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


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


June 29 – the Basics of US Inequality II – Lecture


June 30 – Why is Inequality a Problem I?

Wilkinson & Pickett – TED Talk


July 1 - Why is Inequality a Problem II?


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

July 5 - Why is Inequality a Problem III?


July 6 – Consequences of Inequality – Some Basics


July 7 – Psychological Consequences of Inequality I

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*


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*


July 15 – *Stress and Inequality*


**Week 4 – July 18, 19, 20, 21, 22**

**July 18 – Understanding Inequality – the Basics**


**July 19 – Misunderstanding Inequality**


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.


**July 20 – Why Understanding Inequality Matters**


July 21 – Adolescents’ Understanding of Inequality


July 22 – Understanding Social Mobility & Summary


Week 5 – July 25, 26, 27

July 25 – Summary of Class Themes

July 26, 27 – Class presentations