INEQUALITY AND ORGANIZATIONS

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Over the course of human history, philosophical thought on inequality has shifted from a predominantly hierarchical understanding of human ability and output to a much more egalitarian understanding. This progress has been reflected in the rich modern social science literature documenting the far-reaching societal ills of inequality. Organizational research has, however, remained relatively unmoved by the wider discourse on inequality. Through this chapter, we seek to highlight the growing importance of examining inequality in the context of organizations. Specifically, we discuss inequality research by examining it from the perspective of distributive justice. We then outline the adverse consequences of inequality to societies and organizations. We conclude by discussing the need to critically examine inequality and to study why it is maintained in organizations and societies, despite its adverse effects.

Keywords: Economic inequality, income inequality, distributive justice

A (Brief) History of the Philosophy of Inequality

Inequality, broadly conceived, describes the degree to which people are considered or treated unequally, or experience unequal outcomes. Inequality can be considered in several domains: moral (are all people equal in worth or value?), legal (are all people governed by the same laws?), political (do all people have the same voice in the political process?), and social (do all people have equal access to opportunity and resources?). Philosophers have been debating the nature of inequality for centuries. A comprehensive review of the various philosophical approaches to understanding inequality would require many volumes; however, it is possible to briefly follow patterns of philosophical thought on inequality over time.

Plato argued that a utopian society could be established by placing people into four tiered socioeconomic classes: "gold", "silver", "bronze", and "iron". Those with the power of command were argued to have been made of gold by "God", auxiliaries made of silver, and husbandmen and craftsmen made of bronze and iron. Although rigidly hierarchical, Plato's concept of societal hierarchies was one of the first to not include an ultimate aristocratic class. Rather, he argued that "gold" citizens were "philosopher kings" who valued wisdom and reason above all else (Jowett, 1888)[2]. The Enlightenment brought further philosophical considerations of inequality. Rousseau considered moral inequality to be of great importance (as opposed to natural/physical inequality). He argued that moral inequality is a defining characteristic of civil society and is strongly associated with downstream differences in power and wealth. Rousseau concluded that civil society distorts the natural human state of isolation, which allows individuals to satisfy their own needs (and desires) without the interference of others. He further argued that civil society allows the powerful to control the weak and maintain their political and social power and wealth (an argument still made by some contemporary philosophers and economists). Rousseau argued in one of his later writings, "…one of the most important tasks of government [is] to prevent extreme inequality of fortunes…by shielding citizens from becoming poor" (Gourevitch, 2003, p. 19).

[2] Interestingly, a very similar social structure exists in the form of the Indian caste system, with the argument being that "God" created people of four types from His own body: Brahmins (philosophers) from his mouth, Kshatriyas (warriors) from his arms, Vaisyas (traders) from his thighs, and Sudras (craftsmen) from his feet. In modern India, the caste system holds significant influence (even though it is formally outlawed), where one's family history (i.e., last name in most cases) dictates social and economic roles, as well as hierarchical status.

In the modern era, John Rawls (1971) advocated for a societal structure based on the assumption of a "veil of ignorance"—that "we should try to create the society each of us would want if we didn't know in advance who we'd be" (Krugman, 2011). Rawls put forth two principles to support this approach. First, a society should guarantee equal basic liberties for all. Second, a society should ensure (a) social and economic inequality only manifests as a consequence of positions that can be obtained through fair and equal competition, and (b) inequality should be used to most greatly benefit the least-advantaged members of society. Most liberal democracies have used (and continue to use) Rawlsian principles to structure their societies (e.g., utilizing a progressive income tax to provide a social safety net). Amartya Sen (1992) further expanded on Rawls' ideas by arguing that a well-structured society must mitigate any forms of discrimination that limits human "functions", which include both basic needs (e.g., good health and shelter) and social needs (e.g., self-respect and dignity; Sen, 1992).

The Modern Issue of Inequality

Recent rising levels of economic inequality in the world have demanded considerable public attention. The rapidly increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few has been documented by researchers (e.g., Piketty, 2014), government agencies (e.g., the United States Congressional Budget Office; CBO, 2014), non-government agencies (e.g., Oxfam International; Oxfam, 2014), international economic organizations (e.g., Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development; OECD, 2011), pollsters (e.g., Newport, 2011), industry bodies (e.g., Conference Board of Canada; CBOC, 2013), and the popular press (Beddoes, 2012), among others. The existence of inequality is neither new nor unknown; indeed, differences in wealth and status have been characteristic of most civil societies for all of documented history. However, current attention has been particularly focused on identifying the negative consequences of inequality in modern western industrialized nations. This attention has included growing discussion on interventions that might mitigate the enormous negative consequences of a growing disparity between "haves" and "have-nots". This effort is particularly salient given that modern western industrial societies supposedly embody the ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity for all. That inequality continues to rise, unchecked, raises questions about the effectiveness of economic development to create fair and just societies.

Scholars in a number of disciplines, including economics, epidemiology, sociology, and psychology, have devoted much attention over the years to understanding the causes and consequences of growing inequality to societies (reviewed in Neckerman & Torche, 2007). Much of this research has led to public policy prescriptions designed to reduce inequality (e.g., introducing progressive taxation; universal health care; accessible education). However, academic discourse (and resultant policy) has rarely involved organizational research or practice, even though organizations play a fundamental role in creating and maintaining societal inequality.

Philosophical understandings of inequality over time (briefly reviewed above) have shifted from earlier characterizations of people being rigidly hierarchically structured (usually due to some "innate" reasons) to a more egalitarian understanding of all people being granted ample opportunity to fulfill their potential. Although a large body of research has examined the effect of inequality on societies and individuals, little work has been conducted in the field of organization studies. This chapter aims to draw attention of organizational scholars to this issue. We begin by briefly discussing the concept of inequality and its treatment in management research and practice. We then outline some consequences of inequality to societies and organizations. We conclude with a discussion of potential future research that would allow for a better understanding of the causes and consequences of organizational inequality.

Inequality in Organizational Research and Practice

What is Organizational Inequality?

Within organizational research and practice, two broad types of inequality can be found: demographic and economic. Demographic inequality describes disparities in experiences or outcomes that have a basis in demographic characteristics (e.g., gender; race; age). Broadly, economic inequality describes disparity that is a consequence of the monetary value attached to the possessions and contributions of individuals in organizations and societies.

Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment (i.e., experiences and outcomes) of women in society as well as in organizations. Gender inequality research has not only highlighted the different outcomes and experiences women face in their everyday social lives (compared to men), but has also identified significantly lower representation of women in various fields (ranging from science to politics), the disparities in incomes between women and men for comparable work, and the “glass ceiling” that prevents women from rising to higher-level positions.

Along similar lines, racial inequality reflects unequal treatment of people based on race, with resultant disparities in social and health outcomes (e.g., housing, education, health) as well as economic and organizational outcomes (e.g., income, employment, career growth). More recently, acknowledgement of systematic biases against sexual minorities has sparked public discourse, with (in more progressive jurisdictions) resultant policy prescriptions for equal treatment. A number of organizations have also adopted policies to this effect, while those who opposed equal treatment of sexual minorities have (largely) faced the wrath of the broader community. Yet another fast emerging topic of debate is unequal economic opportunities for younger members of society (i.e., the much-maligned "millenial" generation), especially in comparison to older generations (i.e., the more economically privileged "baby boomer" generation).

Past research has used economic inequality to refer to disparity in the distribution of economic assets among individuals or households in a society, which includes both income and wealth inequality. The former refers to the disparities in money received on a regular basis in the form of salaries, rents, royalties, dividends, and other sources of regular income. The latter refers to uneven distribution of wealth (i.e., mobile assets such as stocks and bonds, and immobile assets such as houses and land). That is, wealth describes the stock of assets held at a given point, while income describes the flow of money on a regular basis. It should be noted that economic inequality is different from poverty, which refers to the lack of economic means to fulfill basic human needs or to achieve a defined level of material possessions. In other words, poverty is about meeting basic needs, whereas economic inequality places in focus the unevenness in the distribution of income and wealth, irrespective of the presence and absence of poverty.

Inequality and Distributive Justice

Before we address the issue of inequality in organizations more explicitly, it is necessary to situate inequality in the broader context of distributive justice. Distributive justice describes norms concerning the distribution of resources to group members. These norms take three primary forms: need, equity, and equality (Deutsch, 1975). Need norms involve the allocation of resources to those who have high levels of need. For example, that new parents receive paternity or maternity leave whereas non-parents do not receive an equivalent form of leave reflects a need norm. Equity norms are centered on the comparison of individuals' inputs (e.g., education, experience, skills, hard work) to outputs (e.g., pay, status, time off) relative to appropriate others (e.g., other organization members, others in the same position at other organizations). For example, most people see it as fair that doctors are paid generously compared to most other occupations because doctors hold difficult positions requiring substantial training, expertise, and personal sacrifice. In other words, doctors provide greater inputs and thus receive more outputs as a consequence. In contrast to need and equity, equality focuses on the degree to which outcomes experienced are equal, regardless of inputs or need. For example, all employees at a worker co-operative may be paid equally regardless of their role in the organization. This distribution norm is based on the assumption that individuals, given their skills and opportunities available to them, contribute uniquely to an organization and such unique contributions cannot be accurately compared and definitively assigned a monetary value. Further, the equality norm is also rooted in the perspective that all human beings are equal and deserve similar rights and entitlements.

The three distributive justice norms—need, equity, and equality—were theorized by Deutsch (1975) to be evoked by different (but not necessarily independent) organizational goals. Economic productivity should be most associated with equity norms, individual development with need norms, and social relationship building with equality norms (Deutsch, 1975). Because modern organizations typically emphasize economic productivity above all other goals, research on organizational distributive justice has focused almost exclusively on equity issues (e.g., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Deutsch, 1975). Furthermore, the dominant distributive justice literature has focused almost exclusively on the distribution of economic resources and outcomes, namely, pay, promotions, and bonuses. However, other workplace resources and outcomes—such as status, power, influence, and respect—are also key components of people's workplace experiences, and the distribution of these resources should have broad effects on organizational outcomes.

Another key issue with canonical research on distributive justice is its focus on the effect of (primarily economic) outcome distributions determined by group membership and social identity. Research examining the effects of gender, ethnic, and class inequalities has been quite common, and a large body of evidence suggests that inequality across group identity has clear and serious negative effects. Essentially every individual-level workplace experience or outcome is worse, on average, for women and ethnic minorities. These outcomes include lower pay, poorer mental and physical health, lower well-being, lesser feelings of empowerment and autonomy, lack of organizational mobility, and lower organizational attachment (e.g., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1991). These effects are particularly ironic given that greater racial and gender disparity in organizations is associated with increased sales revenue, greater profits, more customers, and increased market share (Herring, 2009).

One important caveat is that inequality in organizations may reflect pre-existing inequality outside of organizations, and may not itself be a product of organizational policy or management decisions. Consider ethnic differences in educational attainment. In the United States, African-Americans and Latinos are less likely to have completed high school, and as a consequence, less likely to have completed any post-secondary education (or even had the opportunity to attend a post-secondary institution at all). In Canada, aboriginal people experience the same lack of opportunity. These educational inequalities lead to a lack of hiring into positions that might allow for upward mobility, with the consequence that marginalized groups are less able to gain important workplace experience. As such, certain groups necessarily have fewer "inputs" to offer an organization (through no fault of members of these groups), and may suffer the many consequences of inequality as a result. Later in this chapter, we describe some research on the consequences of societal inequality.

In sum, the study of inequality in organizations has predominantly focused on group membership and social identity at the expense of the more general phenomena of skewed distributions of outcomes and resources. That inequality manifests and has negative effects across easily identifiable group memberships is not particularly surprising. However, those who are victims of inequality suffer negative effects in the workplace regardless of their group membership or social identity. A broader focus on the root causes and consequences of inequality may lead to new insights for organizational research and practice above and beyond the group identity based research done to date.

Consequences of Inequality

Societal Consequences of Inequality

A large body of evidence demonstrates that high levels of income inequality at the societal level facilitate a wide array of negative social, health, and well-being outcomes. In the social domain, inequality has been strongly linked with higher rates of teenage pregnancy, lower social capital, community support, and trust, as well as increased violent and property crime, including homicide (reviewed in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006, 2007, 2009). Societal inequality has also been strongly linked to diverse health and well-being outcomes. Specific physical ailments such as obesity and cardiovascular illness (among others) are associated with inequality, as are more downstream outcomes such as greater general mortality and lower life expectancy. In the mental health domain, inequality has been linked with depression, stress, and a variety of other psychopathology (reviewed in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006, 2007, 2009).

Importantly, these negative effects of inequality have been demonstrated independent of individual-level socioeconomic status and aggregate economic measures (e.g., gross domestic product; Kennedy, Kawachi, Glass, & Prothrow-Stith, 1998; reviewed in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). These results suggest that what is key is relative standing, not absolute standing. This is an important point to emphasize: inequality appears to affect outcomes for all individuals, not just those who are the bottom of a hierarchy (e.g., Weich, Lewis, & Jenkins, 2001; reviewed in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Everyone in a society is subject to relative comparisons, and knowing that there is great disparity among others is damaging, regardless of whether one is at the top or the bottom. For example, it is better to be poor in more egalitarian Scandinavian countries than rich in less egalitarian countries with regard to a wide array of social, health, and well-being outcomes. Together, these findings suggest that there is something important about inequality above and beyond absolute individual-level outcomes. It is clear that inequality at the societal level has substantial and robust social, health, and well-being effects on individuals.

It is important to recognize that almost all research at the societal level on inequality has focused on examining the effects of income inequality manifesting at the household level. This is likely because income inequality is relatively easy to identify and quantify using such measures as the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of the distribution of wealth among households in a population. However, as described earlier, inequality manifests not only in terms of financial currency, but also in terms of other resources and opportunities that are of general importance to people (e.g., social status, prestige, power, and/or influence). We therefore suggest that inequality writ large—that is, inequality in resources, status, reputation, and influence—should have impacts at the societal, organizational, and individual levels. The mechanisms that link inequality to various outcomes should be conserved regardless of what domain inequality manifests in. Some preliminary research suggests that disparities in different domains (i.e., not just income) affect relevant outcomes at the organizational level. We briefly review this evidence below.

Organizational Consequences of Inequality

Organizations are in effect "mini" societies, in that they involve collections of people who interact in a structured community with shared institutions, relationships, and a common culture (Macionis, 2014; Schaefer & Moos, 1993). Just like larger societies, organizations involve varied social structures, policies, and norms, with consequent status, power, income, and resource disparities. These disparities—manifestations of inequality—should have workplace consequences for workers, just as societal-level inequality has consequences for individuals in higher-level communities. Remarkably little research, however, has directly examined the effect of inequality on organizational outcomes, although some research is suggestive.

In the workplace, inequality can manifest as a consequence of objective disparities in outcomes (e.g., pay dispersion, hierarchical complexity; e.g., Carillo & Kopelman, 1991; McCall & Kenworthy, 2009) or as a consequence of perceived or subjective interpretations of disparities in outcomes (e.g., perceptions of equality-related distributive justice/fairness; e.g., Bartunek & Keys, 1982; Spreitzer, 1995). Components of both objective disparity and subjective perceptions of disparity have been associated with negative outcomes in the workplace, (e.g., organizational fairness and justice, participative climate, and empowerment). More specifically, these components of inequality have been associated with diverse negative organizational outcomes: reduced social capital, including less cooperation, trust, and mutual support (e.g., Tyler and Blader, 2003), lower commitment (e.g., Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), lower psychological empowerment (e.g., Spreitzer, 1996), poorer well-being and health (e.g., Christie & Barling, 2010; Danna & Griffin, 1999), and lower performance (e.g., Christie & Barling, 2010).

Together, these findings are highly suggestive of a link between organizational inequality and workplace outcomes, although it is important to note again that very little research has directly examined the influence of inequality (either objective or perceptual) on relevant workplace outcomes (but see Son Hing, Mishra, Yip, & Garcia, *working paper*). It is likely that other organizational analogues of societal-level outcomes—for example, counterproductive work behavior (a form of antisocial and risk-taking behavior more generally) and organizational citizenship behavior (a consequence of trust and social capital) are likely affected by inequality as well.

Outcomes that have been linked with organizational inequality—lower social capital, poorer health and well-being, lower commitment, and lower empowerment—are in turn linked with higher rates of absenteeism and turnover, and lower motivation and performance (reviewed in Johns & Saks, 2014). All of these downstream outcomes have enormous economic implications for organizations. Not surprisingly, it has been argued that economic inequality affects organizational performance by influencing the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, workplace interactions they engage in, and the institutional environment that shapes organizational actions (Bapuji, 2015). Therefore, addressing issues of inequality can be considered not only an issue of justice, but also an issue of financial and economic relevance to organizations (and to society more generally).

In sum, research in disciplines ranging from economics to epidemiology has shown that inequality has deleterious consequences for individuals and societies. By extension, these consequences are also likely to affect organizations, a point borne out by some suggestive evidence within organizational research. However, substantial additional research is required to better understand the effect of inequality on organizations; we suggest some potentially fruitful future directions below.

Inequality and Organizations: Future Directions

Very little research has examined the effect of inequality on and within organizations. Accordingly, a number of questions are ripe for research, ranging from how inequality affects organizations to how organizations affect inequality, and what various stakeholders can do to address inequality. In this section, we focus on two promising areas of inquiry. The first is aimed at better understanding inequality and its workplace consequences; the second is focused on understanding maintenance of inequality in organizations.

Understanding Inequality and the Bias Against Equality

Past organizational research has shown that women and ethnic minorities experience worse workplace outcomes. The most common explanation for such inequality is systematic prejudice and discrimination stemming from in-group/out-group comparisons (i.e., social identity comparisons; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, inequality based on group membership and/or identity necessarily involves inequality in the distribution of resources in the workplace: pay, promotions, status, power, influence, and respect, among others. It is therefore possible that the key variable that explains poorer organizational outcomes for women and minorities is inequality in resource allocation, not necessarily group identity. Put another way, it is possible that if inequality in resources in the workplace were ameliorated, we would not observe systemic group or social identity effects. Following this line of thinking, it is likely that those who are at bottom of an inequality hierarchy—regardless of social or group identity—suffer worse outcomes. As a consequence, we suggest that organizational scholars would benefit from more deeply exploring whether inequality in resources *independent* of group membership or social identity has important social, health, and productivity consequences in organizations. Of course, inequality of resources necessarily interacts with (and is in large part a cause of) group-based inequality, which makes its study even more important.

The above distinction highlights that inequality has been examined as an outcome experienced by some organizational members. The issue of distribution of resources, or unequal access to opportunities, however, has largely escaped the attention of organizational scholars. Without consideration of inequality in opportunity, no amount of research focused on inequalities in outcomes can fully explicate inequality experienced by disadvantaged groups. Much of the research that has been conducted to date examining inequalities in rewards along demographic lines has served to describe and highlight the problem. However, this research has not (and cannot) address underlying causes that perpetuate inequalities (e.g., social structures or ideologies). Productive advances can be made by understanding inequality derived from both access to opportunities (e.g., skill development, education, health) and rewards for production (e.g., pay, status, career progression).

The discussion above brings to the fore the contentious issue of accepting equality as a guiding norm of fairness in organizations. The vast majority of organizational research on inequality has been centered on understanding the equity norm. Under this view, pay and status disparities as a consequence of gender or race are clearly unacceptable as long as individuals possess similar skills, education, experience, and/or capabilities. In contrast, the equality norm assumes that all people are equal and bring equal value to the production process, independent of the type of skill, experience, capabilities, or education contributed. Accepting this norm runs firmly counter to the predominant business paradigm of rewarding members based on the economic value of their inputs (i.e., as a consequence of supply and demand, or credentialing). A shift from a focus on equity to equality thus calls for a fundamental shift in thinking. At the very least, this shift calls for reflecting on the value of various inputs into the production process, and the socio-political nature of such assessment.

Maintenance of Inequality

Given the ubiquitous and wide-reaching effects of inequality, why is it maintained? Perception of a just, meritocratic system likely plays an important role. The job market is typically seen as an independent arbiter of talent and dedication—those who work hard and have the best skills will get hired for the best positions in the best organizations. In this sense, organizations actively foster inequality through sorting of those who are deemed to be meritorious of resources and status and those who are not (Cobb, in press). This process reflects the equity norm that defines organizations driven by economic concerns. However, this process also necessarily facilitates inequality. Any time a process sorts "winners" and "losers" – regardless of whether there is a rational reason for doing so – there will be resultant inequality.

This tension presents a large problem for organizational and societal policy. As reviewed above, inequality has a slate of negative impacts at both the societal and organizational level. However, a market economy also requires incentives that spur striving and greater performance. A key problem is that the balance between incentives for upward striving and minimization of unjust inequality has become deeply unbalanced in the last few decades. Disproportionate gains have been realized by the richest in society, and these gains are in large part a consequence of organizational policy and decision-making. Chief executive officer (CEO) pay has soared astronomically, while those in the lower rungs of organizations have realized take-home pay losses after accounting for inflation (e.g., McKenzie, 2012).

Complicating any policy response to inequality are psychological variables that lead people to favor the status quo. Even in the wake of movements like Occupy Wall Street and increased attention on the societal harms of inequality, public opinion polling suggests that typical citizens do not place much of a priority on addressing economic inequality (e.g., Newport, 2011). Even those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder—those most adversely impacted by inequality—do not strongly prefer more equal distributions of income and wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2011). System justification theory suggests that people are motivated to defend and justify the status quo, which almost always involves high levels of inequality. The theory specifically suggests that in order to minimize cognitive dissonance, people espouse and support views that the system is just, fair, and meritocratic (reviewed in Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Together, the lack of interest in inequality-related policy and psychological mechanisms that support the status quo make it difficult to enact change that reduces the negative impacts of inequality.

In conclusion, organizational research on inequality conducted thus far has been valuable, but has been fairly limited in its scope. We believe that enriching our conceptual understanding of what inequality is and how various forms of inequality (e.g., gender, race, health, and education) are related to each other will facilitate greater understanding of how inequality affects organizations and why inequality is maintained in organizations.

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