

SOS4100 – Social Inequality in the 21st Century: Egalitarian Norway in Comparative Perspective

Course content

This course provides a comprehensive presentation of key dimensions of social inequality in contemporary societies in the early 21st century. We address core issues such as economic inequality, intergenerational social mobility, health inequalities, gender inequality in education and work, and immigration and ethnic inequalities.

The aim of the course is three-fold:

- First, we provide students with an understanding of how patterns of social inequality in the Norwegian welfare state compare to other rich, developed countries.
- Second, we provide students with a set of theoretical perspectives and analytical tools to make sense of both cross-national variations in inequality patterns at the macro level, and the mechanisms that produce unequal outcomes between individuals in a society at the individual level.
- Third, we present students with empirical evidence on how and why patterns of inequality emerge, persist, and change, and which policy interventions are effective in tackling various forms of social inequality.

The course will address these and related questions:

- Why have socioeconomic inequalities in Western societies increased since the latter quarter of the 20th century?
- Why, and to what extent do the parents you are born to affect your future life chances, and why does family background matter more in unequal societies?
- How are health inequalities shaped by the broader socio-economic inequalities and what are the specific mechanisms linking these two types of inequalities?
- Why are so many immigrants unemployed, what obstacles do immigrants and children of immigrants face in the labor market, and how can we ensure equal access to employment and pay for different ethnic groups?
- Why do men still earn higher wages than women despite the fact that women now complete more education than men in most developed countries?
- How do specific policy measures reduce social inequalities at the different stages of individuals' life courses?

Throughout, we focus on how societal institutions, such as the welfare state, educational system, and labor market regulations shape countries' levels of inequality related to socioeconomic status, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Students will be required to read scientific studies covering a wide array of relevant topics and from different disciplines. The syllabus is at a relatively advanced level, but reading it does not require knowledge and understanding of advanced statistical methods beyond the MA level. The syllabus focuses on state-of-the-art literature reviews and recent high quality empirical studies, but also covers some foundational theoretical texts and non-academic reports. We emphasize how good empirical research designs can be used to answer important research questions, which will be useful for later work on your master thesis.

The course will provide you with knowledge and skills that are highly relevant for your employment opportunities, such as analytic skills and critical thinking, as well as insights into important topics such as

socioeconomic inequalities according to family background, gender and ethnicity, employers' hiring practices, welfare policy, health inequalities, the labor market, economic growth, human capital, and equality of opportunity.

Learning outcome

Knowledge

This course will provide you with:

- An analytical perspective on the links between sociological theories on inequality and empirical research.
- An overview of recent empirical studies of inequality related to socioeconomic position, gender, and ethnicity.
- Knowledge about how and why macro-level patterns of inequality emerge, change and persist.
- Knowledge about how evidence on the effectiveness of certain policies and institutional structures is generated and transformed into policy interventions.
- A basic understanding of the methods researchers use to answer questions about social inequalities.

Skills

You will be able to:

- Understand, explain, discuss and use core concepts, such as equality of opportunity, the gender pay gap, segregation, discrimination, social mechanisms, supply and demand, genetic heritability, social mobility, health equity, integration and assimilation, correlation and causation, etc.
- Provide critical discussions on issues related to social inequalities, and draw on important empirical studies in doing so.
- Make good decisions about choice of theoretical framework and analytical design, given the topic of your investigation.
- Conduct research on topics related to social inequality and develop a master thesis topic associated with this course

General competences

This course will provide you with:

- Improved analytical skills and critical thinking, as well as the ability to critically assess the quality of social scientific studies and make related ethical considerations
- A familiarity with key debates that animate quantitative and qualitative research on inequality.
- The ability to understand, discuss and argue about various aspects social inequalities.
- A good understanding of the distinction between academic knowledge based on empirical evidence and perceptions based on opinions and personal observations.
- Knowledge about how social scientific studies can be used in policy development and how policies may affect social inequalities.