

Blame won't help solve economic inequality, say researchers

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(Phys.org) —What makes the difference between being a have and a have-not in America? A millionaire might attribute his fortune to hard work and initiative. He might also say the poverty-stricken simply don't put the same effort into becoming successful.

A low-income American might explain his financial troubles as the result of being born to poor parents in a bad neighborhood, lacking access to quality education and other tools that could have helped him achieve wealth and power.

Both perspectives are understandable, but they're not so useful when it comes to actually solving injustices of economic [equality](#), said Derrick Darby, philosophy and law professor at the University of Kansas.

"When either side feels like it has to take all the responsibility for a problem, they're less inclined to help fix that problem," he said. "That's why we have to stop finger pointing and playing the blame game."

In a new research article, Darby and KU psychology professor Nyla Branscombe examine why people disagree, not only on the causes of economic injustice, but also on what constitutes injustice and whether society is obligated to respond to it. They argue that dwelling on the causes of [inequality](#) hinders society's ability to move forward in solving it.

The article, "Egalitarianism and Perceptions of Inequality," appears in a

forthcoming edition of the journal Philosophical Topics.

"We're not saying the causes of inequality don't matter," Darby said. "But to make positive change, we have to find ways to develop solidarity amongst a very broad group of people."

Drawing on several previous studies, the authors write that several social psychological factors are critical to understanding why some groups perceive inequality differently from others.

For historically disadvantaged groups such as women and racial minorities, equality is typically a more important goal than it is for their more advantaged counterparts. They're more likely to compare existing circumstances to the ideal or end point of full equality.

Advantaged groups are more likely to judge the present circumstances to the past, when discrimination was legal or more widely accepted. In other words, they may define equality as being free from overt or institutional segregation.

Advantaged and disadvantaged groups also differently view the current realities of equality.

While 72 percent of white Americans believe the racial wage gap has decreased over the past 10 years, only 38 percent of black Americans believe the gap has become smaller.

Men reported that 40 percent of women would need to have salaries lower than men's for them to call the gender [wage gap](#) unfair. "By setting a more severe standard for judging inequality, men were able to conclude that the inequality that exists is less unfair," the authors wrote.

"Human psychology has shown us that people are invested in protecting

the groups they belong to," Darby said. "It's just how people operate. They cling to their own groups."

Even if everyone agrees about what constitutes inequality and what causes it, group membership has its own powerful effect on whether inequality is seen as fair or unfair.

"Those who are disadvantaged know that discrimination affects their choices and outcomes; in effect choice and circumstances are inextricably bound together for them," the authors wrote. "In contrast, advantaged groups do not experience exclusion and discrimination as typically defined, but they do at times experience privilege—benefits based on their [group membership](#)."

"Ironically enough, privileged group members are quite motivated not to perceive their own [circumstances](#) as a determinant of the choices and options available to them," the authors wrote. "Doing so would undermine their perceived responsibility for those favorable outcomes."

Darby and Branscombe will address how society can respond to the ethical challenges presented by perceptions of inequality in a followup article, to be published in the journal *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*.

Provided by University of Kansas

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