

Life's not fair! So why do we assume it is?

September 9 2015, by Larisa Hussak



I guess there's a reason things are the way they are... right? Credit: mSeattle, CC BY

Income inequality in America has been [growing](#) rapidly, and is [expected to increase](#). While the widening wealth gap is a hot topic in the media and on the campaign trail, there's quite a disconnect between the perceptions of economists and those of the general public.

For instance, surveys show people tend to [underestimate](#) the [income disparity](#) between the top and bottom 20% of Americans, and [overestimate](#) the opportunity for poor individuals to climb the social ladder. Additionally, a majority of adults [believe](#) that corporations conduct business fairly [despite evidence to the contrary](#) and that the government should not act to reduce [income inequality](#).

Even though inequality is increasing, Americans seem to believe that our social and economic systems work exactly as they should. This perspective has [intrigued social scientists](#) for decades. My colleague Andrei Cimpian and I have demonstrated in our recent [research](#) that these beliefs that our society is fair and just may take root in the first years of life, stemming from our fundamental desire to explain the world around us.

Believing in a legit reason for bad situations

When the going gets tough, it can be emotionally exhausting to think about all the obstacles in one's path. This idea has been used by many researchers to explain why people – especially those who are disadvantaged – would support an unequal society. Consciously or not, people want to reduce the negative emotions they naturally feel when faced with unfairness and inequality.

To do this, people [rationalize](#) the way things are. Rather than confronting or trying to change what is unfair about their society, people prefer to fall back on the belief that there's a valid reason for that inequity to exist.

This drive to relieve negative feelings by justifying "the system" seems to play an important role in [people's thinking](#) about their societies [all over the world](#). Therefore, it almost seems to be human nature to explain away the inequalities we encounter as simply the way things are

supposed to be.

But are negative emotions necessary for people to justify the society around them? According to [our findings](#), perhaps not.

Quick assumptions aren't necessarily right

We make these kinds of justifying assumptions all day long, not just about social inequality. We're constantly trying to make sense of everything we see around us.

When people [generate explanations](#) for the events and patterns they encounter in the world (for instance, orange juice being served at breakfast), they often do so quickly, without a whole lot of concern for whether the answer they come up with is 100% correct. To devise these answers on the spot, our explanation-generating system grabs onto the first things that come to mind, which are most often inherent facts. We look to simple descriptions of the objects in question – orange juice has vitamin C – without considering external information about the history of these objects or their surroundings.

What this means is the bulk of our explanations rely on the features of the things we're trying to explain – there must be something about orange juice itself, like vitamin C, that explains why we have it for breakfast. Because of the shortcuts in this explanation process, it introduces a degree of bias into our explanations and, as a result, into how we understand the world.

There's gotta be a reason...

In our research, Andrei and I wanted to see if this biased tendency to explain using inherent information shaped people's beliefs about

inequality. We hypothesized that inherent explanations of inequalities directly lead to the belief that society is fair. After all, if there is some inherent feature of the members of Group A (such as work ethic or intelligence) that explains their high status relative to Group B, then it seems fair that Group A should continue to enjoy an advantage.

What we found confirmed our predictions. When we asked adults to explain several status disparities, they favored explanations that relied on inherent traits over those that referred to past events or contextual influences. They were much more likely to say that a high-status group achieved their advantage because they were "smarter or better workers" than because they had "won a war" or lived in a prosperous region.

Furthermore, the stronger a participant's preference for inherent explanations, the stronger their belief that the disparities were fair and just.

In order to ensure that this tendency wasn't simply the result of a desire to reduce negative emotions, we told our participants about fictional disparities on other planets. Unlike the inequalities they may encounter in their everyday lives, our imaginary inequalities (for instance, between the Blarks and the Orps on Planet Teeku) would be unlikely to make participants feel bad. These made-up scenarios allowed us to see that people do jump to the same kinds of justifications even when we aren't trying to alleviate negative feelings.

Kids buy into inherent explanations for inequality

We also asked these questions of an additional group of participants who should be even less likely to experience anxiety about their place in society when thinking about status disparities on alien planets: young children. Just like our adult participants, children as young as four years of age showed a strong preference for inherent explanations for

inequality.

When we asked them to generate explanations, they were almost twice as likely to say that the high-status Blarks were more intelligent, worked harder, or were "just better" than the low-status Orps than they were to mention factors such as the neighborhood, family or history of either group. This preference promoted a belief that conditions were fair and worthy of support.

These findings suggest that the public's misconceptions of inequality are, at least to some extent, due to our basic mental makeup. Primitive cognitive processes that allow us to create explanations for all the things we encounter in the world may also bias us to see our world as fair.

But the tendency to rely on inherent explanations, and adopt the subsequent belief that things are as they should be, is not unavoidable.

When we told children, for instance, that certain disparities were due to historical and contextual factors (rather than built-in, fundamental features of the aliens), they were much less likely to endorse those disparities as fair and just. Taking time to consider the many factors – both inherent and external – that contribute to social status may be an effective tool for developing a reasoned and critical perspective on our society in the face of growing inequality.

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Source: The Conversation

Citation: Life's not fair! So why do we assume it is? (2015, September 9) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-life-fair-assume.html>

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