

# Can perspectives of concept formation derive a definition of inequality that can be better measured and targeted by digital trade policy interventions?

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## Abstract

*The present essay aims to raise a reflection on alternative concepts and definitions of inequality by discussing possible applications of concept formation perspectives that have been developed in philosophy and social science. The necessity for furthering conceptualization works on inequality arise because the concept of 'inequality' lacks a precise, universal definition that can be relevant to the complexities that social science entails. In this context, the present essay aims to discuss general perspectives of concept formation in philosophy and social science to reflect on deeper considerations that defining a concept, such as inequality, needs to address. For materializing this objective, this essay will also revise common definitions of inequality concepts that are recurrent on the literature, followed by a discussion on how perspectives of concept formation might lead to alternative ways for deriving a definition of inequality. While stating a universal, precise definition of inequality may be challenging, this essay may also intend to reflect on how perspectives of concept formation can suggest alternative concepts and definitions of inequality that can be addressed by research objectives, such as the role digital trade policy could play in reducing some form of inequality between and within countries*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

What do we understand by the concept of 'inequality'? This is a question that has drawn pronounced interest in academia and policy circles seeking to address the complexity that conceptualizing such term entails. Scholars and practitioners have held longstanding discussions on a multiplicity of definitions and concepts associated with the term 'inequality' because of its applicability in various dimensions of concern across social science disciplines. Cowell (2009, p. 1-2), for example, referred to the concept of 'inequality' as an awkward word due to its connection to a number of social and economic problems which often leave a wide room for interpretation of different ideas and knowledge perspectives in social science. Cowell (2009) further stressed that another challenge has to be with the fact that inequality could be approached as a departure from some idea of 'equality'. On this latter point, Allison (1978, p. 865) referred to the intrinsic complexity of conceptualizing inequality because it entails addressing theoretical questions on the meaning that any deviation from a state of equality could mean to derive an understanding on what inequality should be specified for.

Because of the lack of rigor in developing a precise, universal concept of inequality, research efforts aiming at measuring dimensions associated with any concept of inequality face several constraints that may be subject of validity. In economics, for example, a number of measurement challenges have been pointed out with regard to research and analysis of inequality metrics. Ostry and Berg (2014),

Lakner et al (2016), and Athow (2017) have referred to four challenges in particular.

The first challenge has to be with the strengths and weaknesses of traditional sets of statistics that are used to measure inequality, such as household surveys and administrative records. When approaching the concept of inequality from an economic perspective, scholars such as Li (2017, p. 17-20) have emphasized that inequality is often conceptualized as 'income inequality', broadly meaning differences of income among and within observational units of interest, e.g., individuals,<sup>2</sup> households, countries, regions, etc. And then, a critique to any measures of income is the lack of consistency and comparability that their data collection methods and information sources have.

The second challenge is that current metrics to quantify inequality may not capture accurately enough all the complexities involved in the conceptualization of inequality. The third challenge questions the dimensions targeted by inequality measures in economic terms. Here an underlying question is whether income and wealth are the best dimensions to measure inequality in economic research. The fourth challenge pertains to the comparability feature associated with any concept of inequality. As concepts of inequality have intended to refer to differences in dimensions of social and economic well-being among observational units of interest, a question that emerges is to what extent measures measuring such comparability feature is feasible.

The list of complexities and challenges with the conceptualization of inequality may continue and grow as more research works are undertaken on the subject matter. With

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the literature on inequality measures focusing on individuals may only refer to inequality between individuals, but

research work on other inequality directions with individuals as subjects may be possible. Since this is an area outside of the scope of this essay, no references will be added on inequality pertaining individuals.

research and analysis efforts on inequality being constrained by lack of precise conceptualization frameworks, adopting more rigorous approaches to deriving a concept of inequality is a gap that needs to be addressed in the literature. In this context, the present essay aims to discuss general perspectives of concept formation in philosophy and social science to reflect on deeper considerations that defining a concept, such as inequality, needs to address. For materializing this objective, this essay will also revise common definitions of inequality concepts that are recurrent on the literature, followed by a discussion on how perspectives of concept formation might lead to alternative ways to deriving a definition of inequality. While stating a universal, precise definition of inequality may be challenging, this essay may also intend to reflect on how perspectives of concept formation can suggest alternative concepts and definitions of inequality that can be addressed by research objectives, such as the role digital trade policy could play in reducing some form of inequality between and within countries.

The present essay is structured as follows. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 presents a general discussion on perspectives of concept formation in philosophy and social science. Section 3 revises definitions of inequality that may be common in the economics literature that relates to notions of income inequality or any other form of inequality in economic terms. Section 4 presents a reflection on alternative ways for defining inequality by adopting some of the perspectives of concept formation that Section 3 aims to discuss. Section 5 underscores possible concepts and definitions of inequality that may suit a doctoral research project to be undertaken by this essay's author. It will delve into definitions of inequality that can be addressed by research on the role of digital trade policy in bridging inequality. Section 6 concludes the findings. Section 7 presents the essay's bibliography.

### **What is concept formation from philosophical and social science perspectives?**

This section presents a discussion on general perspectives of concept formation in philosophy and social science. It aims to start with revising what some philosophical perspectives have had to say about the characteristics of concepts and the processes through which the latter are formulated and structured. In revising such concept formation perspective in philosophy, a contrast between opposing views on the subject is inevitable, which will also be highlighted generally in the discussion by referring to some references in the literature. Then, the objective should be that a reflection on concept formation in philosophy can frame considerations that pertain to social science.

What is a 'concept'? This question could perhaps be a starting point to reflect on how philosophical perspectives have approached any notion or meaning associated with the term 'concept' and an understanding on the formation of concepts. While any intention to conceptualize the word concept is out of scope of this essay, it may be relevant to refer to some theoretical works with regards to concepts. For instance, Margolis and Laurence (2022) have reviewed theories of concepts to capture a general understanding on what

the term 'concept' might mean in practice. As pointed out by the authors, opposing approaches to the study of the mind, to language, and to philosophy have placed theories of concept under debate, underscoring several dimensions to frame plausible definitions. By reviewing theories regarding the ontology, structure, empiricism and nativism of concepts, Margolis and Laurence (2022) have referred to 'concepts' as the building blocks of thoughts which are crucial for processes such as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision-making.

Seel (2012, p. 723-728) has also undertaken analytical and theoretical works aiming at developing possible definitions for the term 'concept'. These works have had a departure point in making the distinction between the meaning of words and that of concepts. According to Seel (2012, p. 723), an initial understanding that can be made is that concepts are „... the result of cognitive abstraction” whereas words refer to „... units of language...”. By disentangling several features where concepts and words may converge and diverge in meaning and attributes, Seel (2012, p. 724) has approached the formation of concepts under a relationship between concept and word in terms of three dimensional semantics. Such relationship entails that concepts signify words playing two roles. The first role is denoting things, attributes and relations. The second role is encompassing meanings about individuals, classes and structures. In other words, Seel (2012, p. 724-725) referred that concept formation begins with identifying a common set of characteristics or attributes on things, qualities and events that can be united in developing a semantic category for deriving an intended meaning.

How has concept formation been approached from philosophical views? Philosophy works documented by Ros (1989/1990) have identified the central issue that concept formation has occupied on theoretical and practical considerations that have been developed since ancient times. By studying the works of Socrates and Wittgenstein, Ros (1989/1990) alluded to concepts as „... directly accessible subjects of self-consciousness that are created autonomously by the human mind...”. This notion on concepts was placed in perspective with regard to philosophical works on concepts developed by Locke, Leibniz and Kant. According to the writings of Ros (1989/1990), Locke understood concepts as templates of existing mental images while Leibniz depicted concepts as capabilities to imagine forms. Like Leibniz, Kant also approached concepts from a capability point of view, but he emphasized on their purpose to develop optional mental representations of concrete objects in compliance with the rule.

Opposing philosophical views have presented contrasting notions and understandings of concept formation. While revising such contrasts may deserve in-depth relevance and study in the literature, this essay does not intend to capture an exhaustive compilation of works. Rather, it presents a few references on some academic works that have pointed out to contrasting philosophical perspectives on concept formation.

For example, Minimah (2016, p. 1-8) reviewed the differences on concept formation perspectives held by the

rationalists and empiricists to stress how Kant’s views on concept formation were derived. According to Minimah (2016, p. 7-8), Kant developed a theory of concept formation as a result of his dissatisfaction with the views of his predecessors with regard to mind interactions with the world. In particular, Minimah (2016, pp. 1-3) noted how Kant intended to provide a fresh twist to the marked distinctions between the rationalists’ approach to knowledge as an instance of logical truth and the one adopted by empiricists in leveraging experience to develop *a posteriori* ‘synthetic’ judgement of the world. With this regard, Minimah (2016, p. 1-3) pointed to how Kant questioned both rationalists and empiricists by developing a new theory of concept formation addressing the role of our minds in the formation of our knowledge. In this view, Kant referred to two complementary conditions that are necessary for the mind to make objective judgements about knowledge experience. The first has to be with the object of experience which comes from the development of intuition on perceptions to situations in the world. The second refers to the role categories of human intellect play in deriving knowledge about a subject.

Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 65-87) have also presented a relevant contrast on naturalist and anti-naturalist perspectives on concept formation. While such contrast has merited a degree of concern for its possible distortions in methodological approaches to social science research, noting the relevant differences with regard to concept formation constitutes a departure point for understanding the complexity on the matter. According to the works compiled by Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 67-80), naturalist views on concept formation have depicted three forms of concept formation. The first relates to reification of social science concepts which leads to the neglect of the holistic nature of beliefs and meanings by rendering social reality as the composition of mere things. The second has to be with essentialism, a naturalist view that stresses the occurrence of essential attributes cross-temporally and cross-culturally by transcending historical contingency. The third is a form of linguistic instrumentalism that naturalist use to divorce concepts from their own language and from the language of those they study. In contrast, Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 81-85) stressed on the anti-naturalist views of concept formation which emphasizes on descriptive and explanatory concepts as the two main kinds of social concepts. By opposing to the three naturalist forms of concept formations, the anti-naturalists underscore concepts as the formation of a family resemblance of similarities and mutable relations that crisscross a group. On this point, Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 81) referred to the views of Wittgenstein (1958, p. 31-33) who specified, „I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are related to one another in many different ways...we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’”.

How has concept formation been viewed in social science? Gerring (1999, pp. 357-393) and Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 529-546) have undertaken work that can offer

relevant insights into how philosophical views of concept formation have been applicable to social science research. Gerring (1999, p. 366-384) made a contribution to the literature on concept formation by defining a standard set of criteria that can be useful to develop adequate concepts to be approached by social science research. In developing such criteria, Gerring (1999, p. 357-365) presented a critique to some of the empiricists, rationalists and naturalists’ views on concept formation that were mentioned previously by referencing the works of Minimah (2016, p. 1-8) and Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 65-87). In his view, Gerring (1999, 357-365) stressed that concepts „... cannot be reduced to ‘clarity,’ to empirical or theoretical relevance, to a set of rules, or to the methodology particular to a given study.” Rather, Gerring (1999, p. 366-384) emphasizes that concept formation should embed a level of goodness in developing concepts that respond to purposes and functions envisaged in social science research. With this regard, a process of concept formation, for instance, can follow eight criteria: familiarity; resonance; parsimony; coherence; differentiation; depth; theoretical utility; field utility. These concepts are briefly described in the following table produced by Gerring (1999, p. 367).

**Table 1. Criteria of Conceptual Goodness**

1	Familiarity	How familiar is the concept (to a lay or academic audience)?
2	Resonance	Does the chosen term ring (resonate)?
3	Parsimony	How short is a) the term and b) its list of defining attributes (the intension)?
4	Coherence	How internally consistent (logically related) are the instances and attributes?
5	Differentiation	How differentiated are the instances and the attributes (from other most-similar concepts)? How bounded, how operationalizable, is the concept?
6	Depth	How many accompanying properties are shared by the instances under definition?
7	Theoretical Utility	How useful is the concept within a wider field of inferences?
8	Field Utility	How useful is the concept within a field of related instances and attributes?

Source: Gerring (1999, p. 367)

On the other hand, Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 529-546) have offered a framework for researchers to apply perspectives of concept formation to reflect on the coherence between the operationalization of researchers through assessments of measurement validity. By questioning the extent to which observations meaningfully capture ideas concepts intend to frame, Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 529) stress the relevance that measurement validity takes to enable researchers to assess the adequacy of concepts they utilize. To frame a roadmap for assessing the measurement validity encompassed in the relationship between concepts and observations, Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 530-531) identified four levels. The first level refers to the background concept in a broad sense, which comprise a holistic set of meanings associated with a given concept. The second level is the

systematized concept which results from an explicit definition a particular researcher or group of researchers grant for conducting the specific formation of a concept. The third level has to be with indicators or measures that reflect systemic scoring procedures aiming at using quantitative and qualitative approaches to measure the meaning embedded in a given concept. The fourth level depicts a set of scores for cases which are meant to provide results on the characterization expected for the concepts that were formulated.

### **How has inequality been conceptualized and defined?**

This section presents some definitions of inequality that may be recurrent in the economics literature. As it was the case with section 2, this essay does not attempt to discuss an exhaustive list of academic works on the subject. Rather, it reflects on works that can provide insights to the topics of reflection this essay intends to place in perspective for future research efforts.

The concept of 'inequality' has been a complex and ambiguous one that has lacked a precise, universal definition. Cowell (2009, p. 1) referred to inequality as an awkward word because of its difficulty associated to a number of different ideas with regard to multiple awkward social and economic problems. On this point, McGregor et al (2019, p 368) stressed on the complexity of conceptualizing inequality because of its political, social and economic implications which implies decisions on framing any definition of inequality by specifying the variable, population and distributional characteristics of interest. The latter point received emphasis in the works of Allison (1978, p. 865) who stressed that specifying the concept of inequality necessitates to answer a question on how one decides on which distribution of a 'given metric' is more unequal.

Broadly speaking, conceptualizing inequality may be applicable to many disciplines across social science. However, most of the academic works reviewed for this essay refer to notions of inequality that have been understood in economics. One of the reasons that motivates the understanding of conceptualization and measurement approaches to inequality in economics may be to its relevance to formulate policies affecting well-being in the human population, as noted by Li (2017, p. 17). In particular, Li (2017, p. 17-29) emphasized that "... income inequality could be the „best” form of inequality as it can be adjusted and improved through policies, while other forms of inequality could be life-long.”

The concept of 'income inequality', as referred by the works of Li (2017, p. 17-29), has been subject of some definitions developed by the literature on inequality in economics. Works on income inequality have been documented over the past century at least. In 1920, Dalton (1920, p. 348-350) defined inequality as "... the ratio of the total economic welfare attainable under an equal distribution to the total economic welfare attained under the given distribution.” Pursuant of this definition, Dalton (1920, p. 351-352) used mathematical terms to define a concept of 'income inequality' in terms of unequal distributions of economic welfare—

or income as Dalton's works later specified—as a result of the aforementioned ratio that is greater than the unity.

Whether measures such as economic welfare or income may comprise a departure point for defining a concept of 'inequality' has been stressed by Cowell (2012, p. 1-240), McGregor et al (2019, p. 268-295) and United Nations (2015a, p. 1-2) and United Nations (2015b, p. 1-2). Cowell (2012, p. 1-5) intended implicitly to conceptualize inequality in relation to other concepts that can point to any measurement direction such conceptualization may entail. Precisely, Cowell (2012, p. 5) described the concept of 'income' as "... the increase in a person's command over resources during a given time period..." which can be useful to derive a definition of inequality when one introduces a sense of comparison on varying levels of income. However, Cowell (2012, p. 5) did not specify any particular definition to inequality as his works delved in abstract notions of concepts that can be useful to derive such definition. Other authors have made more specified attempts in clarifying the concept of inequality in terms of dimensions or metrics that go beyond income. For example, McGregor et al (2019, p. 268-295) and United Nations (2015a, p. 1-2) have approached definitions to inequality in terms of the subject that such definitions should aim to target. In particular, these authors questioned what should be the subject to which inequality could refer to by providing some plausible directions. United Nations (2015a, p. 1-2) underscored the terms of 'inequality of outcomes' and 'inequality of opportunities, with the former meaning unequal levels of material wealth or overall living economic conditions and the latter referring to varying levels of freedom to choose one type of life rather than another. When alluding to what is that inequality should refer to, McGregor et al (2019, p. 268-295) compiled trends observed in statistics aimed at describing inequality in terms of differences in terms of opportunities, happiness and utility, consumption, income and wealth across units observed over time.

Another set of approaches to the conceptualization of inequality refer to the latter when it applies over units under observation. Precisely, the literature has referred to these approaches as 'inequality between whom'. McGregor et al (2019, p. 268-295), for instance, has underscored three concepts of inequality when entailing a difference of some measures between observational units. The first is a concept of 'global inequality' referring to changes in real income observed by percentiles of the global income distribution. The second concept is 'between-country inequality' which pertains to a comparison between countries with regard to dimensions under consideration, such as income levels or other metrics. The third concept is 'within-country inequality' which has to be with the patterns characterizing variability in the distribution of inequality dimensions, such as income, across the boundaries of countries, with such boundaries referring to disaggregated observational units such as persons, households, regions, races, genders, among others. These concepts associated with inequality between observational units has been further explored by works of Yee Koh (2020, P. 269-277), Osberg (2001, P. 7371-7377) and Jasso (2015, P. 885-893). Yee Koh (2020, P. 269-277) has emphasized on a geographical dimension of inequality that is more

directly related to the notion of inequality within a given observational unit. And Osberg (2001, P. 7371-7377) and Jasso (2015, P. 885-893) have referred to further theoretical works on the notions of inequality between observational units.

### **Can concept formation suggest more precise inequality definitions?**

So far, the previous sections have discussed perspectives of concept formation in philosophy and social science and approaches to plausible definitions and concepts of inequality. These two set of contents were needed to somehow link them by reflecting on the relevant facts. This section then aims to elaborate on such reflection.

A starting question may be if any of the perspectives on concept formation suggest alternative ways to develop concepts and definitions of inequality. As most of the literature of inequality in economics seems to converge, the concept of inequality clearly lacks a precise, universal definition and depicts a scarce level of rigor among scholars and practitioners in furthering conceptualization, measurement and research efforts on the subject. When one reads the situational contexts and research background used to frame any notion of inequality, the latter seems to be conceptualized and defined as a necessity to events or experiences of concern to policymakers.

For example, a number of research works have referred to a somewhat convergence of understanding inequality as the differences in measures related to income, welfare and opportunity between and across observational units of interest. Most of the background for such convergence has been depicted as a response to events that trigger such differences in the subject measures of inequality, such as crises that alter a preconceived order in economic, political and social terms. The occurrence of economic and financial crises, political instability events, social unrest, health emergencies and environmental risks may be some examples of such alterations of orders that are commonly referred in the literature. It thus seems that concepts of inequality that are recurrent in the literature of economics may fall under perspectives of concept formation that may be found in the philosophical works of the naturalists, empiricists or rationalists. According to the philosophical works revised by Minimah (2016, p. 1-8) and Bevir and Blakely (2018, p. 65-87), a salient feature that naturalists, empiricists and rationalists may share with regard to concept formation perspectives is that their tendency in defining concepts on the basis of logical truth, judgements to experiences and reliance on social reality dynamics rather than adopting a more holistic approach to the developing of meanings for a given concept or set of concepts of interest.

Works on perspectives of concept formation in social science that were revised to this essay seem to suggest more precise ways for deriving alternative concepts of inequality to the ones that are recurrent in the economics literature. For example, by following the eight-criteria list proposed by Gerring (1999, p. 367) for ensuring a degree of goodness in concept formation, more rigorous theoretical, conceptualization and measurement efforts can be taken towards a

more precise, universal definition of inequality. According to Gerring (1999, p. 367), ensuring a conceptual goodness would need to subject and test whether the process of concept formation aims at deriving concepts that meets the following criteria items: familiarity; resonance; parsimony; coherence; differentiation; depth; theoretical utility; and field utility (see table in page 5 for more information).

### **Which inequality definitions could be better targeted by digital trade policy?**

This section aims to address a relation of the present essay's discussion scope to an ongoing doctoral research project being developed by the author. As this essay intended to explore alternative approaches to developing more precise definitions and concepts of inequality, the perspectives, reflections and ideas discussed in previous sections can well serve to deepen analytical thinking that the conceptualization of inequality may deserve for future stages of the doctoral research project. A core objective of the doctoral research project is to address the role digital trade policy may have in bridging inequality. Thus, future stages of this project may question the concepts, definitions and holistic understandings of any notions of inequality that may be under consideration. As discussions raised by this essay suggested the value that concept formation perspectives in social science may bring to further specify concepts of research subject, alternative concepts and definitions to what has been written on inequality may require consideration for the doctoral research project. A place to start could be to question which direct effects digital trade policy interventions might have on inequality, as this exercise can lead to propose measures, metrics and indicators of inequality that might not have been considered yet by the literature on economics—and more precisely by the literature on digital trade policy. Developing a process of concept formation on inequality by following the works of Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 529-546) could be a plausible starting point.

### **Conclusion**

Inequality is a concept that remains complex to define, conceptualize and measure. While its semantic properties and characteristic dimensions have been explored in relation to situational contexts and research backgrounds, more rigorous efforts need to be adopted in specifying a holistic understanding of the concept of inequality. This may be a hard endeavour to accomplish because of the intrinsic relation that the concept of inequality has to other concepts that merit a holistic conceptualization process due to their usefulness in enhancing any understanding of what could be meant by inequality. While social science may acknowledge the complex but not impossible task of conceptualizing inequality, progress on developing concepts and definitions that are precise and suitable to research needs may be feasible. This is an insight the present essay aimed to explore for directing theoretical, conceptualization and measurement efforts for deriving definitions and measures of inequality that can be subject to the research area of digital trade policy, an area that is under ongoing exploration by a doctoral research project to be undertaken by the author of the present essay.

of the University of St. Gallen. This paper is a working draft version and must not be quoted nor cited. All remaining errors and omissions are the fault of the author.

### **Disclaimer and acknowledgements**

The opinions expressed in this paper should be attributed to the author. They are not meant to represent the positions or opinions

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