

Inequality and Humiliation

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The adoption of free market and free trade policies since the 70s has led to a rapid reversal of the historic trend towards income equality and a shrinking of 'unskilled' entry-level job diversity away from manufacturing towards service work. At the same time, accelerating mechanisation has limited the range of jobs involving physical labour, and a creeping credentialisation restricts the choices of those who for various reasons have not prospered in academic (as distinct from on-the-job) learning.

These changes in the labour market have particularly affected the employment prospects of young men, with flow-on effects for young women as they bear children in circumstances of limited support. The result is a significant 'class' of unemployed or part time, precariously employed citizens, often concentrated in older, outlying public housing estates.

Epidemiological studies show a consistent correlation between economic inequality and lowered measures of social wellbeing (including mental and physical health, educational attainment, community trust and crime). Explanations for this often seek to link the macro with the micro using languages such as shame and pride, dignity and humiliation, respect and disrespect – all referring to actors' emotions (and therefore *motivations*).

These emotional effects have shown themselves repeatedly in the course of my community study in a public housing area. On the theoretical level I want to draw together a grounded theory that embraces the languages of inequality, hierarchy, power (and its abuse), trauma and powerlessness, shame and humiliation, human rights and more, through the stories of people living near the bottom of our socio-economic hierarchy. On the practical level I want to elucidate both the helpful and the humiliating policies and procedures of institutions and agencies that impinge upon the citizens, in the hope the information can be used to educate the former in what they are doing to their 'clients' at the emotional level (for they often "know not what they do"). I also hope to explore how citizens cope with these 'assaults to selfhood', with the view of contributing to the development of a useful language of the emotionality of shame, as a tool of personal and social change.

In the absence of any optimism for the structural change needed to reverse the current growth in inequality, I can only hope to contribute to the amelioration of its effects at the local and individual levels.