

Social inequality

Myths and facts: Rawls' veil of ignorance

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World of Difference

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on Social Inequality

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1.1

Rawls' veil of ignorance

Gwen Van Eijk en Sabine Roeser

What happens when two children have to share a cookie? It depends. Chances of getting an equal division are best when one child divides the cookie and the other is allowed to choose first. This is less likely to happen when one child divides the cookie and gives part of it away. This example illustrates the point of a famous thought experiment designed by philosopher John Rawls to explain the 'veil of ignorance'. Imagine that no one knows what his or her preferences, abilities or position in society will be – because this is covered by a veil of ignorance – what kind of society would we want to live in?

This thought experiment invites us to think about fairness, equality and justice. Those who choose to have a society that is very hard on people with few abilities or who are born into a group with a low social status, might suffer if they happen to end up as someone with few abilities or belonging to a low-status group. This way of thinking thus helps us transform self-interest into general interest. A similar principle underlies insurances: everybody contributes an equal share, not knowing who will be the one needing a smaller or larger payment or nothing at all. This justice principle can be threatened when insurances refuse to accept people who are considered high risk (e.g., because they suffer from a chronic illness), or give discounts to those who are unlikely to undergo costly medical treatments (e.g., students).

different outcomes simply reflect differences in capabilities and priorities? Do they result from diverging choices? Is it a matter of chance that some people are lucky while others suffer misfortune? So are some people often lucky while others encounter misfortune every time? How can this be? What are the consequences of these inequalities? Can they be ignored, or should we try to tackle them; and if so, how? In the public debate on social inequality different kinds of explanations are offered, for instance by journalists or politicians. Scholars who engage in this debate tend to address specific issues, or only consider their own disciplinary perspective. With all these competing analyses being put forth, it is easy to lose heart and conclude that the origins of social inequality are so complex that a solution is out of our reach. We thus tend to close our eyes to the inequality that exists, because we don't see how it could be resolved. We assume it does not matter what we do; we hope that things will be sorted out in the end, or we trust others to take care of them. These are all missed opportunities. We need to acknowledge the problems we face before we can address them, for they will not be resolved by themselves. If we do nothing, things will only get worse. Because it truly matters what we do – or fail to do.

How?

This book aims to shed new light on the debate on social in-

equality. We brought together academic experts from a variety of disciplines to examine this issue in depth. Throughout the book, we take a moral perspective (see [Box 1.1](#)): What is fair? What kind of world do we want to live in? By taking these questions as our starting point and combining knowledge from different academic disciplines, we evaluate the conceptions held by the public against scholarly knowledge in order to separate facts from myths.

This book captures our collective insights in an integrated analysis. The consequences of social inequality are made visible in photographs and statistics, because we have to face reality, however unpleasant it may be, instead of turning a blind eye. In this book we explain why many measures are not particularly effective, and draw on scientific knowledge to elucidate what kinds of solutions are necessary and feasible.

Resolving social inequality seems a daunting task, because it touches upon different areas of life. When we think about social inequality, we tend to focus on the differences between people, for instance in income and living standards. But such differences are closely linked to other important life outcomes (see [Box 1.2](#)), such as health and life expectancy or educational level and career opportunities. Social differences also play a role on a larger scale, for example in the movements and absorption of migrants, or in the way we use our natural habitat and deal with ecological hazards.

Common roots

Richard Wilkinson

We tend to think that inequalities in different areas – in health, education, or opportunities for children – are separate problems. They are often discussed as injustices requiring different remedial policies. But although many policies which would improve health would make little difference to education and vice versa, it is essential to recognise that most of the problems rooted in relative deprivation also share some powerful common causes.

Most of the problems which within any society are more common lower down the social ladder, get worse when differences in income and wealth between rich and poor get larger. Basically, problems related to social status get worse when social status differences get bigger. As a result, countries with wider income gaps between rich and poor have higher rates of a range of social problems (such as homicide rates and level of mental illness) compared with more equal countries (see [Figure 2](#)).

This pattern is partly explained by the way bigger income differences increase the scale of relative deprivation. But although inequality has its biggest effects among the poorest, it leads to worse outcomes across all sections of society. That is because bigger income differences make class and status – social position – more important throughout society. Those with lower status are eager to climb, and those with higher status are fearful to lose their status. Status anxiety increases in all income groups and, as status competition increases, social relations, community life and our willingness to trust others declines.