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Humans are most atrocious when we live under the weight of great inequalities

[Danny Dorling](#)

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests greater equality pays dividends at every stage of life. So why, in the UK, are we led to believe that inequality is ‘normal’?



Since 1990, the top 1% of UK income earners have seen their annual takings soar. Photograph: David Levene

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“Inequality falls as collapse in unemployment helps poor families.” So read the headline on a recent [UK news story](#), reporting the latest release of ONS statistics comparing average incomes of the best-off fifth of the British population with the worse-off fifth.

What the Telegraph did not explain in its story is that this ratio has been falling, on and off, ever since it hit a peak of 6.4:1 in 1990. Or

that, also from 1990 onwards, the top 1% of income earners have seen their annual takings soar (although much of what they earn is not included in this annual employment survey). So, ever since 1990, income inequalities within the best-off 10% have been rising rapidly.



The story also failed to explain that unemployment in the UK is falling because people are being forced to take very low paying, insecure jobs. This work did result in them being a little better off, but the average additional reward per hour worked among the bottom fifth is risible.

In a world that often lionises wealth, it is worth remembering that no one can be rich unless others are poor. In the world's more equal countries, [more infants survive](#) and people are generally [healthier and happier](#). Greater equality pays dividends at every stage of human life, from babyhood to old age.

Despite increasing awareness of all this, it is still common to hear views such as the following – although not as common as when this view was first recorded, back in 2011:

There's ultimately a very small number of people that are phenomenally bright but also have the skills to run a company, the social skills to run a company at that level. It's just the nature of the world ... If this person has those skills, then he deserves the money."
(Male, 37, private sector, earning more than £100,000 a year)

This is one of many quotations recorded by Tess Lanning and Kate Lawton and reported in [Getting What We Deserve? Attitudes to Pay, Reward and Desert](#) (IPPR, 2011).

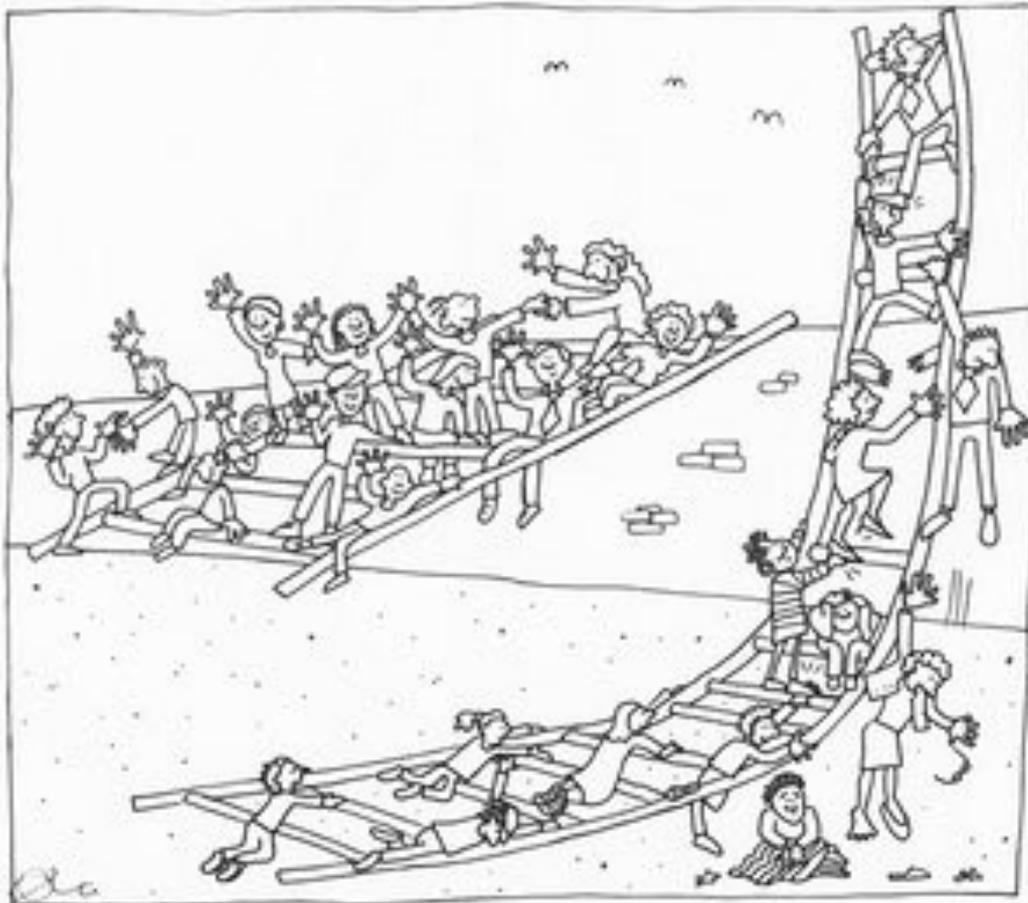
[Inequality](#) matters because, when you have more of it, you have to put up with obnoxious behaviour, insulting suggestions and stupid ideas such as the one above, that it is the “nature of the world” that “a very small number of people” are “phenomenally bright”.

Inequality matters because human beings are creatures that thrive in societies where we are treated more as equals rather than as being greatly unequal in mental ability, sociability or any other kind of ability. We work best, behave best, play best and think best when we are not labouring under the assumption that some of us are much better, more deserving and much more able than others.

We perform the worst, are most atrocious in our conduct, are least relaxed and most unimaginative in outlook when we live under the weight of great inequalities – and especially under the illusion that these are somehow warranted.

Inequalities harm the rich as well as the poor. The rich are not necessarily especially hard working, well behaved, happy or creative.

Some are obsessed with making money and can be driven by that. Most behave much better when they are more like the rest of us; when they have less. Many don't understand that it is questionable why the poor should work hard for a pittance, obey the law or any other conventions, when the poor are members of a group that is being treated so unfairly.



‘Two ladders.’ © Ella Furness

The UK is currently the economically [most unequal country in Europe](#) (excluding [Russia](#)). Its richest 10% take 28% of all income every year – in no other European country do they take as much. Half of that is taken just by the best-off tenth of the 10%, the infamous 1%. As a result of such inequalities, especially those inequalities within the elite, [almost no one who is very well rewarded feels well-enough rewarded!](#)

Inequality pervades all aspects of our lives. In places where the disparities are extreme, such as in the UK in 2017, we are led to believe this is “normal”. It results in us defending bizarrely segregated school education systems – and suggesting a further increase in this segregation by [introducing new grammar schools](#). And it pervades every other aspect of our lives, right through to how we die – and how our deaths are hastened by living in a more unequal country.

Often the links are hard to see and multi-directional. In grossly economically unequal countries such as the UK, the provision of public transport tends to be poor. Many more people drive – and drive further – than is usual in Europe every day. [Air pollution in England](#) is much higher than is normal for a European citizen. More deaths occur earlier as a result of that pollution, which kills 10 times as many people as die in traffic crashes. Inequality connects many aspects of our lives in destructive ways.



Economic inequality exacerbates and sustains all other inequalities: those between men and women, immigrants and locals, ethnic groups and social classes. In most affluent countries in the world, ways have been found to control the extent of inequality and often reduce it further. Once these mechanisms are accepted as normal, controlling inequality is relatively easy.

Progressive taxation discourages the greedy from taking too much, as most of the extra they take each day is taxed away. Marginal tax rates of more than 50% on incomes above £50,000 a year are normal on the European mainland. Such high rates are not designed to bring in much tax – but to dissuade employers from wasting money on pay that is too high.

Danny Dorling will be talking about his new book, [The Equality Effect: Improving Life For Everyone](#), at the [London School of Economics on Thursday 18 May](#). The book [can be ordered here](#) for £8.49 (a saving of £1.50 on the RRP)