The Payne of inequality

Review of ‘The broken ladder: How inequality affects the way we think, live, and die.’

by Keith Payne

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As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest. ~ Nelson Mandela (retrieved from brainyquote.com)

Social psychology suffers from two recurring crises. One crisis is about the field’s status as a science. Lack of a master theory, failures of replication, and the woes of weak statistical methods (Krueger & Heck, 2017), as well as researchers’ sloppiness or downright duplicitousness cast one pall after another (Lilienfeld & Waldman, 2017; see Pratkanis, 2017, for an assertive response therein). The other crisis is the absence of a clear domain of application, and hence a perceived lack of relevance (but see Steg, Buunk, & Rosengatter, 2008, for an effort to fix this). Yet, we live in interesting times (in the Chinese sense of “interesting”) where challenges abound. How can social psychology not be relevant?

Perhaps the historically most prominent challenge taken up by social psychology is the problem of racism. The study of racism presents a dialectic that continues to frustrate many a researcher. On the one hand, there is a social reality, which is structural and systemic. On the other hand, there are the psychological processes and mechanisms that psychologists must prioritize if they wish to remain true to their field. The pendulum tends to swing more to the individual than to the social. Of late, the study of implicit bias has been particularly popular, to the point that everything that appears to be of consequence is located in the person’s head, and beneath the threshold of awareness at that (see Mitchell & Tetlock, 2017, for a critical analysis). Sociologists since Durkheim have disdained this kind of ‘psychologization,’ and it is difficult to deny them the point.

One problem with the study of racism – not to diminish its importance – is that it is of limited interest. No one really wants to see social psychology overwhelmed by question of U.S. American race relations. This is why some thinkers have tried their hand at general
theories, among which Tajfel’s (1969) accentuation theory is a particularly fine example. In such theories, racial, ethnic, religious (or whatever) groups become particular ‘social categories.’ In other words, these theories focus on the very act of people carving social nature at her joints, creating what they think are clear-cut and discrete categories. From this ‘mere categorization,’ theorists then derive specific hypotheses regarding the accuracy of perception as well as lawful distortions (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008). The psychology is more elegant for it, but it pays the price of stepping away from the ‘blood and guts’ phenomena (Tajfel’s phrase) it seeks to explain.

There has to be a better way to make social psychology relevant. Enter Keith Payne. Payne (2001) became famous with a series of evocative and important studies on the so-called weapon’s effect, showing that white participants automatically associated guns with Blacks. This work was path-breaking in theoretical and methodological ways, and the findings offered intriguing psychological accounts of police shootings, such as the one of Amadou Diallo in 1999, which continue today. Payne has made significant contributions to the study of implicit cognition, with his work on affect misattribution being especially creative and impactful (Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005).

In time, Payne became interested in social and economic inequality. He reveals some of the reasons why in his book The broken ladder. Perhaps the deepest reasons are personal, as Payne experienced poverty/inequality first-hand. The memories he shares show sensitivity and insight, laying the foundation for the social psychological project of trying to understand what is going on in rigorous scientific fashion. In The broken ladder, Payne tells us what he and fellow scientists have found, and what he makes of it. The result is an important and timely book, a well-told story that ought to get the attention of a broad audience.
Payne’s greatest insight is to realize that inequality is a structural, non-psychological issue that triggers a host of psychological processes and responses. Inequality itself, as he notes, is very difficult to behold. Typically, we encounter inequality only through its effects on us, and then it tends to be too late, the damage has been done. Because of its hidden nature, inequality is – particularly in the USA – far greater than people realize. If people respond negatively to it – as they do – then they would respond far more negatively if they perceived the unequal reality in which they live on its actual scale. Like other psychologists, Payne is fond of using demonstrations of visual illusion to make metaphorical points (Felin, Koenderink, & Krueger, 2017), but here he misses an opportunity to elaborate the perceptual underestimation of how bad things are. He does, however, show the J-shaped income distribution next to the drawing of a man, impressing on us that our median income is only ankle-high.

Payne’s main theme is the role of upward social comparison. This is basically the Joneses effect, the neighbors with whom you are trying to keep up. Festinger (1954) predicted that most social comparisons are local, that is, with others that are already known to be similar (Suls & Wheeler, 2000), and that upward comparisons have a motivating, but also a potentially dispiriting, effect. Indeed, the postulate of local comparisons goes some way towards explaining why people underestimate the scale of inequality. The grotesquely elongated tail of the J-distribution is plain out of sight.

But the real issue, according to Payne, is that these comparisons are automatic. When a difference comes into view, we can’t help but notice and suffer a contrast effect. And yet, these contrast effects are psychologically sophisticated. Payne reminds us of Don Brown’s (1953) classic tray study, which showed the typical contrast effects among subjects who
estimated weights, but not when there had incidentally lifted a tray they knew to be unrelated to the task. The psychological structuring of the stimuli matters. The question is whether we can control it.

Focusing squarely on social comparison as the proximal cause of distress and unhappiness, Payne continually faces the need to show that perceived relative disadvantage is critical. A weak version of this argument is that subjective poverty explains important outcomes above and beyond the effects of poverty expressed in absolute terms. A strong version of this argument is that subjective poverty is the main, and perhaps the only, game in town. Payne tries to make the strong claim wherever possible, and he often succeeds. But he does not always succeed. Sometimes, there is some slippage in the writing so that the reader is uncertain whether the data show the effects of subjective and relative poverty or the effects of objective and absolute poverty. As this phrasing shows, there is also the challenge to separate the conjunction of ‘subjective’ with ‘relative’ and the conjunction of ‘objective’ with ‘absolute.’ Payne’s own introductory example illustrates the issue. He recalls that he became aware of his family’s limited means when he was mistakenly asked to pay for his school lunch. Up to that point, he did not realize the difference between those who paid and those who had a pass, and what it meant. An objective difference became subjectively relevant. And it was the difference that mattered, not the absolute state. To respond to these conceptual challenges is important, but it is also awkward because it forces Payne to reassure the reader that he does not dismiss the effects of true adversity and scarcity.

There is another issue that Payne needs to grapple with. This issue is economical and structural, and it therefore lies beyond the realm of psychology (but wait . . .). This issue is about the nature of inequality itself. An economist might acknowledge the presence of
inequality and find a way to model – and justify – it as an equilibrium. If the markets for commodities, money, and labor were as efficient as advertised, wouldn’t the inequalities in income and wealth have to be equilibria? Payne notes that conservatives tend to think this way. The empirical data, however, refute the equilibrium hypothesis by showing rapid trends (globally, and strikingly in the USA) towards greater inequality. To rationalize this, economists would have to argue either that external conditions are changing in such a way that equilibria must change as well, or that for some reason the economy has not been in equilibrium, but that it is now moving toward it. Archconservatives might like this argument. Government-sponsored healthcare for the elderly must be abandoned, they might claim, because the very wealthy must have a tax cut, because as it stands, they are being overcharged, and “But that is socialism!” as Payne recalls a student protesting in this context.

Psychology is called upon to explain how people perceive changes in inequality, how they evaluate them, and what they are prepared to do. While laying important foundations, Payne’s work has not taken this next step. We can ask, for example, what it would take to identify an optimal degree of inequality and stabilize it. Historically, psychologists have been reluctant to comment on social or economical engineering. But if the problems are as grave as Payne convincingly claims, perhaps the time for greater assertiveness has come.

Having framed his arguments on the individual, subjective, perceptual plane, Payne finally considers remedies. How may the destructive force of inequality be countered? His recommendations are individual, subjective, and perceptual. They respond to the question ‘What can you do to alleviate the pains visited upon you by a society deeply divided into the haves and the have-nots?’ Payne counsels us to choose our social comparisons wisely, to compare with lucidity, and to favor downward comparisons (‘Look how much better off we
are than the Joneses on the other side of the tracks!’). Well intentioned as it is, this advice runs counter to the equally well-constructed argument that social comparisons are automatic. Assuming that our intentions are controllable, we can elect to contemplate ‘cherished values’ to nudge ourselves away from our own desire to compete and climb. This may sound soothing; it points to a psychological escape route, a soft-cushion Timothy Leary tactic. It will do little, however, to alleviate the structural problems, or even worsen them. Besides, there is a logical problem with the presumed controllability of intentions. You cannot intend to have an intention without having it at that very moment (Pink, 2004).

But Payne also offers a behavioral option. Move out, and move to a place of less inequality. Moving out of state is correlated with higher earnings, although the causal pattern is unclear. Moving per se does not pay; something else must be happening to lift that boat. Moving to a region (state or company) with less inequality is an intriguing possibility, but its scope is limited by necessity. In time, those attractive low-inequality places will fill up. One might hope – but it has not been shown to be the case – that massive movement to low-inequality regions serves as a signal and a stimulus for social and economic change towards greater equality elsewhere. In theory at least, the regions and companies that are losing talent will seek reform. A darker possibility is that movement toward places of low inequality will destroy this very attractive feature. At the limit, the movement of a large number of economically unequal individuals will dilute the equality in the target region. If all of Oklahoma moves to Oregon, Oregon will not be the same.

Part of The broken ladder’s appeal is that Payne situates psychological analysis within a broader social context. To be sure, Durkheim and other sociologists (e.g., Brannigan, 2004), who are squarely concerned with the structure of society, abhor
psychological reductionism. Likewise, psychologists tend to abstain from treating groups as if they were organisms. Laypeople are less concerned. In a recent article, Payne and colleagues show that attributing minds to groups rises – ironically – when the presence of individuals is emphasized, that is, when we think about “people in a group” instead of “a group of people” (Cooley, Payne, Cipolli, Cameron, Berger, & Gray, 2017). Now consider the highly skewed income distribution in the USA. If the nation were a person, it would be very unhappy. Parducci’s (1965) range-frequency theory explains why. Highly positive but rare experiences (great wealth or income) extend the range while consigning the majority of experience to what is now the lowest section of the range. While the half-range (and the average) has moved up, and the median has changed little, the bulk of the experiences is now heavily negative in the relative sense. Parducci’s solution is to truncate at the top or to add a thin tail of true misery. The former solution is difficult politically, the latter is morally repugnant.

All told, The broken ladder takes a significant leap for social psychological scholarship to be relevant in today’s changing world. We live in the intersection of social, economic, and psychological forces. Payne situates us in this intersection, and, using the best contemporary research, opens our perception to a greater reality that has a way of, and an interest in, obscuring itself. Reading Payne’s book can do for us what the cashier in the school cafeteria did for him: open our eyes to our standing in an unfair world. How will we respond as individuals and as a nation?

References


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