

Understanding Inequality: Psychological and Educational Perspectives EDST 211Z PSYC287Z

William Arsenio
Summer Session 2022

Course Description: This class focuses on work by psychologists, economists, and education researchers examining the effects of growing inequality on our collective mental health and on the school-related performance of children and adolescents. One class theme is that U.S. economic inequality has grown substantially in the past few decades, so that we now have one of the highest levels of inequality of any advanced industrialized country in the world. A second key theme is how few Americans are fully aware of the extent of these changes and their effects on the well-being of children and adults.

The class concentrates on how these economic realities and related psychological misperceptions have created a cascade of negative psychosocial and educational consequences, ranging from “deaths of despair” in adults, to increased mental health issues in children, to the growing polarization of educational opportunities and outcomes at all ages. Among the topics that will be covered are: the growth of wealth and income inequality in the U.S.; psychological research on how people perceive and misperceive inequality; the moral nature of inequality in relation to thinking about distributive justice; and the psychological literature on the consequences of inequality.

Class sessions will typically include a lecture or presentation during the first part of the class, followed by breakout discussion groups and group summaries of discussion themes. In addition to lectures and class discussions, we will also see several relevant online presentations and movies. During the last week, students will give a brief oral summary of a theme related to their final research paper.

Assignments: An in-class midterm (20% of the final grade) a 10–12 page term paper (50%), and a final oral presentation (25%) based on your term paper themes. In addition, a *very* brief reaction paper is due for each class session that includes required readings. These reaction papers (5%) can include your questions, comments, etc., and will typically be no more than ½ page.

Required Books

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Payne, K. (2017) *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Think, Live, & Die*. New York: Viking.

Class Articles

Available through Moodle or whatever system Wesleyan uses now.

Week 1 – June 27, 28, 29, 30, July 1

June 27 – *Course Overview and Introductions*

June 28 – *the Basics of US Inequality I* – Robert Reich’s movie

Stiglitz, J., (2012). *The price of inequality: How today’s divided society endangers our future*, Chapter 1, “America’s 1 percent problem” (pp. 1-27). New York: W. W. Norton.

Piketty, T., & Saez, E. (2014). Inequality in the long run. *Science*, 344 (6186), 838-844.

June 29 – *the Basics of US Inequality II* – Lecture

Alvaredo, F., Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., & Zucman, G. *World Inequality Report: 2018*. Read the section on the U.S. (pp. 78-92). World Inequality Lab.

June 30 – *Why is Inequality a Problem I?*

Wilkinson & Pickett – TED Talk

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. Read preface, & chapters 1 to 7: New York: Bloomsbury Press.

July 1 - *Why is Inequality a Problem II?*

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009) Chapters 8-13 in *The Spirit Level*

Week 2 - July 5, 6, 7, 8 (July 4 – holiday)

July 5 - *Why is Inequality a Problem III?*

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009) Chapters 14-16 & Postscript in *The Spirit Level*

July 6 – *Consequences of Inequality – Some Basics*

Duncan, G., & Murnane, R. (2011). Introduction: The American dream, then and now. In G. Duncan, G., & R. Murnane (Eds.). *Whither opportunity: Rising inequality, schools, and children’s life chances* (pp. 3-23). New York & Chicago: Russell Sage & Spencer Foundations.

Arsenio, W. (2013). The psychological and educational costs of growing income inequality. *Human Development*. 56, 134-140.

Arsenio, W. (2015). Education, class, and the divergence of children’s life opportunities: Essay review of *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. *Human Development*.

July 7 – *Psychological Consequences of Inequality I*

Payne, K. (2017) *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Think, Live, & Die*, Introduction and chapters 1 to 4. New York: Viking

July 8 – *Psychological Consequences of Inequality II*

Payne, K. (2017) Chapters 5 to 9 in *The Broken Ladder*

Week 3 - July 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

July 11 – *Review session*

July 12 – *In class midterm*

July 13 – *Inequality and Education I*

Putnam, R. (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Chapter 4 – Schooling (pp. 135-190). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Case, A. & Deaton, A. (2021). Life expectancy in adulthood is falling for those without a BA degree, but as educational gaps have widened, racial gaps have narrowed. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 188(11), March 16th.

July 14 – *Inequality and Education II*

Reardon, S. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between rich and poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In G. Duncan, G., & R. Murnane (Eds.). *Whither opportunity: Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances* (pp. 91-116). New York & Chicago: Russell Sage & Spencer Foundations.

Fahle, E., Reardon, S., Kalogrides, D., Weathers, E., & Jang, H. (2020). Racial segregation and school poverty in the United States, 1999-2016. *Race and Social Problems*, 12, 42-56.

Triventi, M., Skopek, J., Kulic, N., Buchholz, S., & Blosefeld, H. P. (2020). Advantage “finds its way”: How privileged families exploit opportunities in different systems of secondary education. *Sociology*, 54(2), 237-257.

July 15 – *Stress and Inequality*

Duncan, G., Magnuson, K., Murnane, R., & Votuba-Drzal, E. (2019). Income inequality and well-being of American families. *Family Relations*, 68, 313-325.

Evans, G., & Kim, P. (2012). Childhood poverty and young adults' allostatic load: The mediating role of childhood cumulative risk exposure. *Psychological Science* 23(9) 979–983.

Tough, P. (2011, March 21). The poverty clinic: Can a stressful childhood make you a sick adult? *The New Yorker*, 21, 25-32.

Week 4 – July 18, 19, 20, 21, 22

July 18 – *Understanding Inequality – the Basics*

Norton, M. & Ariely, D. (2011). Consensus on building a better America- one wealth Quintile at a time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6, 9-12.

Norton, M., Neal, D., Govan, C., Ariely, D., & Holland, E. (2014). The not-so-commonwealth of Australia: Evidence for a cross-cultural desire for a more equal distribution of wealth. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 14(1), 339-351.

Arsenio, W., & Willems, C. (2017). Adolescents' conceptions of national wealth distribution: Connections with perceived societal fairness and academic plans. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(3), 463-474.

July 19 – *Misunderstanding Inequality*

Eriksson, K., & Simpson, B. (2012). What do Americans know about inequality? It depends on how you ask them. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 7(6), 741-745.

Eriksson, K., & Simpson, B. (2013). The available evidence suggests the percent measure should not be used to study inequality: Reply to Norton and Ariely. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(3), 395-396.

Norton, M., & Ariely, D. (2013). American's desire for less inequality does depend on how you ask them. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(3), 393-394.

Arsenio, W. (2018). The wealth of nations: International judgments regarding actual and ideal resource distributions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 357-362.

July 20 – *Why Understanding Inequality Matters*

Bartels, L. (2005). Homer gets a tax cut: Inequality and public policy in the American mind. *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(1), 15–31.

Niehues, J. (2014). Subjective perceptions of inequality and redistributive preferences: An international comparison. Unpublished manuscript.

Gimpelson, V., & Treisman, D. (2018). Misperceiving inequality. *Economics and Politics*, 30, 27-54.

July 21 – *Adolescents' Understanding of Inequality*

Barreiro, A., Arsenio, W., Wainryb, C. (2018). Adolescents' conceptions of wealth and societal fairness amid extreme inequality: An Argentine sample. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(3), 458-508.

Flanagan, C., Kim, T., Pykett, A., Finlay, A., Gallay, E., & Pancer, M. (2014). Adolescents' theories about economic inequality: Why are some people poor and other people rich? *Developmental Psychology*, 50(11), 2512-2525.

Flanagan, C. & Kornbluh, M. (2019). "How unequal is the United States? Adolescents' images of social stratification. *Child Development*, 90(3), 957-969.

Arsenio, W. (2015). Moral psychological perspectives on distributive justice and societal inequalities. *Child Development Perspectives*, 9 (2), 91-95.

July 22 – *Understanding Social Mobility & Summary*

Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T. (2015) Building a more mobile America – one income quintile at a time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(1), 60-71.

Davidai, S. (2018). Why do Americans believe in economic mobility? Economic inequality, external attributions of wealth and poverty, and the belief in economic mobility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 79, 138-148.

Arsenio, W. (2022). Conceptions of Economic Inequality and Societal Fairness. In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds). *Handbook of Moral Development* (3rd ed.). Oxfordshire UK: Routledge,

Week 5 – July 25, 26, 27

July 25 – Summary of Class Themes

July 26, 27 – Class presentations