

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/inequality-isnt-the-real-issue-1493385246>

ESSAY

Inequality Isn't the Real Issue

Research suggests that people care most about fair chances, not the distribution of wealth



ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN REA

By *Christina Starmans, Mark Sheskin and Paul Bloom*

April 28, 2017 9:14 a.m. ET

What do Americans and Europeans see as the greatest threat now facing the world? A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that the most common answer is inequality—ranking above religious and ethnic hatred, pollution, disease and nuclear weapons. Pope Francis has called economic inequality “the root of social evil,” and inequality was a major theme in the last presidential election, with different solutions offered up by candidates of the left and right.

Many of us seem to consider inequality intrinsically and obviously immoral. Hundreds of studies have found that when you ask people—including young children—to distribute resources such as money, they have a strong bias toward giving everyone the same amount.

Psychologists who study these issues claim to have discovered “a universal desire for more equal pay” and fundamentally “egalitarian motives” in our interactions with each other. This consensus is nicely captured by the primatologist Frans de Waal, who suggests, “Robin Hood has it right. Humanity’s deepest wish is to spread the wealth.”

We used to share such views, but having examined the relevant research, we can find no evidence that people are, in fact, concerned with economic inequality for its own sake. Rather, they are bothered by other problems that are connected with economic inequality, such as poverty, the erosion of democratic values and, most interesting to us, unfairness.

A 2011 study in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, by Michael Norton and Dan Ariely, asked a sample of more than 5,500 Americans to estimate the actual distribution of wealth in the U.S., and then to suggest what they saw as an ideal distribution. One of their main findings was that Americans were unaware of just how unequal their society is: They thought that the bottom 40% had 9% of the wealth and the top 20% had 59%, while the actual proportions were 0.3% and 84%.

Most interesting to us, however, was the way people responded when asked about their ideal distribution of wealth. Their allocation was far from equal. In fact, people thought on average that, in the perfect society, individuals in the top 20% should have more than three times as much money as individuals in the bottom 20%.

A similar endorsement of inequality appears in studies done in 16 other countries, and it holds for men and women, people on the right and left of the political spectrum, and teenagers. As Dr. Norton puts it, “people exhibit a desire for inequality—not too equal, but not too unequal.” Other research points to an even greater acceptance of inequality, with one study finding that people prefer for the richest 20% to have 50 times the wealth of the poorest 20%.

How do we reconcile this with all the laboratory studies that have seemed to find a strong bias for equality? It turns out that in these studies, equality is confounded with fairness. Recipients of the distributed goods are intentionally made to be indistinguishable from one another with respect to considerations such as need and merit. With this setup, a preference for fairness leads to an equal distribution because there is no reason to assign a larger share to anyone.

In other studies, psychologists have been careful to separate concerns about equality from concerns about fairness. When you do this, both adults and children reject unfairly equal distributions in favor of distributions that are fair but unequal. For example, in a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* by Alex Shaw and Kristina Olson, 6- to 8-year-olds insisted on dividing rewards equally between two boys who both cleaned a room. When one boy was described as having done more work, however, the children demanded that the harder worker receive a larger reward.

Or consider a situation with two individuals who are identical in all relevant regards, but one gets \$10 and the other gets nothing. This is plainly unequal, but is it fair? It can be, if the allocation is random. Adults consider it fair to use impartial procedures such as coin tosses and lotteries when distributing many different kinds of resources, and children have similar views. In the rewards-for-room-cleaning study, if children were given a fair “spinner” to randomly choose who got the extra reward, they were happy to create inequality. One person getting three rewards and another getting two (or 10 and zero for that matter) can be entirely fair and acceptable, although it is clearly not equal.

The Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt makes a similar point in his recent book “On Inequality.” He notes that few people worry about inequalities between the very rich and the very, very rich, even though the inequalities might be greater, both absolutely and proportionately, than the inequalities between the poor and the moderately well-off. This suggests that it isn't inequality in itself that is really bothering us.

Admittedly, some will find this point obvious. When many scholars, policy makers and activists complain about inequality, they are actually worried about the negative consequences of inequality, or about unfairness in how this inequality came about. Inequalities of wealth would be fine with them so long as there were no negative consequences and the process was fair, and they would reject equal societies that violated fairness.

MORE ESSAYS FROM REVIEW

- AP Tests Are Still a Great American Equalizer [February 22, 2019](#)
- The Muslim World Looks On as China Persecutes Its Muslims [February 21, 2019](#)
- The Science of Better Meetings [February 15, 2019](#)
- Vladimir Putin's Bold Push Into the Middle East [February 15, 2019](#)
- 'I Had No Idea I Was Having a Heart Attack': For Women, the Signals Often Aren't Clear [February 15, 2019](#)

However, others rage against economic inequality as such, insisting that there is something fundamentally

wrong with a world in which some have so much more than others. For some, this is a rational and principled view. But we think that many of these equality-obsessives are in the grips of a false consciousness. They fail to distinguish worries about inequality from worries about unfairness. They are confused about what they really want. Human beings, the research suggests, are not natural-born socialists, but we do care about justice.

Paying more attention to this distinction can help to sharpen political discourse. It allows us to zoom in on certain critical questions that have long been of interest to political scientists and moral philosophers. When is it unjust to treat people the same—that is, which factors (hard

work, skill, need, morality) are fair grounds for inequality and which are not? Which resources should be distributed on the basis of merit?

Americans overwhelmingly believe, for instance, that a fair electoral system requires that every adult gets one and only one vote. But there is heated disagreement over whether fairness dictates that everyone should have equal access to health care and higher education.

Extreme economic inequality deeply troubles many people, including us. But the source of this outrage isn't that people see inequality as inherently wrong; it's that they see it as the result of unfairness. There is no consensus about what a perfectly just world would look like, but for most of us, it will be an unequal one.

—Dr. Starmans is a postdoctoral associate in psychology, Dr. Sheskin is a postdoctoral associate in cognitive science, and Dr. Bloom is a professor of psychology, all at Yale University. This article is based on a paper that they recently published in the journal Nature Human Behavior.

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.