

## **Many Cooks, Brave Men, Apples, and Oranges: How People Think About Equality**

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When I was writing *Blaming The Victim*—25 years ago—there were, I now realize, two issues on my mind that have been nagging at me every since.

The first of these is equality, or rather inequality. The process that I called—perhaps too glibly—blaming the victim is a way of justifying inequalities that appear on their face to be quite unjustifiable. If, for example, existing extremes of wealth and poverty seem to be blatant violations of simple justice, a moral person cannot simply ignore the injustice. If such extremes of inequality are allowed to exist, there must be some justification, some received wisdom, some explanation that will appease the conscience of a decent person. Blaming the victim serves just such a purpose; first, by finding defects and deficiencies in the poor themselves, and then, more important, concluding that these discovered defects are the cause of poverty. *Presto Chango!* Extreme poverty is no longer an instance of social injustice. It now becomes the inevitable consequence of the characteristics and behavior of the poor themselves. The notion that poverty is caused by the incompetence, laziness, or wickedness of poor persons seem quite plausible. It is made even more plausible when close observation reveals that many poor persons are, indeed, incompetent, or lazy, or wicked. (As are many who are not poor, of course.)

At this point, the search for understanding ceases abruptly. No further inquiry seems necessary, no examination of the circumstances, of the social and economic systems, of the wage scale, or the employment situation, and so forth. The personal explanation renders any structural explanation irrelevant.

This readiness to believe was the second issue that nagged at me. It was not so clear-cut as the first. It had to do somehow with the *style* of one's thinking, such as, for example, a preference for explanations that fo-

cused on such matters as individual responsibility, and on the primary significance of an individual's particular characteristics.

In *Equality*, I tried to work this out more fully, proposing the idea that there were two competing versions, two basic conceptions of equality that were contradictory. I named these two competing conceptions—again, perhaps too glibly—the Fair Play and the Fair Shares perspectives. They rested upon underlying modes of thought, more or less unconscious assumptions about the nature of human nature itself.

I use the verb “speculate” to suggest that I was not working from a large quantity of empirical data. To provide such data was the next obvious order of business and, finally, my longtime colleague, Ali Banuazizi, and I worked out the formulations in *Equality* as hypotheses to be tested empirically. We have been engaged in this task for the past several years and today I would like to tell you something about what we have been doing and what we have been finding out in our efforts to explore how people think about equality.

As it happens, equality has also in recent years become a matter of public concern. Economists and political scientists have begun to worry and fret as they have observed growing inequalities in wealth and income—how the rich have been waxing richer while the rest of us have been slowly losing ground. The issue has spilled off the campus and onto the Op-Ed pages of the newspapers and into the substance of political discourse. One of the main issues in the recent budget debate was an effort to use the tax code to achieve a slightly greater degree of equality between the wealthy and impoverished working families.

And many of the most pressing issues on the agenda are, to a greater or lesser degree, addressed ultimately to the issue of equality. Affirmative action is about equality. Health care reform is about equality. Welfare reform, the kinds of jobs people find available, education—all of these are in some way about equality and inequality. The issue of equality turns out to be much more than a matter of intellectual curiosity. It is a part of real life, of the stuff of decisions to be made over the next years that will affect all of us. So, how people think about equality is a very significant question.

Here, then, are a few empirical findings from our beginning inquiries. With your indulgence, I begin more or less in the middle. I went to a classical high school where we studied a good deal of Latin and Greek, if not much else. Our teachers never tired of pointing out how the old-time heavy hitters like Homer and Virgil usually began their stories *in medias res*—in the middle of things—and they suggested we try it ourselves. So I start in the middle and then go back to the beginning.

Imagine, if you will, that you are responding to a questionnaire. The usual agree–disagree thing, with the standard choices: strongly agree, agree, and so forth. Just the way Moses brought it to us down from the mountain.

Let me read you three items from the questionnaire and you decide whether you agree:

“A great symphony orchestra differs from a mediocre one largely because of the skillful leadership of the conductor.”

“The fact that no two people in the world have the same fingerprints seems to show that Nature makes each individual an absolutely unique person.”

“A small army of brave men can usually defeat a larger army of cowards.”

Now, if you should agree with these items—and the rest of the questionnaire goes in the same direction—we would have some insights into how you think about equality and about issues relating to equality. Let us take affirmative action as an example. You would be against it. And you would very likely agree with this statement: “If incomes were more equal, nothing would motivate people to work hard.”

That is one way your questionnaire might turn out. Or you might be one of those who disagree with most of the statements of this kind and agree with the next set:

“The proverb ‘Many hands make light labor’ is more often true than the proverb ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth.’”

“You can add apples and oranges—three apples and four oranges equal seven pieces of fruit.”

“The old riddle says that a chicken crosses the road to get to the other side, but more likely, there’s something on the other side that’s attracting him.”

If you agreed with these and similar items, you would likely be one of those who took the opposing position on affirmative action, income distribution, and similar issues.

The items I read to you are parts of three closely related instruments<sup>1</sup> designed to measure aspects of what we have reluctantly been calling “human nature ideology” (we welcome suggestions for a different name). The idea is to tap into basic assumptions about human nature and the nature of human society, with the idea that these basic assumptions come together in varying patterns to shape and influence ideas about particular topics like equality. I go into this in more detail at a later point, but for now I ask

<sup>1</sup>A detailed report of the research herein described, in conventional form, has been prepared for publication and will be available in the near future. Meanwhile, copies of the five scales referred to can be obtained by writing to Prof. Ali Banuazizi, Psychology Department, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02167.

you to put a bookmark in your mind right here and come now from the middle back to the beginning.

The beginning point, of course, has to be some consideration of the concept of quality itself. That there are many different and often conflicting ideas about equality is no secret. If you ask, "what do you mean, equality?", contradictory answers emerge and it sometimes seems like one of those abstract, nebulous notions that completely resists definition. But, if you examine some of the writing and thinking about the topic, I believe you can discern two general families of ideas, two quite different ways of looking at the subject, two general viewpoints or perspectives. And we think we can formulate these two opposing perspectives with some degree of clarity.

The first version we have labeled the Fair Play perspective. It is often formulated in terms of a metaphor, the metaphor of a race. Perhaps we might call it the Great Race of Life. The basic point is that all participants should face an equal set of conditions. Every effort must be made to insure a scrupulously fair beginning of the race, everyone starting exactly at the same time. And further efforts must ensure that no one confronts any kind of barrier or handicap and no one is given any unfair advantage. To what end? To the end that nothing but sheer ability determines the winner. The winner of the race, beyond any question, is the fastest runner.

The vocabulary of this version features words like "equal opportunity," "advancement by merit," "distributive justice," and so forth. This is the majority viewpoint on the issue of equality. It is, of course, congruent with American individualism and is, in fact, often presented as the definition of The American Dream.

The second general conception of equality is the minority version. The primary issue from this perspective is the distribution of resources. Is there some reasonable allocation of resources throughout the community or the society? Not, of course, does everyone have exactly the same—that is a silly notion often raised up as a straw man—but is everyone able to meet his or her needs? This and the absence of vastly disproportionate differences in resources between one group and another are the basic components in the second conception of equality. We are calling this the Fair Shares perspective.

In brief, the difference is this: The Fair Player wants an equal opportunity and assurance that the best get the most. The Fair Sharer wants equal access and assurance that everyone has enough.

Fair Play and Fair Shares can be thought about in the words of the Declaration. The ones that follow the assertion that all men—all persons—are created equal. You know, the ones about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that each individual should have an unfettered opportunity to pursue happiness—although not, of course, necessarily to

achieve it. Some have the capacity to succeed in their pursuit. Others, less favored, fail.

The Fair Shares idea focusses more on the right to life and the right to liberty, with the assumption that, if one is to assert right to life and liberty, one must also assert a right to sufficient resources to sustain life and maintain liberty. If persons do not have the means of preserving life and liberty, it would seem quite shallow and trivial to affirm the rights to those conditions.

What I am proposing to you, then, is the idea that thinking about equality can be divided into these two general conceptions: the Fair Play perspective and the Fair Sharers perspective.

Next step: Can we approximate some kind of measurement of these two viewpoints? Well, we tried, and I think it works out. Again, we used the tried and true method—a set of items asking for agreement or disagreement. Let me give you a couple of examples of the items.

Here are two Fair Play items:

“A society can be considered just only if the most worthy people are in positions of leadership.”

“The most important American idea is that each individual would have the opportunity to rise as high as his talents and hard work will take him.”

To elicit the Fair Shares perspective, we had such items as these:

“For any decent society, the first job is to make sure everyone has enough food, shelter, and health care.”

“It simply isn’t fair that a small number of people have enormous wealth while millions are so poor they can barely survive.”

Using these and similar items, we tried to sort out 500-some college students into the Fair Players and the Fair Sharers, and it seemed a pretty good scale for a first attempt. Fairly reliable. The two kinds of items hung together and we at least found it interesting to see these examples of how people thought about equality in these rather general terms.

But, of course, we had much greater interest in looking at the consequences of these viewpoints. What difference does it make whether we are dealing with the Fair Play or the Fair Shares perspective? It turns out that they do indeed imply quite different ways of looking at specific equality-related issues.

Take, for example, the central question of income inequalities, which, as I mentioned, is gradually looming up as a very important issue. We found that there were marked differences between Fair Players and Fair Sharers. The latter were inclined to agree with the statement “Incomes should be more equal, because every family’s needs for food, housing, and so on, are the same.” Those of the Fair Play persuasion, in contrast, tended to agree

with statements like “Incomes cannot be made more equal since people’s abilities and talents are unequal.”

Take another issue. On what basis should wages be established? One principle would be to set pay scales in accordance with the skill and productivity and training of the individual worker. An opposing principle would be that a wage rate should be attached to the job itself, not to the particular worker. Those doing comparable work should get comparable pay. At this point, it may come as no surprise to learn that the Fair Play viewpoint is associated with a preference for pay differentials based on an individual’s merit. The Fair Shares folks would rather see wages based on the job that is being done. Same job, same pay scale.

One more example of a specific policy issue: ability grouping in school—what is usually termed “tracking.” How do different perspectives on equality play themselves out here? Again, as you might expect, those from the Fair Play perspective, focusing on the idea of advancement by merit, thinking that the correct arrangement of things is that the best should outdistance the rest, tend to be very approving of a system of tracking; the Fair Shares people, vice versa. This pattern of relationships holds up across a number of social policy issues.

So far, then, we find that we can identify Fair Sharers and Fair Players and that the two groups think quite differently about the specific details of many real-life issues related to equality.

The next question is “How come?” How come we find these two quite distinctive ways of thinking about equality? What are the wellsprings of the Fair Play perspective and the Fair Shares perspective? Can we understand the foundation, the underpinnings upon which these two quite different viewpoints rest? Are there, in short, ways of thinking that precede, or rather, underlie these different conceptions? Without going into the details of analysis and derivation, let me put our conclusions straight out.

We arrived at the position that the two different concepts of equality reflect and concretize differing conceptions of human nature. These conceptions of human nature can be formulated as a set of assumptions that lie deep in one’s consciousness. So deep that they are rarely even questioned, but are simply taken for granted, and are perceived almost as factual rather than matters of belief. Such deep unquestioned beliefs pretty well fit Karl Mannheim’s formulations about the nature of ideology.

We were particularly concerned about three issues, three dimensions, three questions about what human beings are really like, their modes of living, their motivations, how they live their lives together in social units. We are coming now to the place where you put a bookmark in your mind about 15 minutes ago.

We wish now to look more closely at these three dimensions of beliefs and assumptions that we carry around with us and that shape and define our perceptions of other persons and of the world around us. As I mentioned, the term we have been using to refer to this layer of mental process is human nature ideology. It is a clumsy and unsatisfactory label, but it does, I think, capture the nature of what we are looking for. Let me turn to these three dimensions of—you should excuse the expression—human nature ideology.

The first question is this: Can we better understand and interact with other persons by perceiving them primarily as separate individuals or by paying more attention to the ways in which persons function together as a social unit—a family, a community, a society. It is, of course, an age-old question—the individual and the collectivity; the citizen and the state; the person and society. And, as with all such questions, the correct answer is always both. But I think it is undeniable that most persons lean one way or another, many in quite an extreme manner. So, we hypothesize that persons can be categorized into two groups: those who tend to assume that the individual is paramount; and others who are more aware of and are attuned to the collectivity. We tried to develop a method of measuring these ideological preferences. The questions that I asked you to agree or disagree with are a few of the items from our questionnaire. The item about the importance of the conductor at a symphony concert, for example, is intended to tap into a leaning toward the individual, while a preference for “many hands make light the labor” rather than “too many cooks spoil the broth” is seen as a leaning toward the collectivity. To give you a little more of the flavor of the questionnaires, let me read two more items:

On the individual side, a very straightforward item: “The individual human being is much more important than any group he might belong to, such as his family, his neighborhood, his country, etc.”

And on the collective side: “With regard to making sound judgments, not only are two heads better than one—six heads are better than two.”

The second dimension—may I say ideological dimension—is reflected in response to this question: Are human beings better perceived in terms of the ways in which they are essentially similar to one another or should we pay more attention to differences between them? Again, a question that comes up again and again, at least in the history of Western thought.

The relevant questionnaire items for this dimension are, first, the one about apples and oranges. Are we more concerned about differentiating between the two or do we first see their fundamental similarity as fruits? The other one is about fingerprints—don’t unique fingerprints demonstrate the ultimate uniqueness of each individual? Let me add two more examples from the questionnaire:

One emphasizing difference goes like this: "I can usually spot the little things that make one identical twin different from the other."

And one emphasizing similarity: "There's a lot of wisdom in Rudyard Kipling's line, 'The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin.'"

The third dimension concerns the relative importance of factors inside and outside the skin. Which is primary? The forces within us? Forces of mind, personality, biology? Or the forces we encounter outside ourselves—the circumstances we find ourselves in, the events we encounter in our life, the lucky breaks and the disasters, the barriers and the favoring winds? Should we emphasize the internal or the external?

Questionnaire items that try to tap into this are, first, the one about chickens crossing the road—is it not likely that there is something on the other side of the road that is attracting the chicken to go over there? The second is the one about the small army of brave men. What determines the outcome of the struggle? Is it not usually internal attributes—in this case the bravery of the soldiers in that small army? Here are two more items to illustrate the internal–external dimension:

Internal: "Some people survive what seem to be fatal accidents or illnesses because they have a strong will to live."

And external: "No matter how a person might appear, it usually turns out that what he actually does depends primarily on the situation he is in."

So here are the three dimensions that we are terming ideology of human nature: the individual versus the collective; difference versus similarity; internal versus external.

Again, we ask the question, so what? The response is that, empirically, these measures of assumptions about human nature correlate quite highly with our measures of Fair Play and Fair Shares. If one is inclined to emphasize the individual, difference, and the internal, it is quite likely that one will adopt a Fair Play perspective on the issue of equality, and vice versa. The Fair Shares viewpoint rests on assumptions emphasizing the collectivity, similarity, and the external.

The way this works out is, I think, fairly straightforward, if not obvious. The Fair Play conception is concerned with the opportunity afforded to individuals—it is the individual who is supposed to be free to pursue his or her own personal happiness.

Whether or not this pursuit is successful depends on the extent to which the individual is different from others—which is to say, the extent to which he is superior. Different in what way? Superior in what way? For Fair Players, only internal differences are legitimate as a basis for higher achievement and greater rewards—differences of intelligence, of character, of motivating impulses.



From this point of view, life is primarily the working out of internal differences among individuals and the Fair Play conceptions of quality fits these fundamental assumptions. Justice requires that all individuals have an equal opportunity in their competition with one another. And justice requires that the outcome of the competition depends on the relative merits of the individuals involved, the differences, the characteristics that mark some as superior, some inferior. And, finally, justice requires that rewards in life be proportional to individual differences in merit. He who is most meritorious receives the most rewards. Aristotle, it turns out, is the paradigm Fair Player with his formulations about distributive justice.

The Fair Sharer in pursuit of justice, on the other hand, asks how resources are distributed throughout the collectivity. Is there a just and reasonable distribution? Does one group have vastly more than others? Is there another group that has little or nothing? If so, it is not right, it is not just.

In the results of our research, it appears that this all hangs together. We begin with these fundamental assumptions about the way we are. When these assumptions, these ideological predispositions are brought to bear on a particular topic like equality, we arrive at consistent conclusions and arrive at a consistent conception—in this case, a Fair Play or Fair Shares perspective. And when we turn to specific instances—such as income inequality or affirmative action with respect to equality—we apply the general principles and come up with a Fair Play version or a Fair Shares version.

That brings me to the end of the empirical data we have regarding the question of how people think about equality—or at least how college students think about it.

But allow me to continue for a few more minutes beyond the data. Two points: One about the extreme emphasis on individual internal differences in the minds of most Americans—the dominance of the Fair Play perspective. And two: Is there anything particularly relevant for Psychology and psychologists in all this?

I think you would all agree that, in America, we have gone overboard on the side of internal, individual, differences and, consequently, the Fair Play version of equality reigns supreme. I, for one, do not like this. I do not think it leads to true social justice. I think it is also unrealistic, that an accurate and meaningful view of human beings and their world requires that American thought move a good deal farther in the direction of the Fair Shares viewpoint.

It is simply not true that we are only a collection of millions of autonomous disconnected individuals, a horde of lone cowhands clashing with one another to see who is the top gun. A friend of mine, Matt Dumont, calls this view, “life as a demolition derby.” Not true. We are all

dependent on one another. Our individuality derives from membership in social units, from the family to the whole society, indeed, to the whole world. At the same time, it is not true that we are simply an undifferentiated swarm of humanity, existing only as collectivities. We are individuals, but social individuals, living always embedded in social units, interacting in a process of change and adjustment and response to one another. I am drawing here on the work of a friend and colleague at Boston College, Brinton Lykes, and I commend to you her work on what she has called “autonomous individualism vs. social individuality.”

Nor is it true that our principle characteristic is the way in which we are different from one another. Differences are important and interesting, but differences are only meaningful as variations on the larger attribute of similarity.

Nor can we explain what happens in life purely in terms of internal processes. In particular we cannot explain away the vast, obscene differences in wealth and income. For every smart, thrifty, ambitious millionaire you show me, I will show you a thousand smart, thrifty, ambitious paupers.

The values that go along with the Fair Play perspective are certainly important and very much worth emphasizing—values like self-reliance, commitment to hard work and persistence, independence, responsibility for one’s own actions. We cannot abandon these values but they need to be tempered and modulated by Fair Shares values. I am thinking of things like loyalty to one another, respect and consideration for one another, self-sacrifice, sharing, cooperation, and fidelity. By the way, may I suggest that these are all what might be termed “family values,” certainly the values that make for cohesive and loving families.

Finally, let me turn specifically to the role of Psychology. Are the things I have been talking about psychological in nature? Very much so, very essentially so. Is it not the psychologist, for example, who is in charge of pondering the opposition between innate ideas and empiricism and the writing on the *tabula rasa*? Is it not the psychologist who dwells on the contrast between the significance of instincts, defense mechanisms, and so forth, as against external sources of reinforcement? And is not the history of Psychology filled with the tension between the search for the general laws that apply universally to the species and the intricate searching out of individual differences? Indeed, we bear a heavy burden of responsibility for our enthusiastic pursuit of individual differences. Our endless categorizing and diagnosing an endless series of defects and disorders: the intelligence tests, the personality inventories—on and on. Psychologists have played a major role in teaching the extraordinary importance of internal, individual, differences.

But psychologists can also play an important role in trying to reach Fair Shares values, in trying to expand and enrich the mental world of America. Opinions, values, attitudes—that is our meat. If Psychology does not own attitude change, who does? And another kind of change. I am quite persuaded that we develop our assumptions, our ideology of human nature, through our experiences, and not through our experiences alone, but through the interpretation of our experiences. A lot of us here are or were clinicians and we are supposed to know something about interpretation. Might we look forward to something like “ideological therapy”?

I believe that we can help to develop a world that is more just and more equitable. A world that would deemphasize the exaltation of the individual as some kind of disconnected, omnipotent being; that would accept the reality that human accomplishments are mostly the result of many persons working together. A world in which we were aware that all men and women are the children of God and thus essentially similar to one another. Not that we will *become* brothers and sisters, but that we *are* brothers and sisters—here, now, in this place, in this time—like it or not. And a world in which we would treasure our inner life—our intelligence, our capacity for love, our will—but at the same time realize that these inner attributes must confront the realities of the external world if they are to be meaningful.

Thousands of years ago, the Psalmist sang: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.” I believe that the earth is the Lord’s and that He has bestowed its bounties upon all of us, all humankind—not to a select few superior individuals. Believing that gives hope that we can learn—together—to act—together—to share these bounties with one another.