

## Emotional Foundations of Inequality

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### *Disintegrated Nature of Inequality Studies*

Inequality is one of the most important topics in the social sciences; in fact, some influential scholars (such as, for example Andrew Abbott) assert that it has been *the* most important theme in sociology for decades. It cuts through various parts of the theoretical landscape of sociology, economics, and some other disciplines. However, a progressive division of labor made those studies substantially disintegrated, so that, for example, those scholars who dig deeply into the quantitative details of measuring mobility and inter-generational reproduction of inequality often are not connected to a wider picture of the meaning of inequality in terms of basic categories of the social sciences. This leads to a situation, when we know much about the chances of this or that social group and mechanisms which contribute to those chances, but we don't really see how these are connected with major dramatic consequences of inequality, such as marginalization of large social groups, growing polarization and loss of cohesion within societies. We also do not really know how macro metrics of inequality, such as the Gini coefficient and other indexes, are connected to meanings in peoples' lives, their motivation, identity, dignity and mutual recognition. In a substantial way, this is caused by the weakness of cultural analysis within inequality studies.

### *What About Culture?*

Cultural theory unhappily invaded into studies of inequality in the 1950s and 1960s, under the banner of a "culture of poverty" notion, introduced by Oscar Lewis. In the beginning it became very powerful, and even informed a major social policy initiative in the United States named the "War on Poverty." However, very soon this "culture of poverty" concept faced strong criticism, on both empirical and ethical grounds. The latter was especially cruel: "blaming the victim" became a label of enormous cancelling power. Not only this specific concept, but also cultural approaches to inequality more generally were strongly compromised. Since then, cultural theory has lost its positions within inequality studies, because any endeavor of cultural analysis of inequality was an easy target for an "asymmetrical" criticism.

### *The Return of Culture and New Cultural Sociology of Inequality*

Recently, however, a number of influential sociologists have opted to return to studying cultural processes of inequality. Most notably, Michelle Lamont and her colleagues argued, that "culture of poverty" was a major oversimplification. Instead of looking for "right" and "wrong" values, sociologists should focus on how particular strategies of action and other cultural patterns and narrative work under particular economic conditions and institutional settings. They illustrate their theses by using a variety of empirical evidence which show the importance of context when it comes to how culture affects inequality. Those studies show that the same values might work very differently under different circumstances.

The proponents of this return of culture into inequality studies, therefore, argue that culture is important not only because it affects inequality by itself, but also because it powerfully mediates the influence of all the other mechanisms, such as both material and non-material distribution. The bigger picture is, Lamont states, that there are two basic dimensions of inequality: distribution and recognition. They are of equal importance, and, in addition, they complement each other. Distribution has been thoroughly studied by economists and those sociologists who work under the influence of economics and a paradigm of rational choice. In contrast, recognition remains dramatically understudied. Concerns of recognition and cultural dimensions of inequality therefore represent a potential new frontier in the study of inequalities.

There are several types of processes that cultural scholars are currently focused on within inequality, such as, for example, stigmatization and evaluation. People constantly stigmatize each other, both consciously and unconsciously, and this powerfully affects the reproduction of inequality. In turn, the evaluation of people, social groups, institutions and practices, grants some high prestige and recognition, while leaving others with a lack of these. Recognition and respect are the basic facts of human lives which shape human dignity and self-respect. The dramatic difference in dignity and recognition effectively fractures human race into parts, which are very different in quality (and quantity!) of life, and which are mutually non-transparent.

### *Culture Returns via Cognition*

Surprisingly, culture returns to the stage by means of an increased interest in cognition. At some point, economists also realized that cognition and cognitive biases powerfully affect economic behavior of people, so, classical rational action model must be substituted with a more nuanced knowledge of how cognition works. This kind of knowledge had been successfully produced within neuroscience and cognitive psychology. This eventually led to emerging of the so called "behavioral economics," as well as a series of "cognitive turns" in some other disciplines, including the ongoing changes in sociology. Multiple studies have shown that, because making rational economic decision-making using all the available information is too cognitively costly, people instead rely on "cognitive schemas" and "cognitive frames." In turn, in the beginning of the new century there appeared a number of studies showing that those schemas inevitably include attitudes and stereotypes about all the types of inequality, such as racial, gender, class etc.

When these studies connected the macro-picture of inequality, developed by economists, with the micro-perspective of the cognitive mechanisms that stand behind people's decisions and choices, it became clear that there is a missing link in this chain, which is those cultural structures that lie between the macro and micro pictures.

### *Cognition and Emotions*

Culture thus returns into inequality studies in many ways thanks to a better understanding of cognitive processes. In turn, cognitive psychologists and sociologists came to an understanding of the important role emotions play in cognition. When we look at the social aspects of inequality, the prominence of emotions makes a lot of sense. Being socially and economically depressed, or, in opposite, being advantaged and powerful — these states inevitably include emotional

descriptions. Basic cultural categories of a social position, such as recognition, dignity, and respect, are all emotionally pronounced.

*Emotional Dimension of Inequality: Emotions as Connection Between Social Sanction and Self-Identity*

What is even more important, emotions play a central role as drivers of people's motivation and decision-making when it comes to building an educational trajectory and a career. After all, at the individual level, inequality is getting shaped in peoples' lives mostly through building a career.

Cultural sociology has conceptual resources that allow us to connect emotional dimensions of social recognition with emotional drivers of action, such as, for example, Durkheimian theory of collective emotions and later developments that are based upon it. Following the vision based on that theory, the same emotionally charged cultural structures that shape the social standing of certain individuals and groups provide emotional drivers that inform their desires, urges, aspirations and ambitions. We thus come to see collectively produced emotions as one of the key foundations of inequality. Inequality is effectual because it is anything but emotionally neutral. Instead of being a mere artifact of economists' calculations, it is a vivid fact of any person's life. I thus follow recent researchers of the emotional dimensions of social life, such as, for example, Eva Illouz and Jennifer Silva, in thinking that studying emotional foundations of inequality is a part of the forthcoming frontier in studies of social inequality.