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Article

A comparative study of the impact of income inequality on social cohesion

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Abstract: Economic inequality weakens social cohesion in three ways: by decreasing interpersonal trust, increasing intergroup animosity, and eroding accepted social norms. Comparative analysis reveals that the magnitude of this negative impact is not uniformly moderated by contextual factors such as social mobility, welfare institution strength, and cultural values. To further strengthen social cohesion, reduce these adverse effects, and build a more resilient social fabric, governments should develop policies that support a society with a high level of social inclusion, social capital, and social diversity.

Keywords: income inequality social; cohesion; comparative analysis

1. The triple mechanism by which income inequality weakens social cohesion

Income inequality erodes social cohesion indirectly but through multiple tiers of social, psychological, and behavioral mechanisms. In highly unequal income societies, common contacts are affected first (Ren, 2009). Extremely disparate economic status results in the lack of shared experience and concerns and concerns to discuss among society members, and contacts deteriorate and become functional. This physical and psychological distance reduces gargantuan interpersonal trust directly. When the populace perceives that their social status is lower and this disparity is felt to be unjust, this produces a feeling of deprivation (Wang et al., 2022). Not merely does such adverse sentiment brew resentment against the rich, but it can also breed suspicion in others within one's own social stratum, so that others are felt to gain unfairly. A culture of social alienation results from this (Wu and Duan, 2025). The interpersonal unit that makes up the impact of inequality on social cohesion is this mechanism. Additionally, roup hostility exacerbates the effects of inequality even more. The social cognitive system easily reduces apparent economic disparities to "us" and "them" (While and Eadson, 2022). High-income people and low-income people are no longer seen as members of the same society but are labeled with different social labels, forming stereotypes and prejudices against each other (Foxon, 2011). This distinction between groups reduces people's sense of identity with society and makes people more willing to safeguard their own group interests rather than work for the common interests of the entire society. Unfair resource distribution is regarded as a reasonable thing in this process. High-income people may feel that their wealth comes from personal efforts, while low-income people are considered to be incompetent or not diligent enough. This opposing view hinders cooperation and unity between different classes and greatly affects the entire social action ability (Lockie, 2022).

Figure 1

A three-process model of "interpersonal-intergroup-normative" studies on how economic inequality weakens social cohesion

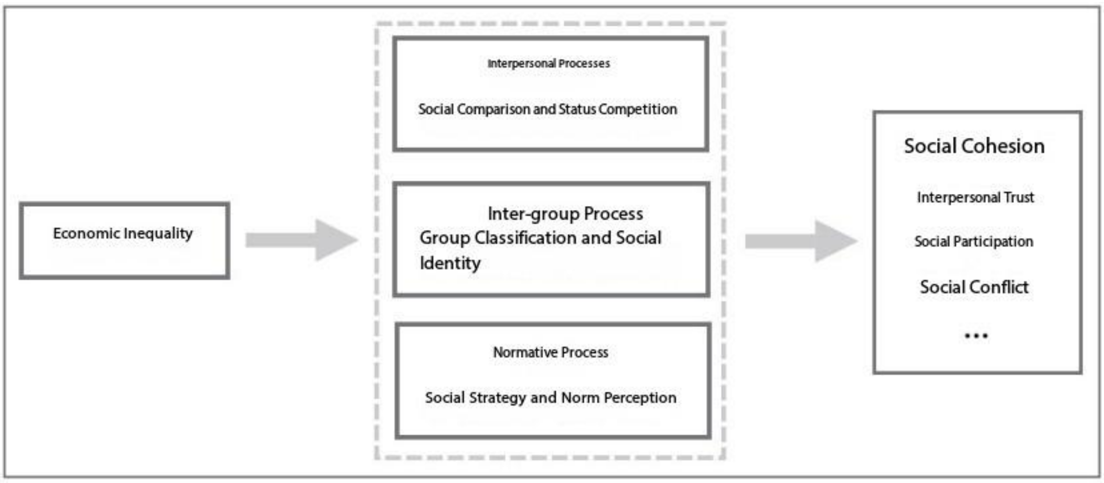

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the gradual progression from alienation between individuals to intergroup antagonism. Weakening of social norms is a third and deeper cause. A successful society needs to have widespread recognition and acceptance of fundamental rules like fairness, mutual aid, and cooperation. But long-term and acute income inequality erodes trust in these essential norms (Liu et al., 2022). When individuals observe no apparent connection between the accumulation of wealth and one's morality and strong work ethic, or even end up in a position where "the rich are immoral," they are motivated to ask whether society is actually equitable or not. This lower perception of fairness directly affects their willingness to cooperate. People will end up believing that obeying the rules of cooperation in an unjust system will benefit no one except themselves, and thus they will be more inclined to cooperate only for themselves. Long-term, this can result in a vicious cycle of low trust and decreased cooperation. As people's enthusiasm for public participation wanes, so does their trust in government institutions. Ultimately, social cohesion is compromised. This rule-breaking has far-reaching consequences, making it difficult for society to work together to solve common issues (Pan and Chen, 2021).

2. Comparison of influence effects in different social contexts

The impact of income inequality on social cohesion varies extremely in multicultural social contexts. Such deviations are a result of bottom conditions, such as culture, institutional context, as well as level of development (Lu and Hu, 2021). Comparison shows that income inequality is not so purely an economic phenomenon; its social impact varies with where it occurs. Values that differ across cultures are the starting point for explanations of this variation. In individualistic societies where individual effort and ability are valued, income differentials may be conceived as an expression of individual effort as well as ability and thus acceptable to a certain extent. In a similar way, this explanation may also lead towards blaming losers as well as envy towards winners, again eroding trust amongst individuals. Contrastingly, if there is a cultural push towards group solidarity as well as responsibility, unlimited income inequality would be viewed as a danger towards group solidarity as well as easily trigger social unrest (Cheng et al., 2024). Even if it's tolerated for a short period of time, cultural context moderates how individuals watch, perceive, as well as eventually respond towards economic inequality. Institutional arrangements, as well as notably social welfare institution density as well as coverage, possess a key buffer role to perform. With extensive coverage as well as comprehensive protection, a welfare state could compensate inequalities generated by market distribution, allowing individuals a minimal sense of security as well as room for expansion. Such an institutional configuration not just eliminates economic anxiety but furthermore enforces the very simple tenet of mutual risk-bearing as well as mutual benefit from development, thus maintaining trust amongst different social classes. Otherwise, where social protection does not exist, human beings will struggle in solitude with market hazards and thus further consolidate economic insecurity as well as bring about perceptions that there exists a low mobility between classes (Chauhan et al., 2022). This will predominantly stoke interindividual alienation as well as intergroup rivalry. Such a welfare system’s existence as well as role always determines how inequity gets converted to adverse psychological consequences.

The processes of legitimacy and inequality are triggered by social mobility. Significant income disparities may be interpreted as temporary and reversible through individual effort in high mobility societies. Without maintaining an innately antagonistic social disposition, this assumption of equal opportunity can effectively eradicate hopelessness and discontent. However, as soon as societies are established, income inequality turns into an insurmountable barrier to identity. Systematic exclusion plagues the poor, and their willingness to cooperate and adopt common social values is undermined. The most important metric for determining whether inequality can cause serious harm is mobility.

3. Conclusion

Comparative analysis shows that rather than being a straightforward, cross-contextual cause-and-effect relationship, the relationship between income inequality and social cohesion is complex and occurs within particular sociocultural and institutional contexts. The threshold for intergroup conflict to escalate interpersonal trust and the rate at which social norms deteriorate vary substantially amongst social contexts. This finding indicates that a simple linear model cannot be employed to study these problems. Instead, contextual processes and variables must be employed to create a dynamic analysis framework. This is because this framework takes into account cultural values, welfare institution strength, and social mobility as moderating or mediating variables to account for the variations in the impact.

Policy making needs to be cognizant of this contextuality. In societies with a culture that is more individualistic and has poor welfare networks, redistributive policies need to be intensified and a universal social safety net created in order to directly address economic insecurity due to inequality. In collectivist societies, more emphasis can be placed on having open channels for social mobility, maintaining the value of "effort-reward" fairness by having equal education and equal opportunity, and therefore social norms can be reinforced. Throughout, social inclusiveness, generation of social capital that goes beyond class, and an acceptance and respect for social diversity are main strategies towards social cohesion.

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