

How Gender and Social Class Affect Public Opinion on Social Inequality

Balwinder Kaur

Associate Professor, Govt College For Girls Patiala

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Abstract- All human societies have a social structure that divides people into categories based on a combination of achieved and ascribed traits. The kinds of categories McCall cites gender, race, age, and membership in exclusive social organizations. Most Americans also increasingly disagreeing with the statement “the American Dream has become impossible for most people to achieve” leading to the conclusion that most Americans are increasingly satisfied with the opportunity to get ahead. To answer these questions, data was taken from a survey conducted on Brigham Young University (BYU) students from various class backgrounds. It is interesting to see that 61% of rich people strongly agree that there are still great differences between social levels in the United States. This is against McCall’s findings

Index Terms- American Dream, BYU, Human Societies, McCall, social class, social levels

I. INTRODUCTION

All human societies have a social structure that divides people into categories based on a combination of achieved and ascribed traits. The kinds of categories he cites include gender, race, age, and membership in exclusive social organizations. Categorical inequality, then, is defined as inequalities of income, wealth, or influence that vary systematically with membership in social categories. (Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*, 2008). In the United States, economic disparities began to rise in the mid-1970s, and although the increase may have slowed recently, levels of inequality remain high compared with the three decades after World War II. Among the rich OECD countries, the United States features the highest level of income inequality and, together with the UK, has experienced the sharpest growth in disparities over the past quarter century (Kenworthy 2004, Smeeding 2005). Underlying these broad trends, earnings have changed in diverse ways at different parts of the distribution. During the 1980s, both upper-tail and lower-tail inequality grew. Then these trends diverged. Lower-tail inequality stopped growing around 1987 and contracted slightly during the 1990s, whereas upper-tail inequality continued to rise (Atkinson 2003, Blau & Kahn 2002, Mishel et al. 2005). In this paper, we will try to find out how gender and income affect people’s opinions on inequality and the American Dream.

How income is divided:

The share of national income going to families in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution declined by about one-fifth,

from 17.4 percent in 1973 to 13.9 percent in 2001, while the share going to families in the top 5 percent increased by more than one-third, from 15.5 percent to 21.0 percent. Meanwhile, the share of income going to the top one-tenth of one percent quadrupled between 1970 and 1998, leaving the 13,000 richest families in America with almost as much income as the 20 million poorest families. (Homer) In light of these developments, business writer Robert Samuelson argued, “If Americans couldn’t abide rising inequality, we’d now be demonstrating in the streets.”⁵ Instead, to the contrary, the past four years have seen a massive additional government-engineered transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the rich in the form of substantial reductions in federal income taxes. In 2001 and 2003, the Bush administration engineered two enormous tax cuts primarily benefiting very wealthy taxpayers. Most Americans supported these tax cuts. Larry Bartels argues that they did so not because they were indifferent to economic inequality, but because they largely failed to connect inequality and public policy. (Homer)

Ordinary Americans supporting tax breaks:

One common hypothesis is that they do so because they embrace an American ideology of opportunity in which economic inequality is natural and unobjectionable. Jennifer Hochschild reported that her rich and poor respondents alike “define political freedom as strict equality, but economic freedom as an equal chance to become unequal.” Many—as of 2011, most—adult Americans have become aware of the very real possibility that they may not fare economically any better than did their parents. However, Americans may continue to find solace in the notion of the American Dream, defined as spiritual well-being more than material success, as documented by Hanson and Zogby (2010). According to recent accounts, most Americans are aware of growing income and wealth inequality and remain willing to see government as a vehicle to provide opportunities, despite their tendency to see themselves as ideologically more conservative than liberal. (Shaw and Gaffey 2012)

Role of Democracy and Government:

One of the leading arguments in favor of democracy relates to the distribution of power in society and the benefit that an egalitarian distribution of power has for the poor (Lenski 1966; Lipset 1981). The basic logic of the argument is that those at the bottom of society benefit from redistribution. When those at the bottom are given the franchise and have a formal say about the formation of government policy, redistribution will increase. This increase in redistribution then reduces economic inequality.

Essentially, the argument holds that democracy enhances the absolute and relative well-being of the poor, who demand increased state redistribution and are able to see their demands met when provided with procedural mechanisms for influencing state policy. (Kelly and Enns 2010)

There can be little doubt that the wealthy exert more political influence than the less affluent do. If they tend to get their way in some areas of public policy, and if they have policy preferences that differ significantly from those of most Americans, the results could be troubling for democratic policy making. (Page et al. 2013) We can see here that on one hand, people who are not well off believe that the government is going to take care of them. They have a lot of faith in public policies and on the other hand, the people who are making these public policies are the top one percent. We need to realize that these people will do their best to ensure that the power does not go in the hands of the poor.

Nevertheless, if those with lower incomes are less likely to vote, then the political system will be less responsive to a rise in inequality. Two effects are worth noting. First, higher fractions of the poor are noncitizens. Second, among the poor who are citizens, turnout is very low. Fewer than half the households with incomes under \$15,000 reported voting in the presidential election of 2008, even though turnout of the poor increased over the 2000 level, in contrast, over four-fifths of those with incomes over \$150,000 reported voting. (Bonica et al 2013)

Public opinion on Social Inequality:

The study done by University of California at Berkeley that showed us that rich people feel entitled and feel that they deserve to win the game of life. The more money you have, chances are that you will run over people at a crosswalk, commit more crimes, cheat on your partner, lie when playing games, a lot more than a poor person who is earning less than \$15,000/year. Poor people know that they do not have a lot of opportunities and hence do not even complain. This reminds me of the constrained agency and the two circles. Constrained agency is real when we watch this video. (New and Politics) Hence public opinion on income inequality is shaped by the kind of background a person is coming from. In the canonical model of Meitzer and Richard (1981), increased inequality (in the form of median incomes falling relative to average incomes) leads the median voter to demand more redistribution, so that politics should limit after-tax and -transfer inequality. But as the 1 percent get relatively richer, they turn against redistribution. (Bonica et al 2013)

In addition to economic background, other factors like gender, nationality, ethnic prejudice also contribute towards shaping our views on income inequality. Men get scared when the power goes into the hands of women, so they try their best to keep women at jobs which do not pay as much. Even when a woman gets the same job a man has, she still gets paid less. (Pratto et al. 1994) In today's world, women are paying more than men everyday while buying the same products as shown on Anderson Cooper 360.

Defining the American Dream

From the beginning of American thought, the notion of equality of opportunity was a persistent impression; this American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Hauhart 2015, 66). The American Dream is among the United States' most recognizable and revered symbols of our national heritage. Celebrated in popular culture, this statement of national purpose has been analyzed by commentators across the broad range of humanistic and scholarly disciplines, including American sociology. (Hauhart 2015) As described by Adams, American Dream meant a life in which personal fulfillment – or success as one personally defined it – could be pursued.

Most Americans also increasingly disagreeing with the statement "the American Dream has become impossible for most people to achieve" (Hanson and Zogby 2010), leading to the conclusion that most Americans are increasingly satisfied with the opportunity to get ahead. Another study of public opinion polls, however, found that "many Americans are losing confidence in the essential fairness of the system and their opportunities for financial advancement" (Chambers, Swan, Heesacker 2014, 413).

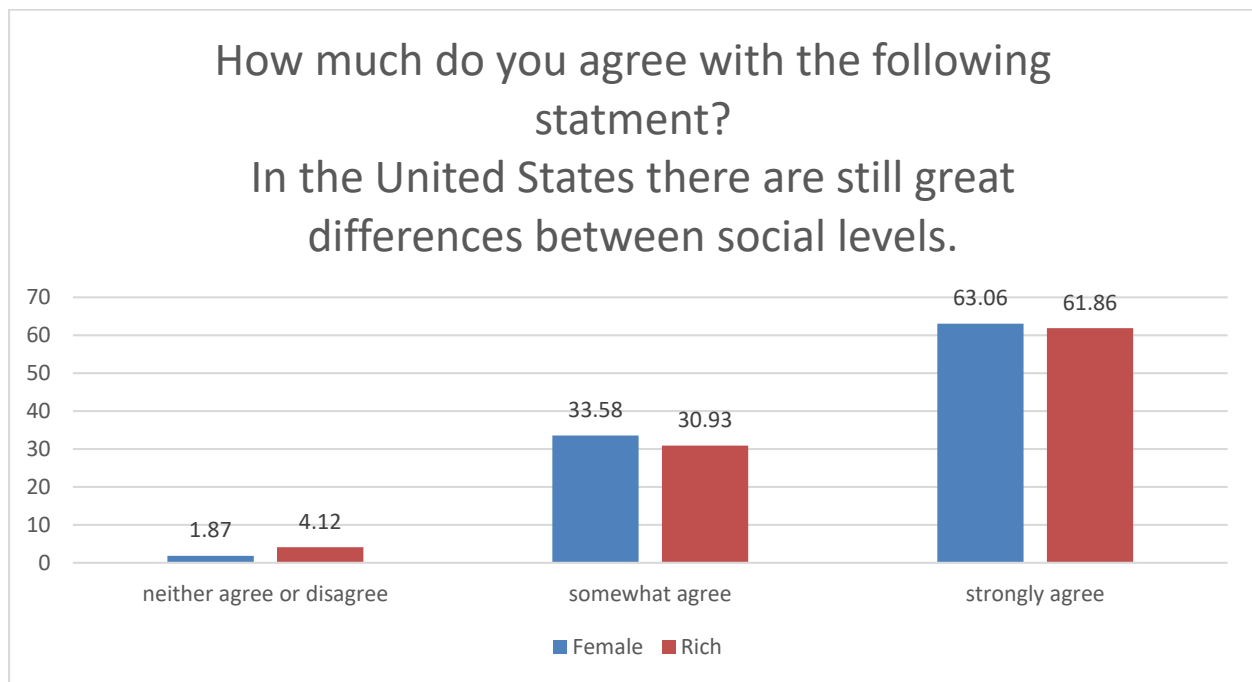
II. METHODS

To answer these questions, data was taken from a survey conducted on Brigham Young University (BYU) students from various class backgrounds. Our sample size was 480. The General Social Survey had questions both in regards to opinions and demographics. Questions covered topics such as inequality, government involvement, economic mobility, and the American Dream, as well as demographic questions regarding political affiliation, parental income, religious affiliation, and family structure. While this is not a representative of BYU students, it does provide a starting point for understanding how this group differs from the general population in beliefs on inequality and class.

We need to keep in mind that the same survey would give out different results when we give it to a sample from the general U.S. population because most BYU students come from privileged class backgrounds. STATA software was used for statistical analysis of survey responses. Basic analysis were run correlations between independent (income and social class) and dependent (perceptions about inequality, mobility, and the American Dream) variables. Ordinary least squares regressions was also ran to test our hypothesis.

III. RESULTS

We see in the very beginning that according to most BYU students, i.e. 130 out of 463 believe that living comfortable is the most important thing to their American Dream.



In the above graph we see that 63% of women agree that in the United States, there are still great differences between social levels. This verifies McCall’s findings. She also mentioned that women are always looked down upon. Even when a woman gets the same job a man has, she still gets paid less. America is a land

of opportunity but lower wages for women and ethnic minorities simply reflect lower skill and education levels as they are not given as many opportunities as men are given. (Pratto et al. 1994)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.
var3	467	3.072805	1.115175
female	465	.5698925	.4956242
rich	468	.207265	.4057808

We also see that females believe that what one can achieve in life depends mainly upon one’s family background. 73% of the

females said that they come from a middle class background and 43% of them somewhat agreed that family background matters.

Table 2. OLS Model of the Association between Gender, Financial background and Social Differences. BYU Survey 2015.

	Model 1	Model 2
female	-.333 ** (.101)	-.532 ** (.134)
rich	3.163 (.124)	-.079 (.406)
dream1	-.076 (.306)	-.136 -(.016)
_cons	3.048 *** (.097)	2.828 *** (3.268)

***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05

Note: Standard errors in paratheses.

N=453

IV. DISCUSSION

It is interesting to see that 61% of rich people strongly agree that there are still great differences between social levels in the United States. This is against McCall's findings. This could be because of the fact that the survey was conducted on the BYU campus where people are humble and they are ready to acknowledge the real problems in this world. 26% of students who have parents making more than \$200,000 disagree with the statement that what one can achieve depends upon one's family background. The following statement given by one of the student is a proof. "Yes, I feel the class someone is born into has the potential to start him/her at an advantage or disadvantage, in terms of opportunity. However, it's only the starting point. What you do with it is up to you."

We also see that if a student is LDS, then 58% of them agree that there are still great differences between social levels. On the contrary, if the students are from any other religion, then 100% of them agree with the above statement. This could be again possible because it is a concentrated campus and there was not a huge sample representing other religions. The main problem with this sample is not a lot of diversity is included. Hence we cannot say that this sample represents the entire country because in Utah, 60% of the population is LDS whereas only 2% of the population in the United States is LDS. This explains the sort of biased findings from this set of data.

We also need to realize that all the students that participated in the survey are college going students who have had opportunities all their lives. They are in college because of the opportunities they were provided with. This tells us why students do not have extreme views about inequality in our society because most probably they do not really know what inequality looks like. This answers our question as to why perceptions matter. People who come from a background of advantage have rosy colors glasses on and it is hard for them to see the harsh reality of life. When we are kids, our parents do not tell us the reason behind poor being poor. We have them as servants, drivers, maids and never really care about them. We get lost in our own little bubble and forget that they are humans as well. We need to look closely at inequality in order to feel its impact. We can watch sad videos all day long on television and still be unaware of what is going in the real world out there. I met a girl a couple of weeks ago in one my classes and she is going to India in summer to help people in the slums. She came up to me and asked me about slums in India. I just stared at her because I did not have an answer. I have never been to the slums because the society looks down upon people who go and visit the slums. We are taught that people are poor because they are refusing to work. Our parents teach us that the poor keep on having a number of kids because they want more people in their family to beg on the streets. This is how they pay their bills.

Government needs to mend its policies and make them more useful to our unfair society. I have mentioned it before as well that

policies need to be changed. For example, a person has applied for social security. The process takes a long time and by the time the case is opened, the person goes homeless. Then the social security office tries to get hold of them, calls them but they do not answer any calls because they do not have money to pay their phone bill. Then they mail them but the person is homeless by now and is never going to receive that mail. Winter comes along and we hear about all these homeless people dying. People who are stuck in poverty are trying to help themselves. It is out turn to help them. Policies need to be changed so that we can prevent people who have shelter from going homeless. This applies to every other policy that exists out there.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Balwinder Kaur, Associate Professor, Govt College For Girls Patiala

