

Inequality Configurations

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Abstract

The notion of multidimensional inequality has attracted attention lately, but mostly as a micro approach to measure inequality in well-being in a more complete way. We argue that considering inequality in a multidimensional way from a macro perspective is useful to understand the structure of inequality in different societies. Different societies display different degrees of inequality in different domains, such as the economic, social, political, and psychological domains. In this paper, we ask how these inequalities relate and what inequality configurations societies display as a result. Do different inequalities are simply a manifestation of one single basic dimension of inequality so that some countries are egalitarian in everything while other countries are fundamentally inegalitarian? Or are inequalities in different domains largely unrelated? Or do some specific inequalities relate so that there are a few basic independent dimensions of inequality? We compile a dataset of more than 100 countries merging income inequality data from the World Income Inequality Database (WIID), health (length-of-life) inequality data from life tables, and inequality measures of political participation, perceived political influence, self-efficacy, and social class, compiled from a large set of cross-country attitudes surveys. To deal with the bounded nature of most of our variables, we adjust our inequality measures following the procedure in Permanyer, Seth, and Yalonetzky (2022). Our preliminary results suggest two fundamental dimensions of inequality. The first and by far most important captures socioeconomic and psychological inequality: inequalities in income, health, social class and self-efficacy are strongly related. A second relatively less important but still relevant dimension of inequality concerns political inequality. Countries cluster into several inequality configurations. “Western” countries are in two different clusters: both display low socioeconomic/psychological inequality, but they differ in their political inequality patterns. Latin American and Sub-Saharan Africa countries display relatively high socioeconomic/psychological inequality, but while Latin American countries also feature high political inequality, African countries display fairly low political inequality. We also find that the socioeconomic/psychological dimension of inequality (but not the political inequality dimension) correlates with inequality in life satisfaction.