Would helping only the least advantaged benefit society as a whole?

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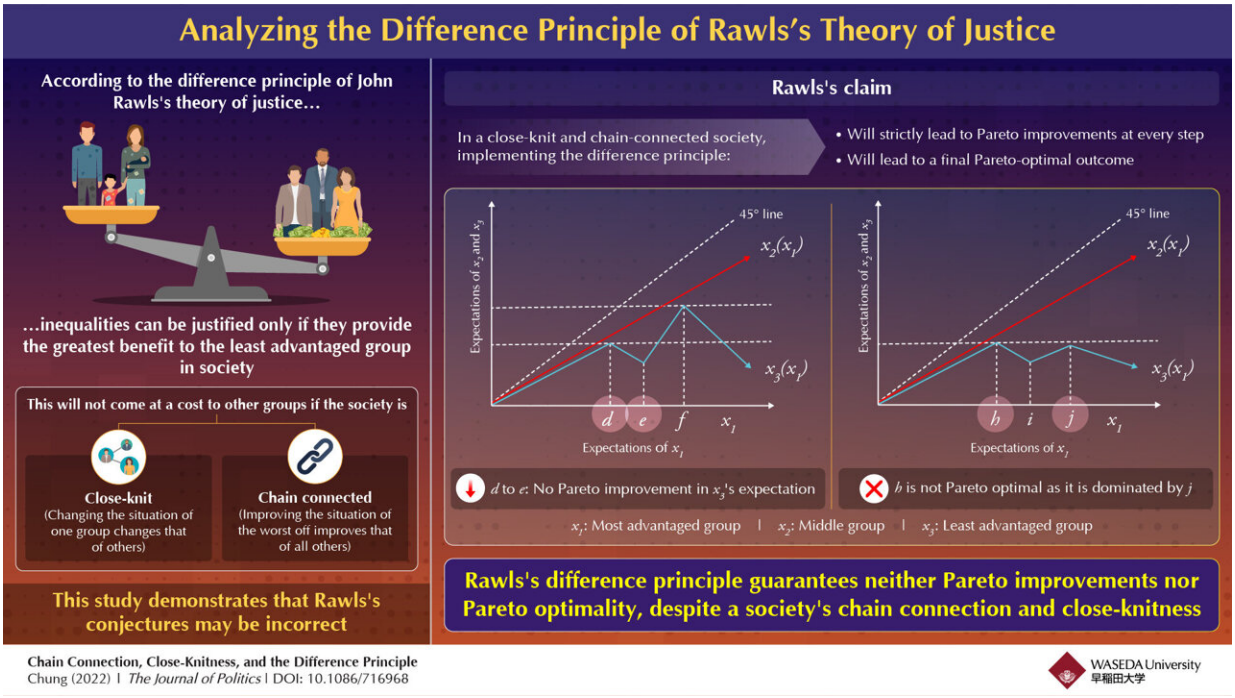


Study on social justice in chain-connected and close-knit societies finds that helping the least advantaged section of society may not necessarily benefit everyone. Credit: Waseda University

John Rawls, one of the 20th century's most notable political philosophers, proposed a theory of distributive justice known as "justice as fairness." According to his theory, once a society successfully guarantees equal basic rights and liberties for everybody, the next step

should be to properly regulate any ensuing social and economic inequalities. One of the principles he proposed to do this was the difference principle.

Rawls's difference principle states that inequalities can be justified only if they provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged group in society. Rawls argued that if a society is chain connected (meaning that the betterment of the least advantaged group leads to the betterment of all other groups in society) and close-knit (i.e., changes in the condition of one group necessarily changes that of all others), the concern that benefiting the least advantaged may not lead to improving society as a whole is nullified, because benefiting one group would, by default, benefit others. In this process, societies could eventually reach an optimal state.

However, in an article that was published online on July 26, 2022, and is to appear in Volume 84, Issue 4 of the *Journal of Politics* in October 2022, Associate Professor Hun Chung of Waseda University argues that Rawls' conjectures are incorrect. "Political philosophy serves as the foundation for a society's basic political and economic institutions, and can have a profound impact on people's lives," Chung explains. The purpose of his study is to make policymakers aware of the possible gaps in such well-established theories.

Chung considers a close-knit and chain-connected society with three groups: the most advantaged, the least advantaged, and the middle group, as proposed by Rawls. He starts from a hypothetical position where all the groups are at the same level of economic benefit, after which society develops economically and inequalities grow. As the situation of the most advantaged group improves, the benefits are expected to trickle down to all the others. During the process, the difference principle requires society to choose the point at which the economic benefit to the least advantaged group is maximized. Given that society is chain

connected and close-knit, Rawls claims that every new stage in implementing the difference principle is better than the preceding stage for every group, till an optimum point is reached.

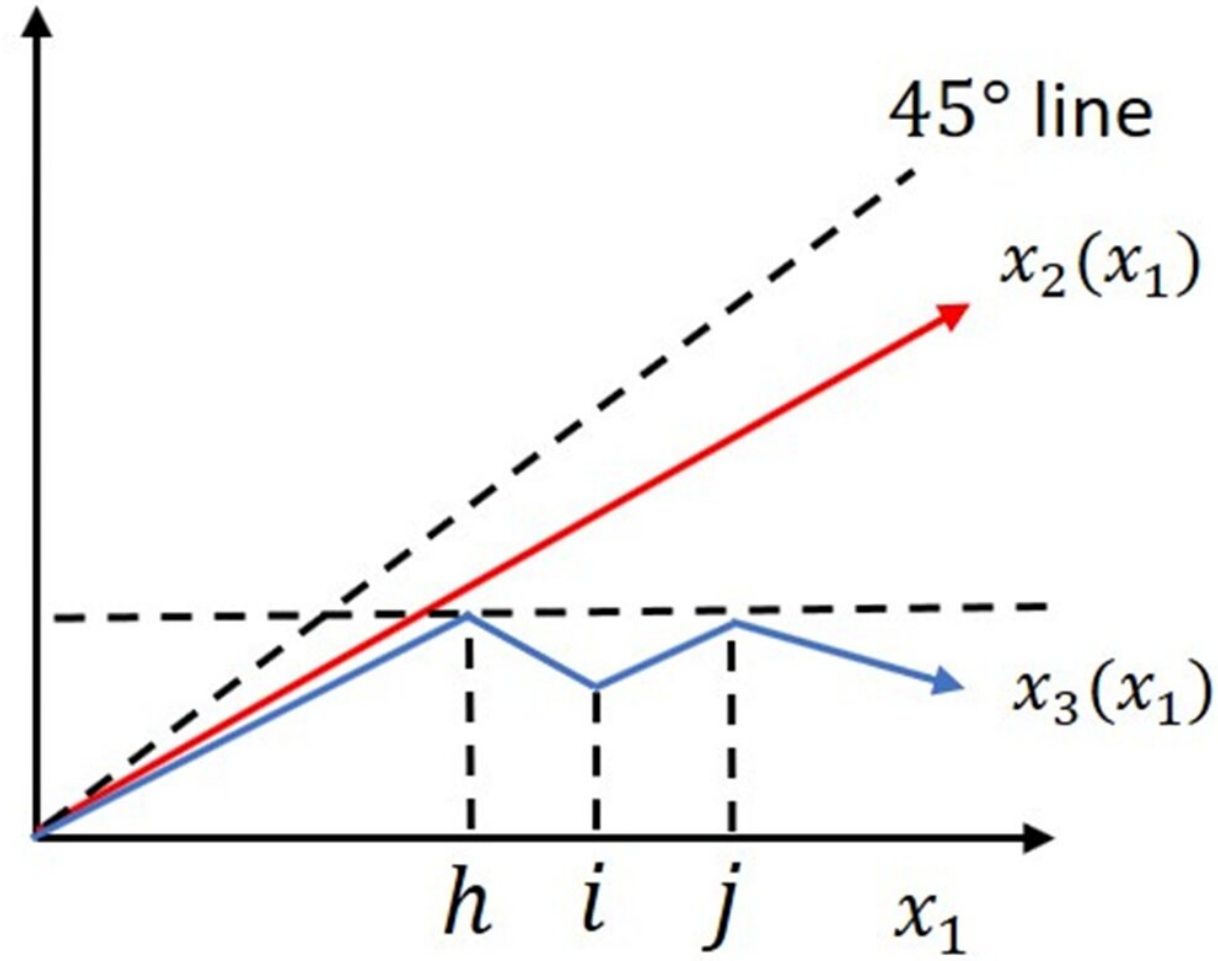
However, Chung finds that in the practical implementation of the difference principle, there can be cases where the expectations of the least advantaged group fall with the increase in benefits for the privileged, even when such steps are necessary to achieve a final social state prescribed by the difference principle. Therefore, the conjecture that every step in implementing the difference principle leads to Pareto improvements (i.e., a change that hinders no one and benefits at least some one) over the previous one is negated.

Next, Chung examines the proposal that the difference principle eventually leads to a Pareto optimal state (which is a balanced state, where any further improvement in one group's state would necessarily lead to a decline in another group's state). Even after the difference principle is fully implemented and the economic benefits to the least advantaged group have been maximized, he finds that there may be situations where the other groups may further improve their situations without worsening the situation of the least advantaged group. In short, the difference principle may fail to lead to a Pareto optimal state.

Some people might think that the lexical version of Rawls's difference principle (which Rawls himself considers and eventually rejects on grounds of redundancy) could solve the problem. To this, Chung argues that although the lexical difference principle (unlike the original difference principle) does lead to a Pareto optimal social state, it can, at best, serve only as a partial solution to the problem as its practical implement still does not guarantee Pareto improvements at all stages of its implementation. Furthermore, the lexical difference principle has its own critical flaws by failing to provide continuous ethical judgments, meaning that it can generate vastly different ethical evaluations to

vanishingly small ethical differences. This would violate Aristotle's well-known principle that requires us to "treat like cases alike," which means that extremely small differences between any two cases should not have evaluations that widely differ.

In sum, Chung has shown that improvements in the situation of the least favored group does not necessarily entail betterment of all groups at every stage, or even a Pareto optimal state even when society is chain connected and close-knit. Chung's analysis provides enough scope to reconsider the implementation of the difference principle while making policies on a just and fair society. "My research can make policy designers become self-aware of the potential and unintended (negative) effects of certain policies that aim to improve the situation of a specific targeted social group," Chung concludes.



In a recent paper, Waseda University's Associate Professor Hun Chung explains how helping the least advantaged group in a society does not automatically benefit other groups and lead to an optimal social state. Credit: Hun Chung, Waseda University

Chung's reassessment of Rawls's theory of distributive justice goes to show that while the heart is in the right place, the head needs to be as well; more consideration might be needed when using theory for policy implementation to improve the quality of life for all social groups.

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More information: Hun Chung, Chain Connection, Close-Knitness, and the Difference Principle, *The Journal of Politics* (2021). DOI: 10.1086/716968

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