What is social inequality?

Robert M. Blackburn

Cambridge University, Social Science Research Group, Social and Political Sciences, Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explain the difference between social inequality and identity.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a conceptual view.

Findings – The paper notes that the concepts are often confused, as in arguments that equality is impossible because everyone is different. It is pointed out that equality and inequality are not opposites; that equality is simply the zero point on the infinite range of inequality. The existence of inequality depends on socially recognised difference. The difference may often be simply a basis for socially imposed inequalities, as with ethnicity and gender, or it may be a real cause of inequality as with health differences. Nine important inter-related bases of inequality are considered. Equality does not require zero inequality on all aspects but merely a balance of inequalities. However, the complexity means it is difficult to define or recognise total equality. The nearest would be that all individuals are regarded and treated as equally important. The zero point of inequality may be unattainable, but the real issue is the actual extent of inequality, which could be very substantially reduced.

Originality/value – This original paper is of value in correcting some misconceptions and improving understanding of an important subject.

Keywords Gender, Social stratification, Individual psychology, Equal opportunities, Ethnic minorities

Paper type Conceptual paper

The extent of inequality around the world is enormous. From one country to another and within each country there are huge economic inequalities. We see this clearly in the pricing of goods made in the poorer countries for sale in the affluent ones. Only a tiny proportion of the selling price goes to the workers who make the goods. For example, in the rich countries, like those of Europe and North America, people pay quite substantial sums for a pair of trainers, while those who make them do not even receive enough to live, yet when they die there are others to take their places. Others do rather better. For instance, in 1992 baseball superstar Michael Jordan received more than $20,000,000 for advertising Nike shoes; this was more than the entire payroll for the six Indonesian factories that made them (Breverton, 1996). Such inequalities have continued to the present, indeed the $100,000,000 paid to Tiger Woods in 2000 dwarfs Jordan's riches (Nosweat, 2003). Inequalities of wealth are equally stark, with a few hyper-rich owning much of the world's wealth. The contrasts between rich and poor countries are well known, and even in affluent Britain, without any hyper-rich, the richest 1 per cent own 23 per cent of wealth (ONS, 2006, Table 5.24).

While economic inequalities are striking and important, social inequality embraces much more. Social inequality “is the condition where people have unequal access to valued resources, services, and positions in the society” (Kerbo, 2003, p. 11). Here, we are concerned with the inequalities entailed in social stratification: power, class, status, money and lifestyle.

Social inequality has been increasing throughout the world, and as it increased it has become fashionable to ignore it. As Dworkin (2000, p. 1) puts it, equality has become “the endangered species of political ideals”. Social scientists and politicians do not ignore it totally, but they no longer appear to give it high priority. Yet it is
fundamentally important. However, even when it is considered, understanding is hampered by confusion of meaning. It is important, therefore, to be clear just what is social inequality.

Identity or equality

A common confusion arises from failing to appreciate the difference between identity and equality. Identity is a much stronger relationship indicating two items are essentially the same. This does not mean the items are really the same item, as when it was discovered that the morning star was the same star as the evening star. It applies to two distinct items. Identical twins would be an example except that twins are never absolutely and totally identical; perhaps cloned twins would fit the requirement of identity.

The symbol for identity is $\equiv$, while the symbol for equality is the familiar $=\text{.}$

The difference between the two concepts can be neatly illustrated geometrically with triangles that are congruent (identical), or equal in size.

In Figure 1, all three triangles have exactly equal area, but only the first two are identical since they have exactly the same shape[1].

Frequently, we find in social science arguments that equality is presented as requiring identity. For instance in some research on gender we find it argued that for equality women and men should do exactly the same jobs – that women should do whatever men do (e.g. European Commission, 2007)[2]. Yet if women and men tend to value and want different things in their work, it would not necessarily be equality for both sexes to have identical occupational distributions. Occupations vary widely in their personal, social and economic attractiveness, entailing considerable inequality among men and among women as well as between the sexes, but no egalitarian would suggest that the solution would be for everyone to do the same job.

Degrees of inequality

Another common error is to regard equality and inequality as opposites. In the English language, prefixing “in” to a word normally indicates an opposite. This is not so for equality, however, as Figure 2 illustrates. The line represents degrees of inequality.

Equality is simply the single zero point on the continuum of inequality which varies from 0 to $\infty$. We may not have a conception of infinite inequality, but all that is required mathematically is that we do not have a conception of an upper limit. Whatever degree of inequality exists in a particular situation, we can always imagine greater inequality. The point X indicates a possible degree of inequality. It is placed well away from the zero point as inequalities are generally substantial, as our opening examples illustrate.

![Figure 1. Identical and equal triangles](image1.png)

![Figure 2. Equality and inequality](image2.png)
Some have argued that social equality is impossible (e.g. Michels, 1911/1967; Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939), and we shall return to this presently. The important point to recognise here, however, is that the level of inequality $X$ can vary and potentially could be very much smaller.

**False equality**

France (1923, p. 113) observed:

> The law, in its majestic impartiality forbids the rich, as well as the poor, to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.

This neatly illustrates the potential inadequacy of specific forms of equality in a fundamentally unequal society. The relevance of the law depends on a degree of inequality where the poor might need to engage in these illegal activities. It does not mean that any form of equality legislation, which directly effects only part of the population is false equality. For instance, extending the right to vote until it applied equally to all adult citizens was a genuine move in the direction of equality. The false nature arises when nominal equality entails significant advantages or disadvantages for particular sections of the population. Society allows the poor, as well as the rich, to live in expensive houses, to own racehorses and to relax on their own luxury yachts. Being permitted to own racehorses, like being forbidden to sleep under bridges, is an irrelevant equality.

Taxation provides a neat example of the problem of equality in an unequal society, in this case unequal in income. Everyone paying exactly the same tax might appear to be not merely a situation of equality but of identity. However, the social meaning of such a tax depends on the income level of the payer, so this is false equality. If each paid tax as a proportion of income, we would come closer to equality in a social sense, but the meaning for the payers would still vary. It is hard to imagine a system of taxation where the amount paid seemed an equal cost to all regardless of income variations. Without equality of income, perhaps in the sense of in proportion to needs, there can be no clear meaning to equality of taxation.

A classic variant on false equality is the idea of equality of opportunity. This concept is much beloved of politicians, who frequently declare their support for the principle, because it sounds good but leads nowhere. It entails a logical contradiction. If there are opportunities, which are understood as opportunities to move up in the stratification structure, then there must be a structure of inequality. This is accepted by advocates of equality of opportunity. However, if the structure is unequal, people start from different positions and some are more advantaged than others; opportunities are unequal. It might be argued that the equality applies to young people starting out on careers when their family background is irrelevant, but a minimal knowledge of empirical social science shows this is non-sense (Breen and Jonsson, 2005). It is like a handicap race where runners start in different positions along the track. Apart from this, once the race has started everyone has an equal chance of winning[3].

This does not mean that individuals cannot have equal opportunities. On the contrary, this is to be expected sometimes, unless we argue that if two people differ in any respect – if they are not identical – their opportunities cannot be equal. We are concerned here with social equality of opportunity, as equality of opportunity is usually conceived, which requires that all in a society have this equality. It is sometimes held that a strength of American democracy is that any citizen can become President, in contrast to the restricted opportunities to become Queen of Britain, but
the chance of a poor black woman becoming President is well below that of a wealthy white man. The nominal equality is socially non-existent. It might be thought that opportunities can be equal if the opportunities do not imply inequality. However, it is not possible to think of a situation of social opportunity where some element of inequality is not involved. Quite simply, in our unequal societies opportunities can never be equal[4].

**Difference and equality**

It is sometimes argued that everyone is different, so equality is impossible. It is pointed out that some people are stronger, bigger or cleverer than others, and furthermore people have different aims and values. Without differences there could be no inequality, but sometimes the logic is reversed. Pursuing equality is said to lead to the rejection of difference; it is claimed equality creates sameness and suppresses social diversity (e.g. Novak, 1991). The counterpart to this argument is that difference precludes equality. For instance occupational gender segregation, the tendency for women and men to work in different occupations, has often been treated as a form of inequality (eg. Blau and Hendricks, 1979; Boyd et al., 1991; Weeden, 1998). In fact, although the occupational segregation does entail an element of inequality, there is a larger component of difference without inequality (Blackburn and Jarman, 2005). More generally, Dworkin (1996) points out that freedom (which is closely related to difference) and equality are not mutually opposed but reinforcing[5]. Indeed, the crucial point is clear: equality which is not identity requires that people (or whatever are being discussed) are different. There may be problems in achieving equality, but to claim difference makes equality impossible is a logical fallacy.

While difference does not necessarily entail inequality, there is an important relation. In the first place, it is logically necessary for difference to exist before there can be any inequality. Furthermore, the very existence of difference provides a potential basis for inequality which can lead to the social creation of inequalities, as we shall see.

**Bases of inequality**

It should be noted that the term “inequality” is often applied to concepts that are not, in themselves, inequalities. For instance, when we speak of ethnic or gender inequalities, we refer to differences that happen to be associated with inequalities of status, income and so on; we have no measures of intrinsic inequality between Indians and Chinese or between men and women. The social bases of inequality can be both cause and consequence of inequalities.

The bases of social inequality are diverse, and vary by logical type. The inequalities are based on identifiable criteria, with varying kinds of social relevance. The one thing that is consistent is the differentiation into those who lose out and those who gain, with varying degrees of gain and loss. It is not always the same people who are advantaged or disadvantaged, although the net outcomes tend to be mutually reinforcing.

Ethnic inequality has no rational basis. It may, nevertheless, be very clear, as with the extreme dominance of ethnic Chinese in Asia (Chua, 2004) or of whites in many countries of the other continents. There are historical reasons, particularly the many years of the powerful Chinese empire and the more recent European empires. Yet this does not explain the persistent reproduction of ethnic dominance. No doubt visible physical characteristics, such as skin colour, play their part.
Inequalities may also relate to immigration and the recentness of arrival in a country. Newly arrived immigrants may often fill the low-paid unattractive jobs that established people avoid. Yet blacks in the USA, who have been there longer than many waves of immigrants, have always remained disadvantaged – more so than in Brazil where there were more black slaves. To understand the persistence of ethnic inequality, we need to appreciate its relation to other aspects of the structure and reproduction of social inequality (cf. Loury et al., 2005).

Gender provides a good example where difference has led to inequality. Gender differences which appear to be inequalities to Western eyes, such as the position of women in Muslim countries, may not be experienced as inequalities by the people concerned. In Western industrial countries, however, there are recognised gender inequalities. When labour market work was generally thoroughly unpleasant – the “curse of Adam” – there was equality of misery between home and employment. However, as employment became more attractive, and employers needed to recruit many adult women, men had the advantage of already filling the better occupations. At the same time middle-class values have tended to down-play women’s work in the home and child-care.

Initially, women were crowded into manual and low-level non-manual occupations. Then the increase in white-collar work had a bigger impact on women’s employment, so that men are now more likely than women to have manual jobs. The net effect is that women tend to be no longer disadvantaged in terms of occupational attractiveness or status (Blackburn et al., 2000, 2001). Nevertheless men still dominate the highest occupational levels, and are very clearly advantaged in terms of pay (United Nations, 2005).

Occupational inequality is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of inequality in contemporary industrialised societies. Whereas ethnicity and gender are biologically based sources of socially created inequality, occupations are central to the social structure. Differentiated by requirements of education, qualifications, skills and experience, they form a structure of inequality.

The occupational structure is entailed in the inequalities of gender and ethnicity. However, the inequality is more directly understood in terms of class and status, which are better measured by CAMSIS (a social stratification scale of occupational desirability, initially known as Cambridge Scale, see Stewart et al., 1980) and in terms of income. As we would expect, CAMSIS and income are well related – in Britain, they are correlated about 0.7 – but nevertheless can display very different patterns. As we have seen, men are clearly advantaged in pay, whereas women score marginally higher on CAMSIS (Blackburn and Jarman, 2004).

Many other forms of inequality, as noted below, are related to ethnicity, gender and occupations. On the whole however, they are more often, and usually more strongly, related to occupations.

Health and life expectancy are heavily influenced by other bases of inequality. They vary across societies, with the advantage lying with the more affluent societies despite notable recent improvements in the poorer countries. Within countries, there are clear and persistent gradients according to the stratification level. As we would expect, the higher the occupational level, the better the health. For various types of health problems, Prandy (1999) demonstrates a continuous health gradient using the CAMSIS Scale for Britain.

Health problems of men and women vary to some extent, but the clearest difference in almost every society (UN, 2005) is that women tend to live longer. This creates
poverty in retirement for those from low stratification and low-income backgrounds who have been unable to save for retirement. Because of their greater life expectancy it is predominantly women who end their lives in poverty[6]. It is generally not clear whether the poorer health of disadvantaged ethnic minorities is due to anything more than class, though class alone cannot explain the low-life expectancy of African Americans.

Where people live varies in quality, both in terms of the quality of housing and of the neighbourhood in which it is located. Neighbours and neighbourhoods have generally been seen as related to class or status (e.g. Warner, 1949, 1963; Lauman and Guttman, 1966), though the relevance of housing cost means that age, or more precisely career stage and income level, can cut across occupation levels (Stewart et al., 1980). Sometimes height above sea level is correlated with height in the status hierarchy, but usually there are other factors determining the desirability of areas, such as new suburbs or gentrified inner city locations.

Access to resources can be an aspect of differential power and inequalities of lifestyle. The problems faced by many Palestinians are a familiar example of recent years. In many of the poorest countries access to clean water or medical aid are often significant factors. In the wealthy countries deprivations are less acute but still real; for instance the decline of public transport as car ownership increased has put those without their own cars at a disadvantage. Inequalities in relation to resources are a major feature of social and economic differences between and within countries.

Respect, like status, depends on the recognition of others. To some extent, it is related to status but has a variety of other determinants, such as honesty and sincerity. Like other forms of inequality, it can be a basis of social advantage.

Social acceptance concerns the attitude of one section of a society to others who are seen as different. Religion is often a basis for non-acceptance, as with various cases of hostility to Jews, particularly in Nazi Germany. Often the hostility is between divisions within the same religion, as currently among Muslims in Iraq and the recent and lingering hostilities between Northern Ireland Christians. The religions provide no rational basis for hatred and killing; indeed Christians are specifically taught to love their enemies. Nevertheless, social and cultural differences are sufficient to define people as “other” and so less acceptable.

The acceptance of “one of us” and distancing from others is a common form of perceived and performed inequality which tends to be related to all other aspects of inequality. Strangers and new arrivals, such as immigrants, may be treated with suspicion or simply not accepted in the community[7]. Difference of physical appearance, such as skin colour, regardless of whether or not related to ethnic culture, is frequently a basis for discrimination. Status groups, as Weber argued, bring together people with similar lifestyles, and thus exclude those with different lifestyles. More fundamentally, the further apart people are in the stratification hierarchy, the less likely they are to interact socially. The success of CAMSIS to measure stratification derives from this pattern.

Natural abilities differentiate people and are a basic reason for inequalities. Although such aptitudes may often depend on accidents of birth, and the poor often lose out, those who are able to exploit significant abilities gain financially.

Mental abilities strongly influence education and the acquiring of qualifications, which in turn influence occupational level. However, academic attainment is strongly related to the class-status backgrounds of students, as may be seen in the upper and middle class backgrounds of Oxbridge students, despite the efforts of those
universities to widen the range of applications and to select on ability. Even if we were inclined to accept the argument that differential attainment is almost entirely due to natural academic abilities varying by class (Saunders, 1990), there is no escaping the benefits of private education (Jenks and Tach, 2006). The academic and social, and subsequently financial, returns on the money invested in private education are considerable. No one may be formally excluded from such education, but in practice the social-economic barriers are considerable.

Physical advantages such as athleticism and beauty also tend to favour the healthier, better-nourished people from higher stratification levels. However, this is an area of significant exceptions to the usual hierarchy. Professional boxing is a prime example of the reverse pattern. The old adage that a hungry fighter is a good fighter is not without relevance and, regardless of ethnicity, men with sufficient strength and skill can rise from poverty to considerable affluence. British football – soccer and possibly rugby league but not rugby union – is reputed to operate with a working class bias. Many other areas of sport, such as athletics, but not polo, allow skill to overcome social class.

Musical ability requires training as well as talent. Opera singers and orchestral musicians require extensive training and practice. However, the biggest financial returns tend to go to popular music, where style can sometimes be more important than skill. This opens up opportunities for the talents of working class performers, though success can depend on effective managers.

The foregoing set of different types of inequality is not meant to be exhaustive. It is intended to illustrate different bases and forms of inequality, including the most important.

**Conclusion**

All the different types of inequality, which we have considered are related to some degree. Any other ways to view inequalities would be clearly related to the forms of inequality we have considered. However, as we have seen, the relationships are not total. Thus, reducing one type of inequality would not necessarily reduce others; conceivably it might lead to an increase in some other inequality.

Does this mean that equality is impossible? If equality requires identity it clearly does. However, we have made a firm distinction between equality and identity, so that this limitation on equality need not concern us.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that complete equality is possible. Given the variety of relevant, only partially related variables, it does appear that total social equality is impossible. I have not covered all the differences that can be a basis of inequality, but even these suggest that total equality is impossible. Equality does not require people to be equal on every aspect, but rather that inequalities balance out so that, all areas of life considered, no individual is disadvantaged compared to the rest. It is the tendency for social advantages to vary together plus the fact that some people are not particularly advantaged in any respect that prevents complete equality.

Indeed, we would have huge difficulty in defining total equality, let alone recognising it. However, this is not a reason for abandoning concern about social inequality. Even if some element of social inequality is unavoidable, the extent of inequality need not be great. Those who argue for the desirability of inequality, or its inevitability, fail to criticise its excessive and harmful extent. Even if some element of inequality is unavoidable, this does not mean it is desirable or should not be reduced as far as possible.
If we can define a sense of complete equality, it has to be that all individuals count as equally important, whatever their distinctive characteristics and resources. This may be seen in the religious concept that “we are all God’s children”. The ideal may be fine, but in the social world as it has existed so far, we have not come near to realising such an ideal. The prospects for the future look no greater. However, this is less important than it may seem.

Equality, it should be remembered, is only the zero point on the scale of inequality. Concentrating on this zero point, and the problem of achieving it, is a distraction from the real issue. The real issue is the extent of inequality. The scope for reducing inequalities around the world, and within countries, is huge. Social scientists should care about this, and recognise its importance, as a major part of the social reality they confront.

Notes

1. The original use of the concept of equality was numerical, as in \(5 + 7 = 12\) (Hajdin, 2001). The left side of the \(=\) sign comprises different items from the right side but in combination they are equal numerically. An identity would be of the form \(12 = 12\).

2. No-one denies the biological differences between women and men, but a common feminist position has been that this should make no difference in the labour market. On the other hand, some argue that bodily difference makes social difference inevitable (e.g. Pateman, 1988; Phillips, 1992), while Eisenstein (1989) has pointed out that there are relevant differences within as well as between the genders. Norman (1991) explicitly rejects the confusion of gender equality with identity.

3. A useful philosophical discussion of equality of opportunity is included in the excellent collection of papers on inequality in Hajdin (2001). Part III, directly on equality of opportunity, reproduces Thomas (1977), Western (1985), Buchanan (1995) and Richards (1997). However, the essential point from a social scientific perspective is quite simply the internal contradiction of the concept.

4. The impossibility is similar to that of the functional theory of stratification (Davis and Moore, 1945), because even if occupations were allocated and rewarded on functional grounds at one point of time, processes of social reproduction would tend to maintain inequalities regardless of their functional fit (Tumin, 1967).

5. Dworkin is countering a popular error. Saunders (1990), for example, treats equality as absence of difference, and asserts (p. 67) “Equality and liberty are incompatible objectives...it is a major contribution of modern sociology to have recognised that we cannot have both.”

6. At higher occupational levels a widow usually receives part of the deceased husband’s pension, even if she has no pension in her own right.

7. The saying “here’s a stranger, let’s throw a brick at him” may be apocryphal, but illustrates the unacceptance of strangers.

References


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**Corresponding author**
Robert M. Blackburn can be contacted at: rmb1@cam.ac.uk

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