

Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice*

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RECENT philosophical debates about normative ideals of equality have focused on questions of *what* we should be aiming at when we wish to make people more equal. Should norms of equality be conceived in terms of *welfare*, for example, which entails reference to subjective valuations, or should goals of equality be directed at objective *resources*? Are concepts of the distribution of resources adequate for comparing objective well-being or do we need to conceptualize and compare what persons are *capable* of doing with these resources? Recent debates have shown that the apparently simple question of what we should compare when we make judgments of equality and inequality harbors a nest of conceptual and practical tensions. Contributors to the debate have greatly clarified these issues, if not solved them.¹

Little attention has been paid to another side of this question, however, namely *whom* we are discussing when we compare people's situation with regard to any or all of these targets of equality. Theorists usually assume that the units we should be comparing when we make judgments of inequality are individuals. Many assessments of inequalities and claims for redress on grounds that an inequality is unjust, however, compare *groups* of individuals according to one or more measures of equality. People commonly claim that women lack equality with men, Blacks with whites, old people with younger people, children of working-class parents with children of middle-class parents, and so on. Governments, research institutes, and other organizations apparently legitimate such group-conscious judgments about equality by disaggregating general welfare measures according to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, caste, age, occupation or region. This article asks whether and how such group-conscious practices of assessing inequality are justified.

First I review both political and philosophical challenges to theories and practices which assess inequality in terms of social groups. If equality is

*I am grateful to David Alexander, Richard Arneson, David Gauthier, Robert Goodin, Charles Larmore, Thomas Ross and Larry Temkin for comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks to Michael Reinhart for research assistance.

¹For reviews of the debates, see: Richard Arneson, "Equality," Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds, *A Companion to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); John Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); see also Andrew Levine's useful discussion in *Rethinking Liberal Equality* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

important, from this point of view, it must be assessed strictly in terms of the comparison of individuals. I argue against this position that assessment of inequality solely by comparing the situation of individuals provides little or no basis for making claims about social justice. The main reason moral and political philosophers care about equality, however, is to contribute to assessments of social justice and proposals for promoting greater justice. A large class of issues of social justice, and those that concern claims that inequalities are unjust in particular, concern evaluation of institutional relations and processes of the society. Evaluating inequality in terms of social groups enables us to claim that some inequalities are unjust, I argue, because such group-based comparison helps reveal important aspects of institutional relations and processes.

Specifically, identifying inequalities according to group categories helps identify *structural* inequalities. Though many philosophers, social theorists and political actors profess an interest in structural inequality, as distinct from patterns or relations of inequality that are transient, accidental or more socially superficial, many use the term without explaining its meaning. This article theorizes structural inequality as a set of reproduced social processes that reinforce one another to enable or constrain individual actions in many ways. What we refer to by group differentiations of gender, race, class, age, and so on, in the context of evaluating inequalities as unjust, are structural social relations that tend to privilege some more than others. Identifying patterned inequalities on measures of well-being among these groups is thus only the beginning, but an important beginning, of identification of these forms of basic and persisting injustice. We need also to be able to give an account of how social processes produce and reproduce these patterns.

The article concludes by asking what this argument implies for social policy. It certainly implies that public and private bodies charged with collecting and analyzing data about the status and well-being of society's members, and their relative well-being, should continue to organize such data in terms of social groups and compare the standing of groups to one another. The particular argument of this article, however, in itself implies nothing about steps which policy ought to take to rectify unjust inequalities discovered by means of such analyses. Some remedies practiced and proposed for structural injustices involve affirmative targeting of the distribution of resources or affording specific opportunities to groups or members of groups. While such a group-conscious approach to remedy for structural disadvantage may indeed be justified or even required, such justification requires arguments additional to those this article offers.

I. CHALLENGES TO GROUP-CONSCIOUS MEASURES OF EQUALITY

The intuition is deep and widespread in our society that assessments of equality and inequality should refer to social groups defined by such characteristics as

gender, race, age, ethnicity, occupation, class, education, and so on. For example, there has been considerable debate on both sides of the issue about whether inequalities between groups have disappeared now that laws make status differences or group-based discrimination illegal. Social scientific research usually documents and explains inequality on some dimension, such as political equality or economic equality, by disaggregating society into social group categories.² In response to these interests, many government agencies and private organizations routinely collect and publish statistics designed to show how various groups of persons compare with other groups on measures of resource distribution, opportunity, privilege or influence. Everyday practical discourse about equality, then, seems to express little doubt that judgments about inequality and equality ought to refer to groups. Practices of evaluating inequality by comparing groups, however, have recently come under both political and philosophical challenge.

A. POLITICAL CHALLENGES

In political and legal debates about social justice in the United States, many question giving any attention to the relative situation of groups in formulating public policy. Certain Supreme Court decisions in the mid-1970s found that the obligation to redress harm could properly be assessed in terms of the “disparate impact” which action or policies had on groups of persons, especially those historically discriminated against on grounds of sex, race or ethnicity. More recently, the Court seems to be rejecting any argument that harm can be evaluated in terms of results affecting groups unequally, and insisting instead on claimants demonstrating that policies or actions contain invidious classifications intended to disadvantage individuals in them as compared with others.³ Recent attacks on the diverse policies associated with the label “affirmative action,” to take another example, not only seem to reject preferential treatment of individuals associated with groups claimed to be unequal, but also to be attacks on the very idea that groups can be unequal, or that we should care whether they are, as long as we affirm principles of equal treatment and formally equal opportunity.

At least in the United States, political controversy about data collection that uses group classification and the use of such data for making group comparisons on measures of well-being has focused almost exclusively on race and ethnicity classifications. Issues of data collection by gender, age, ability, occupation, sexual

²For a recent comprehensive study of aspects and degrees of political inequality, see Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). For one discussion of economic inequality, see Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, *America Unequal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). Both studies compare inequalities by gender, race and class.

³One example: In his concurring opinion in *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.* 488 US 469, 527 (1989), Justice Anthony Scalia specifically says that the wrong of discrimination involves not groups, but individuals.

orientation, income, occupation of parents, or other classifications reasonably argued to have social meaning appear to be less contested. Prompted in part by the claims of people whose lineage and self-identification cross two or more classifications, such as white, Black, or Asian, some people have argued that the United States census should cease asking people to identify themselves by race or ethnicity at all.⁴ Many of those arguing against collecting data by racial or ethnic categorization do so because they opposed any group-conscious measurement of inequality. They have a number of reasons.

The use of group classifications for any purpose amounts to invidious discrimination, they suggest. The long struggle against practices and policies that privileged white male Christians was fought on the principles that each person should be considered only as an individual; we should be blind to differences in ascribed characteristics or social membership. The goal of a free society should be color-blindness, gender-blindness, blindness to all those ascribed characteristics that historically served as markers of inferiority and exclusion. This goal is only thwarted by assessments of well-being that compare categories of people. Race and ethnicity classifications presume fixed immutable identities, and they thereby perpetuate the very social divisions their benign uses are intended to overcome. Assessing inequality in terms of social groups and deriving claims of injustice from such comparisons, finally, encourages damaging political divisiveness. It encourages some to claim a victim status for their group, and public policy debate becomes a zero sum contest among these fixed identity groups. Political cooperation will be more easily obtained if evaluations of well-being consider individuals only.⁵

B. PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

Philosophical theories of equality typically assume without argument that the entities we ought to compare when making evaluations of equality and inequality are individuals. A few political philosophers, however, do explicitly defend the claims that only individuals, and not groups, are proper subjects of judgments about equality.

Ronald Dworkin criticizes the group-conscious evaluations of equality he finds at the base of Rawls's theory of justice. Rawls argues that reasoning about principles of justice behind the veil of ignorance assumes the point of view of the

⁴These challenges have failed. Some proposed a category of "mixed race" for the US census, a proposal supported by very few. The solution that the Census has adopted is to allow respondents to identify themselves by as many categories as they wish. Steven A. Holmes, "The politics of race and the census," *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 19, 2000, wk p. 3.

⁵For some examples of such positions, see: Clint Bolick, *The Affirmative Action Fraud: Can We Restore the Civil Rights Vision?* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1996); Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Nick Gillespie, "Blurred vision: seeing beyond government racial categories," *Reason Magazine*, July 1997.

representative person in that class of persons located in the least advantaged position. On this construction, evaluations of justice are essentially tied to a comparison of the situation of groups or classes. Dworkin traces the causes of such group consciousness to Rawls's overly "flat" conception of equality, which compares classes of people only in economic terms. All the many differences in the tastes, choices and goals of individuals with similar income drop out. Dworkin's own theory of equality of resources is precisely designed to take account of such differences, with the particular aim of distinguishing differences that derive from tastes and choices of individuals from those deriving from natural misfortunes and other sources for which individuals are not responsible. Dworkin offers his theory as methodologically and morally individualistic.

It aims to provide a description (or rather a set of devices for aiming at) equality of resources person by person, and the considerations of each person's history that affect what he should have, in the name of equality, do not include his membership in any economic or social class....The theory proposes that equality is in principle a matter of individual right rather than group position.⁶

Larry Temkin argues against measuring inequality in terms of groups because it seems to locate moral concern with equality in a concern for groups rather than individuals. Moral evaluation and public policy, however, should be concerned with how individuals fare.

The core of the egalitarian's position is that it is bad (unjust or unfair) for one person to be worse off than another through no fault of her own. Ultimately, then, the egalitarian is concerned with how *individuals* in situations fare in relation to one another. Correspondingly, concern about inequality between society's groups must ultimately be understood as concern about inequality between groups' *members*.⁷

Douglas Rae worries that group-conscious assessments of inequality wrongly collapse individual circumstance to a group average. Within any putative group classification there are always many individual differences. On any measure of resource distribution, welfare, capabilities or opportunity, there is likely to be a wide range of individual variation within groups. Assertions that groups are unequal on some measure of well-being thus must rely on comparing statistical averages or medians between groups. Such comparisons create the false impression of a unity or similarity within groups and polarize dissimilarity between them. Discussions of inequalities among groups often fail to mention that some members of the supposedly disadvantaged group are better off than some members of the supposedly advantaged group. Those concerned with gender equality, for example, might cite the fact that the average income of women with a high school education is significantly lower than the average income of male high school graduates. Some women graduates, however, earn

⁶Dworkin, "What is equality? Part 2: equality of resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10 (1981), p. 340.

⁷Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 101.

significantly higher incomes than some men. When we criticize inequalities of that sort between groups, moreover, we seem to be calling for change that would equalize the group statuses. Justice is achieved, on this view, by employment or taxation policy that aims to make the average incomes of women the same as the average incomes of men. Such group-based action, however, is liable to deny some individuals in the groups what they deserve for the sake of a patterned outcome that itself may hide significant individual variation and inequality within each group.⁸

I agree with Dworkin and Temkin that the ultimate purpose for making assessments of inequality is to promote the well-being of individuals considered as irreducible moral equals. That is to say, if there are good reasons for group-conscious measurements of inequality, they are not that we should care about groups as such, considered as independent sources of moral value. I will argue below, however, that in making some of the most important judgments of justice and injustice we must compare social groups such as women, African Americans, migrants, or people with disabilities. Categories such as these name groups are positioned by social structures that constrain and enable individual lives in ways largely beyond their individual control. I will later explain this concept of structural group and argue that comparing groups on measures of inequality is necessary in order to discover such social structures and make judgments that inequalities grounded in those structures are unjust.

II. INEQUALITY AND MORAL JUDGMENT

I assume that philosophers and political actors are interested in theorizing and making evaluations of inequality primarily in order to support judgments of justice or injustice. To be sure, not all claims of justice concern issues of equality, and shortly I will refer to some that do not. Judgments of equality or inequality in themselves, however, are simply factual comparisons of amounts or degrees of some variables between or among entities. Such comparisons by themselves do not yield judgments with the moral force that claims about social, economic or political equality usually carry.

Some question whether considerations of substantive equality are relevant at all when making judgments about justice. On this view, justice is primarily about liberty. If justice includes reference to equality, it is only as formal procedural equality. As long as procedural equality is observed in law and the enforcement of contracts, on this account, and as long as people are free to try to realize their goals through voluntary exchange and associations, then considerations of inequality on some measures of power, influence or material well-being are irrelevant to judgments of justice.

⁸Douglas Rae, *Equalities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), esp. pp. 29–38, 76–81.

I do not intend here to rebut this position, because it would take me away from my main question. Instead I shall assume that *if* we are concerned about some measure of equality and inequality, it is because we have a conception of justice for which such assessments of equality are relevant. My thesis is, then, that claims about social justice that invoke equality usually require comparison of groups on measures of well-being or advantage. As I will explain below, claims that some inequalities are unjust implicitly or explicitly compare groups in order to identify social structures that involuntarily position people, constraining some more than others and privileging some people more than others. Such a conception says that these structures produce injustice insofar as they afford people different degrees of opportunity to achieve well-being. My account here does not claim that all injustice is reducible to these effects of structural positioning. Many claims of justice that invoke liberty, need, or desert do not require identification of structural social groups to become meaningful and gain normative plausibility. The claim here is only that claims of justice that invoke *equality* generally do.

Assessment of inequality in terms of the comparison of individuals yields little basis for judging injustice. Suppose we discover that some individuals are starving and others have access to more food than they need. We have discovered a serious inequality, and one that indeed is likely to provoke moral judgment that something is wrong. It is wrong, unjust, some would say, that some people should starve when others have more than they need. Those who are well-off have a *prima facie* moral obligation to give to the starving people. If there is such an obligation, however, and I believe that there is, it derives not from the fact of inequality as such, but from the fact of need. It is wrong for some people to lack what they need to live a minimally decent life when others are able to contribute to meeting those needs at relatively little cost to themselves. Many criticisms of inequalities probably have this form. They are judgments about obligations to help people reach a certain level of what Harry Frankfurt calls “sufficiency,” however, rather than judgments that an inequality is wrong as such.⁹

So, let us assume a situation in which there is an accepted definition of sufficiency and everyone being compared on measures of well-being starts at or above this baseline. Some individuals, let us suppose, have incomes 100 times those with the lowest incomes, while some have incomes only 20 times those with the lowest incomes. Or suppose that some individuals who are not democratically legitimate public officials have significantly more influence than others over important policy decisions. Or suppose that some people require more time, effort and planning to get to a polling place or a public hearing than others. Even assuming that all the individuals being compared have a sufficient base line, each of these inequalities, I suggest, probably signals injustice. Simply by focusing on comparing the situation of individuals, however, without any

⁹Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a moral ideal,” *Ethics*, 98 (1987), 21–43.

reference to attributes or affinities they share with others or generalized social relations in which they stand, we have no reason to call these inequalities injustices.

Why not? Because if we simply identify some inequality of condition or situation between individuals at a particular time we have no account of the causes of this unequal condition. It is the causes and consequences of some pattern of inequality, rather than the pattern itself, that raise issues of justice. If the causes of an inequality lie in the uncoerced and considered decisions and preferences of the less well-off persons, for example, then the inequality is probably not unjust. Dworkin and many other equality theorists agree. Their theories are devoted to distinguishing those causes for an individual's resource holdings or level of welfare for which he or she can be said to be responsible from those for which he or she is not responsible. Most of these theories place the latter set of causes under a vague category of bad luck.

A large set of the causes of an unequal distribution of resources or unequal opportunities between individuals, however, is attributable neither to individual preferences and choices nor to luck or accident. Instead, the causes of many inequalities of resources or opportunities among individuals lie in social institutions, their rules and relations, and the decisions others make within them that affect the lives of the individuals compared.¹⁰ When a government body holds a hearing in the city center on issues that affect a poor rural population, neither dispersing officials to other locations nor providing transportation to the affected group, then this group's opportunity to influence the decision is not equal to those who live close to the center. They are not victims of bad luck, however, but of institutional routines that convenience public officials and business leaders, a history of transportation planning or the lack of it, regional development inequalities, and so on. People similarly positioned in social structures frequently experience multiple forms of exclusion, unequal burdens or costs deriving from institutional organization, rules, or decisions, and the cumulative consequences of each.

Those interested in equality in the United States often cite the following fact in order to elicit intuitions of unfairness: roughly 80 percent of the wealth in the US is owned by roughly 20 percent of the population. It is disingenuous, however, to hold that this manner of aggregating individuals and comparing their conditions in itself gives grounds for a judgment of injustice. If everyone has enough to meet their needs, if there is nothing preventing the less wealthy from becoming wealthy, if the wealthy receive no social privileges unavailable to the less wealthy, and so on, then such an unequal distribution may be one of those things, a combination of luck and choice. To reach a judgment that there is something *wrong* with such an unequal distribution of wealth, we must ask more about the lives of those in the wealthy group as compared with the group with little wealth.

¹⁰Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, 109 (1999), 287–337.

When we learn that more of the wealthy had wealthy parents, were educated at the most elite and resourced universities, and so on, and we compare their life opportunities with those in the less wealthy group, then we can begin to make judgments of justice. We have moved from assessment of inequality in terms of aggregations of individuals to comparisons of social *groups*, in this case social classes. The importance of measuring inequality in terms of social groups such as class, gender, race, I argue below, lies in that it reveals the *structural* inequalities which are particularly relevant for making judgments of justice and injustice.

III. STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Social critics often describe the inequalities they find particularly important or broadly conditioning of people's lives by referring to structural or systemic relations. Though political philosophers less often distinguish a structural from a more individual level of assessing inequality, there are notable exceptions. Thus in *The Community of Rights*, Alan Gewirth claims that his human rights approach to justice shares with libertarianism the valuing of individual responsibility for using one's freedom to support oneself by one's own efforts. The human rights approach fundamentally differs from libertarianism, however, in that the libertarian "overlooks that many persons do not have and cannot use their freedom in the ways he exalts, and that these negative facts derive from, or are vitally affected by, the structural inequalities of existing institutional arrangements."¹¹

Jean Hampton also recommends attending to social structural or systemic factors for theorizing justice. Political theorizing that is too individualist, she argues, "can fail to acknowledge that all sorts of social structures in our society, including our legal institutions, family structures, and systems of educating the young, have been worked out by generations of people responding to a variety of problems in ways that are complicated, nuanced, and often highly successful."¹² Hampton recommends a post-liberal political theory that not only attends to issues of individual freedom and the dangers of state tyranny, but also theorizes "the harm of oppression coming from systemic effects of certain kinds of social institutions in which individuals find themselves and operate. These social forms are such that individuals, despite any good intentions they might have, are forced to act and react in ways that result in considerable damage to some people."¹³ This post-liberal theory, according to Hampton, realizes that "it is a mistake to try to impose what one takes to be a 'fair' pattern of distribution on a society

¹¹Gewirth, *The Community of Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 34.

¹²Jean Hampton, *Political Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), pp. 189–90.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 191. It may be too strong to say that people are "forced" by structures to act in ways that result in damage to some people. Rather people act under constraints in ways I will detail below.

without realizing that these systemic forces are going to be propelling the society toward a certain (unfair) distribution anyway.”¹⁴

Gewirth and Hampton refer to structural inequality in order to distinguish individual attributes, actions and choices from more socially collective or institutional conditions under which these occur, and which limit individual options and action. They argue that such a distinction is necessary both in order to identify what in their situation individuals are responsible for, and what kinds of policies are likely to work to promote greater equality. Yet neither gives a clear account of the meaning of this concept of structural inequality. I propose to take some steps toward such clarification.

Marilyn Frye likens oppression to a birdcage. The cage makes the bird entirely unfree to fly. If one studies the causes of this imprisonment by looking at one wire at a time, however, it appears puzzling. How does a wire only a couple of centimeters wide prevent a bird’s flight? One wire at a time, we can neither describe nor explain the inhibition of the bird’s flight. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way and connected to one another to enclose the bird and reinforce one another’s rigidity can explain why the bird is unable to fly freely.¹⁵

At a first level of intuition, this is what I mean by social structures that inhibit the capacities of some people. An account of someone’s life circumstances contains many strands of difficulty or difference from others that, taken one by one, can appear to be either the result of decision, preferences or accidents. When considered together, however, and when compared with the life story of others, they reveal a net of restricting and reinforcing relationships. Let me illustrate.

Susan Okin gives an account of women’s oppression as grounded in a gender division of labor in the family. She argues that gender roles and expectations structure men’s and women’s lives in systemic ways that result in disadvantage and vulnerability for many women and their children. Institutionally, the entire society continues to be organized around the expectation that children and other dependent people ought to be cared for primarily by family members without formal compensation. Good jobs, on the other hand, assume that workers are available at least forty hours per week year round. Women are usually the primary caretakers of children and other dependent persons, due to a combination of factors—their socialization disposes them to choose to do it, and/or their job options pay worse than those available to their male partners, or their male partners’ jobs allow them little time for care work. As a consequence the attachment of many women to the world of employment outside the home is more episodic, less prestigious, and less well paid than men’s. This fact in turn often makes women dependent on male earnings for primary support of themselves and their children. Women’s economic dependence gives many men

¹⁴Ibid, p. 206.

¹⁵Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983).

unequal power in the family. If the couple separates, moreover, prior dependence on male earnings coupled with the assumptions of the judicial system make women and their children vulnerable to poverty. Schools, media and employers' assumptions all mirror the expectation that domestic work is done primarily by women, which assumptions in turn help reproduce those unequal structures.¹⁶ In this account, interlocking social structures of family and economy, as well as cultural norms, shape choices and thus explain the unequal conditions of women and their children. Without such an account, it is difficult to describe women's unequal position as a matter of injustice.

Processes that produce and reproduce residential racial segregation provide another example of the structural confluence of many distinct actions, expectations and effects to limit the options of many inner city dwellers in the United States. Racially discriminatory behavior and policies limit the housing options of people of color, confining many of them to neighborhoods from which many of those whites who are able to leave do. Property owners fail to keep up their buildings and new investment is hard to attract because the value of property appears to decline. Because of more concentrated poverty and lay-off policies that disadvantage Blacks or Latinos, the effects of an economic downturn in minority neighborhoods are often felt more severely, and more businesses fail or leave. Politicians often are more responsive to the neighborhoods where more affluent and white people live; thus schools, fire protection, policing, snow removal, garbage pickup, are poor in the ghetto neighborhoods. Economic restructuring independent of these racialized processes contributes to the closing of major employers near the segregated neighborhoods and the opening of employers in faraway suburbs. As a result of the confluence of all these actions and processes, many Black and Latino children are poorly educated, live around demoralized people in dilapidated and dangerous circumstances, and have few prospects for employment.¹⁷

These accounts exhibit structural inequality of gender and race respectively. While attributes of individuals also condition how they will be identified and treated by others, the primary account of gender or racial inequality here is structural. They describe a set of relationships among assumptions and stereotypes, institutional policies, individual actions following rules or choosing in self-interest, and collective consequences of these things, which constrain the options of some at the same time as they expand the options of others. One could tell analogous stories of how the economic class position of one's parents, neighborhoods and friends condition much about a person's life options because of the structural inequalities of class.

Now let us systematize the notion of structure. To do so I will build up an account using elements derived from several theorists. Peter Blau offers the

¹⁶Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

¹⁷See Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

following definition: “A social structure can be defined as a multidimensional space of differentiated social positions among which a population is distributed. The social associations of people provide both the criterion for distinguishing social positions and the connections among them that make them elements of a single social structure.”¹⁸ Blau exploits the spatial metaphor implied by the concept of structure. Individual people occupy varying *positions* in the social space, and their positions stand in determinate relation to other positions. The structure consists in the connections among the positions and their relationships, and the way the attributes of positions internally constitute one another through those relationships. The position of supervisor in a workplace hierarchy is constituted by relationship to determinate subordinates, and their positions are constituted by relations to the supervisor position.

For purposes of inquiring about social justice, we are interested not in such specific positions as foreman on the automobile assembly line, but in more generalized positions that constitute what John Rawls calls the “basic structure” of society. Rawls says that the basic structure concerns “the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation.”¹⁹ Major institutions include, he says, the legal system’s definition of basic rights and duties, market relations, the system of property in the means of production, and family organization. To these I would add the basic kinds of positions in the social division of labor.

Taken together as one scheme, the major institutions define men’s rights and duties and influence their life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do. The basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start. The intuitive notion here is that this structure contains various social positions and men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances.²⁰

Basic social structures consist in determinate social positions that people occupy which condition their opportunities and life chances. These life chances are constituted by the ways the positions are related to one another to create systematic constraints or opportunities that reinforce one another like wires in a cage. Structural social groups are constituted through the social organization of labor and production, the organization of desire and sexuality, the institutionalized rules of authority and subordination and the constitution of prestige. Structural social groups are relationally constituted in the sense that one position in structural relations does not exist apart from differentiated relation to other positions. A position in the social division of labor, for example, is what it

¹⁸Peter Blau, *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 4.

¹⁹John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*

is only in the context of the larger organization of productive activity to which it is related.

It is certainly misleading, however, to reify the metaphor of structure, that is, to think of social structures as entities independent of social actors, lying passively around them easing or inhibiting their movement. On the contrary, social structures exist only in the action and interaction of persons; they exist not as states, but as processes. Thus Anthony Giddens defines social structures in terms of “rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems.”²¹ In the idea of the duality of structure, Giddens theorizes how people act on the basis of their knowledge of pre-existing structures and in so acting reproduce those structures. We do so because we act according to rules and expectations and because our relationally constituted positions make or do not make certain resources available to us.

For example, the parents of upper-class children are supposed to act, and usually do act, to make sure that their children are able to maintain their class position. They have income resources to nurture their children in comfortable surroundings, and to provide high quality private or public schools. They have acquired the education and cultural habits through which they supplement the school’s education with knowledge, skills, tastes and expectations that socialize their children into what others of the class admire, or find valuable. In their interactions with teachers and local politicians they are treated with particular respect because of the resources they can mobilize, or because of their knowledge, demeanor and position. For all these reasons the road to high status, power and affluence is much smoother for these children than those of a low-income single mother without a high school education. The everyday interactions of people in child raising both presuppose the rules and resource mobilization capacity that attend a higher status and reproduce them.

Defining structures in terms of the rules and resources brought to actions and interactions, however, makes the reproduction of structures sound too much like the product of individual and intentional action. The concept of social structure must also include conditions under which actors act, which are often a *collective* outcome of action impressed onto the physical environment. Jean-Paul Sartre calls this aspect of social structuration the *practico-inert*.²² Most of the conditions under which people act are socio-historical: they are the products of previous actions, usually products of many coordinated and uncoordinated but mutually influenced actions over them. Those collective actions have produced

²¹Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 25. I rely on Giddens’ account mindful that it may be too vague and static for some purposes. William Sewell, “A theory of structure: duality, agency, and transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (1992), 1–29, makes a careful critique of aspects of Giddens’ theory, and proposes revisions in the meaning and relations of rules and resources better able to account for structural change as well as stability.

²²Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), bk. I, ch. 3.

determinate effects on the physical and cultural environment which condition future action in specific ways. As I understand the term, social structures include this practico-inert physical organization of buildings, but also modes of transport and communication, trees, rivers and rocks and their relation to human action.

American metropolitan areas, for example, have increasingly separated the physical space of family life from other spaces over the last three decades. The location of suburban residences are relatively farther away from schools, shopping districts, factories and offices than were urban residences fifty years ago. This fact, coupled with the assumption that care for children is primarily the responsibility of family members as unpaid work in and around the home, contributes to conditioning and constraining the lives of these home care workers who, due both to the rules and expectations of gender, and the often greater resources and opportunities available to men, are usually women. The spatial relation of residences to the space of other activities means that women's care work often consists in traveling—to schools, after-school activities, health providers, etc. If she wishes or needs also to have paid employment, the physical organization of her unpaid work tends to restrict her choices to close to home or one of these other activities. These facts make mothers of school-age children something of a captive labor force for part-time suburban retail and service work, and often make the workers more willing than others to work for lower wages.

Reference to such physical aspects of social structures leads us to a final aspect of the concept. The actions and interactions which take place among persons differently situated in social structures using rules and resources do not take place only on the basis of past actions whose collective effects mark the physical conditions of action. They also often have future effects beyond the immediate purposes and intentions of the actors. Structured social action and interaction often have collective results that no one intends and which may even be counter to the best intentions of the actors.²³ Even though no one intends them, they become given circumstances that help structure future actions. Presumably no one intends that many children be vulnerable to poverty in the way that Okin claims the gender division of labor makes them. Indeed, this result contradicts a common justification for the gender division of labor, which says that it is for the sake of the children that one parent should have primary responsibility for their care at home.

In summary, structures refer to the relation of basic social positions that fundamentally condition the opportunities and life prospects of the persons located in those positions. This conditioning occurs because of the way that actions and interactions in one situation conditioning that position reinforce the rules and resources available for other actions and interactions involving people in other structural positions. The unintended consequences of the confluence of many actions often produce and reinforce such opportunities and constraints,

²³Sartre calls such effects counter-finalities; see *ibid*, especially pp. 277–92.

and these often make their mark on the physical conditions of future actions, as well as on the habits and expectations of actors. This mutually reinforcing process means that the positional relations and the way they condition individual lives are difficult to change.

Structural *inequality*, then, consists in the relative constraints some people encounter in their freedom and material well-being as the cumulative effect of the possibilities of their social positions, as compared with others who in their social positions have more options or easier access to benefits. These constraints or possibilities by no means determine outcomes for individuals in their ability to enact their plans or gain access to benefits. Some of those in more constrained situations are particularly lucky or unusually hardworking and clever, while some of those with an open road have bad luck or squander their opportunities by being lazy or stupid. Those who successfully overcome obstacles, however, nevertheless cannot be judged as equal to those before whom few obstacles have loomed, even if at a given time they have roughly equivalent incomes, authority or prestige. Unlike the individualized attributes of native ability that often concern equality theorists, moreover, structural inequalities are socially caused. For this reason there is an even stronger argument than in the case of given individual attributes for social institutions to remedy these inequalities.

IV. GROUPS AND JUDGMENTS OF INJUSTICE

We can now return to our initial question: What, if anything, justifies comparing social groups in various measures of well-being or status, in order to find inequalities between the groups? Assessing degrees of inequality between groups in this way is necessary and justified because it helps to identify structural inequalities. If observation discovers that a category of individuals is unequal to others on certain important measures of well-being, *and* a plausible story can be told about how the relations, rules, expectations, and cumulative consequences of collective action specifically condition the lives of members of that group, then there are grounds for saying that members of the group suffer some injustice.

There is a recursiveness in this method. When we criticize social conditions for being unjust, we do not choose random attributes of individuals, such as their taste in music or their bone structure, as a basis for grouping them. We construct the groups for comparison according to generally recognized social positions which we already know have broad implications for how people relate to one another—class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, ability, religion, caste, citizenship status, and so on. The process of evaluating group inequality for the sake of making judgments about injustice begins with the hypothesis that comparing the average status of members of some of these groups will reveal patterns of inequality. By a *pattern*, I mean the mapping of the distribution of some good across all social positions at a particular time.

Discovering one such pattern on one parameter, however, does not yet take us to a judgment of injustice. We must discover that such inequality is *systemic* by finding a pattern of average difference in level of status or well-being along several parameters. When we find that Native Americans as a group have the lowest incomes, highest infant mortality rates, least education, and so on, of any group in American society, then we are entitled to say that members of this group probably suffer injustice. We are not warranted in the full evaluation, however, unless we can tell a *plausible structural story* that accounts for the production of the patterns. To complete the analysis and evaluation, we must explain how institutional rules and policies, individual actions and interactions, and the cumulative collective and often unintended material effects of these relations reinforce one another in ways that restrict the opportunities of some to achieve well-being in the respects measured, while it does not so restrict that of the others to whom they are compared, or even enlarge their opportunities. This story will be aided, moreover, by evidence that the basic configuration of the patterns shows little change over decades. The measures of group inequality are like wires in the cage; seen alone they reveal nothing about people's freedom or well-being. Seen together as spaced and reinforcing, however, they explain a great deal.

Ultimately the judgments of injustice, then, are not about the distributive patterns. Each distributive pattern only offers a piece of a puzzle, a clue to an account of generalized social *processes* which restrict the opportunities of some people to develop their capacities or access benefits while they enhance those of others.²⁴ A large class of social inequalities can be judged as unjust because they violate a broad principle of equal opportunity: that it is unfair to some individuals to have an easy time flourishing and realizing their goals, while others are hampered in doing so, due to circumstances beyond their control. Many theories of equality interpret the main source of such circumstances as bad luck. I agree with Elizabeth Anderson that the purpose of equality theory is less to identify unlucky sources of inequality than to identify how institutions and social relationships differentially conspire to restrict the opportunities of some people to develop and exercise their capacities and enact their goals. Individuals alone are not responsible for the way they are enabled or constrained by structural relations. To the extent that injustices are socially caused, however, this conception of justice claims that democratic political communities are responsible collectively for remedying such inequalities, perhaps more than they are obliged to remedy the effects of so-called "brute luck." These judgments of injustice take institutional organization and social practice as their object more than distributive patterns per se.

²⁴I have argued in another place that social process is more important than distributive pattern for making evaluations of justice and injustice. See I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), ch. 1.

V. RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Assessing structural inequality by referring to groups does not fall prey to most of the criticisms of group-based assessments of inequality discussed earlier. Nothing in the argument about assessing inequality in terms of structures contradicts the claim that individual persons are and ought to be the final targets of judgments and policies aimed at producing or improving well-being. My argument does not assume a reified concept of group distinct from individuals. Instead it notices that in pursuing individual and institutional goals, people themselves treat others as group members, and that the product of many such actions sometimes results in structural inequalities. Comparison of groups is necessary to judge inequalities unjust because doing so helps show that different individuals have different opportunities and inhibitions related to their structural social positions.

This analysis of structural inequality, moreover, shows why the groups of most concern to political actors and policy makers when they make group-conscious judgments of equality are not arbitrary collections of persons. Identifying groups for the purposes of such evaluations depends on knowing social positions, relations and structures, and how they open or restrict opportunities. There are two levels of knowing: a practical consciousness of action, where people know what are the primary categories according to which persons in the society are often treated differently or noticed as socially different. This practical knowledge motivates the initial data-gathering that aggregates measures of well-being in terms of groups. But more theoretical and systematically empirical investigation must take place before we have warrant to claim that there are unjust structural inequalities. I have said that this involves finding patterned inequality and being able to tell a plausible story about how the position in structures accounts for that inequality.

The worry that group-conscious measures of inequality suppress individual variation within groups is not warranted, because the purpose of assessing inequalities between groups is not to equalize the groups as blocs, without consideration of the relative status of individuals within groups. The goal of equality here considered is strong equality of opportunity among individuals, rather than some static average state of affairs between groups. Measuring inequalities between groups is a means of arguing that structures of privilege and disadvantage give individuals unequal opportunities.

Using group-conscious measures of inequality may indeed exacerbate political conflict to the extent that it identifies injustices that call for remedy, especially if the design of remedies takes the social circumstances of different groups into account. Even assuming that this is true, it cannot count as a reason against the practice of assessing inequality in terms of groups. Making claims of injustice, especially when they involve large numbers of people or social segments, often produces conflict, because people disagree either on principle or because they see their interests threatened. Once judgments of injustice have been made, attempts

at remedy are often divisive, because some people believe that they benefit from the status quo more than from change that would address the injustice. It may be true that identifying some groups as candidates for judgments of unjust inequality gives some people incentive to propose themselves as members of structurally unequal groups who deserve remedial policy. Some of these claims are likely to be groundless, and they ought to be contested in public by means of principles and criteria of justice and injustice. Far from inhibiting such efforts to challenge spurious claims of group disadvantage, the concepts and methods of analyzing structural inequality offered here provide basis for such challenges.

Judgments of injustice based on discovering inequalities between groups invite action to redress the injustice. Such judgments of inequality between groups, however, do not imply any specific principles or strategies for remedial social policy. In particular, it does not follow from the fact that the judgments of injustice use comparison of groups on measures of inequality that policies to correct this injustice ought to target groups. The argument of this paper, then, should not be construed as a defense of affirmative action policies, or other policies that specifically target groups for distributions, such as certain racial desegregation policies or positive gender quotas in electoral rules. Independent analysis and argument must be offered to justify social policies aiming to respond to injustices associated with structural inequality. Awareness of how actions and institutional processes differentially affect groups will usually be necessary to design social policy that aims to change structural inequality. That does not mean, however, that the goal of the change should be defined as producing a different comparative pattern between groups.

The goal of undermining structural inequalities should not be thought of as that of producing certain distributive patterns; rather, the objective of equalizing action is to intervene in the institutional processes and individual actions and interactions that constrain substantive opportunities of individuals who are similarly positioned from developing their capacities or enacting their morally legitimate aims. I believe that group targeted policies are sometimes a justifiable means of intervening in these processes, depending on the circumstances. Exposure of structural inequality will often reveal additional means of intervening.