-confidence and self-reliance and achieve their aspirations. What they need is the right kind of structured help and intervention. Helps which comes with a trusting relationship, respecting and giving them self-confidence and hope, and which makes them realise that they have to do their part.’ (3)

Exercise: ‘The facts disprove’

1. What values and interests do Teo (2017) and Osman (2018) share?
2. What do they really disagree on?

What values and interests do Teo and Osman share?

1. While trying to provide aid for the people suffering, the state is still trying to push for Singaporeans to be more self-reliant.
2. Both agree that the poor deserves the rights to be treated fairly (person centered values)
3. Self efficacy
4. The state has a large responsibility to offer aid, but not to an extent such that it doesn't cripple the people receiving help.
5. They both agree that the poor should be treated fairly despite their financial status.
6. State should intervene and help but they should help themselves as well.
7. Both agree that the poor are willing to work hard (virtue of character)

Overview

1. Review: moral values and social structures
2. **Analysis: objections to inequality**
3. Exercise: 'Inequality per se'
4. Assignment: Reading Quiz 1

Scanlon's approach to inequality

1. **Pluralist:** 'My reasons for favoring equality are in fact quite diverse, and that most of them can be traced back to fundamental values other than equality itself. The idea that equality is, in itself, a fundamental moral value turns out to play a surprisingly limited role in my reasons for thinking that many of the forms of inequality which we see around us should be eliminated.' (202)
2. **Provisional:** 'I assume that it is still only one moral idea among others, which might have to be sacrificed or balanced for the sake of other values.' (206)
 - Freedom of choice
 - Economic efficiency
 - Cultural achievement

Five objections to inequality

1. Suffering or severe deprivation
2. Stigmatising differences in status
3. Unacceptable power or domination over others
4. Unequal starting places
5. Unequal shares of socially produced benefits

Objection 1: Suffering or severe deprivation

- **Humanitarian concern:** ‘The impulse at work here is not essentially egalitarian. No intrinsic importance is attached to narrowing or eliminating the gap between rich and poor...’ (Scanlon 2003, 203)
- **Gap as opportunity:** ‘...this gap is important only because it provides an opportunity – a way of reducing the suffering of some without causing others to suffer a similar fate – and the strength of this reason for moving toward greater equality is a function of the urgency of the claims of those who are worse off.’

Objection 2: Stigmatising differences in status

- **Status differences:** ‘Social practices conferring privileges of rank or requiring expressions of deference are objectionable on this ground...Large differences in material well-being can be objectionable on the same ground: when the mode of life enjoyed by some people sets the norm for a society, those who are much worse off will feel inferiority and shame at the way they must live.’ (204)
- **Equal regard:** ‘The ideal of a society in which people all regard one another as equals – has played an important role in radical egalitarian thinking – a more important role than the idea of distributive justice which dominates much discussion of equality in our own time.’

Objection 3: Unacceptable power or domination

- **Control over others:** '[Inequalities] give some people an unacceptable degree of control over the lives of others.' (205)
- **Kinds and norms:** 'Those who have vastly greater resources than anyone else not only enjoy greater leisure and higher levels of consumption but also can often determine what gets produced, what kinds of employment are offered, what the environment of a town or state is like, and what kind of life one can live there.'

Objection 4: Unequal starting places

- **Condition of procedural fairness:** ‘Some forms of equality are essential preconditions for the fairness of certain processes, and the aim of making or keeping those processes fair may therefore give us a reason to oppose inequalities of these kinds, at least when they are very large.’ (205)
- **Equality of opportunity:** ‘The idea of equality of opportunity – as expressed in the familiar metaphors of a “fair race” or “a level playing field” – provides a familiar example of this fourth reason for objecting to inequality.’

Objection 5: Unequal shares of socially produced benefits

- **Participants in cooperative enterprise:** ‘the basic institutions of a society should be seen as a cooperative enterprise producing certain benefits, and that citizens, as free and equal participants in this process, have (at least prima facie) equal claim to the benefits they collectively produce.’ (207)
- **Basic needs vs. well-being:** ‘This premise does not lead to the conclusion that people should be equal in all respects, but only in their shares of these socially produced benefits. It therefore provides a plausible basis for some form of equality of resources.’”

Overview

1. Review: moral values and social structures
2. Analysis: objections to inequality
3. **Exercise: 'Inequality per se'**
4. Assignment: Reading Quiz 1

Myth #3

- ‘Policymakers should not worry about inequality per se. As long as there are opportunities for all to a good education, high social mobility will dampen people’s demands for a fairer distribution of income. Furthermore, as long as everyone’s incomes are rising, the fact that incomes at the top are rising much faster than those at the bottom is not a cause for concern...Meanwhile, extreme poverty can be addressed with targeted measures such as social assistance. These limited welfare programmes for the indigent and those who cannot work and have no other means of financial support are affordable so long as they are strictly means-tested.’ (Low 2014, 23-4)
- ‘The underlying assumption behind this myth is that people care only about their absolute, and not relative, levels of income. So long as my income is rising, I should be happy and should not begrudge my neighbour’s income rising at a faster rate. To do so is irrational, and governments should not pander to my irrationality or green-eyed envy by redistributing income from my neighbour to me. Parents should also teach their children to be satisfied with what they have and not compare themselves with those who have more.’

Exercise: 'Inequality per se'

1. Which objection to inequality is addressed in Myth #3?
2. Which objection to inequality is neglected in Myth #3?

Overview

1. Review: moral values and social structures
2. Analysis: objections to inequality
3. Exercise: 'Inequality per se'
4. **Assignment: Reading Quiz 1**

Reading quizzes (20%)

- 4 quizzes in Weeks 4, 6, 8, 10
- 5 MCQs each on required readings only
- Submit in LumiNUS Quiz by Friday 2359
- Focus on **reading comprehension** and **concept application**
- Follow the **page numbers** provided
- Choose the **best answer**, on the basis of the required readings

Week 3 Online activities

1. Word cloud

https://PollEv.com/free_text_polls/G9pPjq6A50Hptk6EuBsqq/respond

2. MCQ

https://PollEv.com/multiple_choice_polls/9ya8lXGjA8ZFZTB1vL5EY/respond

3. General Q&A

<https://PollEv.com/discourses/Wx5PmDVMkpRo0kNTomxPG/respond>

Thank you.

Instructor

Daryl Ooi darylloi@nus.edu.sg

Tutor

Nicholas Loo nick.loo@nus.edu.sg

Zoom hours

Fri 12-2pm (via LumiNUS Conferencing)