

'Facts' menace dream of equality

What does it mean to "believe in equality"? Can it be achieved? ERIKA COETZEE explores the implications of this principle that has been associated with struggles for democracy throughout the world.

THE principle of equality has been linked to struggles for democracy all over the world. From the American declaration that "all men (sic) are created equal" and the French revolutionary call for "Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood" (sic) to the election campaigns of most political parties today, the theme of equality weaves through our political past and into the future.

What does "believing in equality" mean? Unfortunately, it is not all that obvious. It could, for instance, indicate an insistence that all people ought to be treated equally. But not necessarily all the time: "equality before the law", for instance, means that everybody basically starts out as an equal legal persona, irrespective of other kinds of inequality they may experience at any other level.

The notion that "everybody is born equal" certainly doesn't refer to the circumstances into which people are born, but suggests that if you ignore these, people are in essence equally human to begin with. What happens after that, of course, is another matter.

Often "equality" is followed by a "but", as in "women and men should be treated as equals but they really are different". Without debating the accuracy of this statement, giving weight to their differences makes it almost impossible to conclude what treating them as equals would amount to.

So, once you begin to unravel it, the problem with much of the talk about equality is that it is either conditional, or selective or totally theoretical. Equality either depends on something else, or only counts in some contexts, or exists purely as a distant imaginary state of being (before birth or after death) beyond the specifics of this lifetime.

When it comes to actual everyday equality, people have become so accustomed to accepting all the exceptions to the rule as natural and inevitable, that it is slightly absurd to say we believe in equality at all. Most societies, deep down, seem to pursue inequality.

Ways of justifying and rationalising inequality have become accepted common sense in some contexts. Looking into popular beliefs about poverty in the United States, for instance, it was found that more people attribute economic inequality to laziness and a lack of effort on the part of the poor themselves than any other factor.

'We underestimate how entangled our psyches still are in the legends and tales of our segregated histories'

The implication of this way of thinking is that equality has not materialised because the victims of inequality are not behaving appropriately; the vague belief in equality remains intact while the reality is argued away. Most societies that proclaim equality are built on conventions that create space for inequality to keep itself firmly lodged. Without addressing in a serious manner, for example, the practical dilemmas many women face between childcare responsibilities and full-time work, it seems glib to profess commitment to gender equality.

All this is actually to be expected: it makes a great deal of sense. It is worth remembering that when the principle of equality is proclaimed or decreed, this generally happens in a context of profound and pro-



longed inequality.

Experience of inequality gives rise to moral outrage and a sense that things should be different. But lifelong seasoning to inequality does not provide the tools with which to make equality work. In fact, it does just the opposite.

Growing up and living in South Africa has fine-tuned our skills to the practice of inequality. We underestimate how entangled our psyches still are in the legends and tales of our segregated histories.

In this phase of uncertainty, people yearn for the familiar and obvious; and what is familiar and obvious includes a million little common-sense notions and habits that fit like pieces of a puzzle in an unequal world. Above all, we disregard how complex the machinery is that keeps inequality in place, and how firmly it remains part of our social structure.

Inequality is a monster with many faces. Racism, sexism, class inequality reinforce one another, creating overlapping patterns of exclusion, prejudice and oppression. They generate mystified, yet mutually supportive "explanations" of the differences that exist between human beings. The various types of inequality we face are based on similar models: they capture the heart, the mind and the body. To do this, they have to function in more than one way at more than one level.

Any inequality is not just a matter of attitudes. To tackle racism merely by trying to change people's attitudes is not going to do



the trick. It is a necessary part of the process, but reconciling one's feelings towards others speaks primarily to the heart. And on its own, the heart is fragile.

Attitudes are fed by ideas, images and experiences. They are not simply absorbed from parents, teachers or friends for no reason other than proximity. Attitudes that bolster inequality often develop at the same time as people are learning what the world is all about. The feelings children acquire towards another race, or another gender – or any group of “others” – grow out of the “facts” they have at their disposal.

Ideas about inequality are almost always presented as absolute truths or scientific facts – while they really are only opinions. So a child may grow up “knowing for a fact” that the poor are poor because they just don't try hard enough.

While attempts to change such an attitude once that child has become an adult may sometimes succeed, it is more likely that the adult will struggle with a change of attitude: it just wouldn't tally with the facts.

While they are presented as facts, beliefs and ideas about inequality and why people are treated differently are often difficult to prove or disprove. If you sincerely believe it to be the honest truth that women are more emotional than men, any new information isn't necessarily going to make you change your mind. You are going to find the evidence you need, because inequality also trains us to be selective.

So if attitudes to others and “facts” about reality are the first two spheres which inequality permeates, the third is access to opportunities, experiences and services. Different people have differing degrees of access to social services, education and job opportunities, and this clearly perpetuates inequality. This is often referred to as the structural dimension of inequality: in other words, how inequality is built into all the systems and institutions that co-ordinate, organise and regulate society.

‘To tackle racism merely by trying to change people's attitudes is not going to do the trick’

Structural inequality not only leads to people having vastly different degrees of power over their own lives; it also creates enough disparity between them to spur the development of prejudice and biased attitudes. The social and economic structures through which inequality is channelled also help to nurture, reinforce and confirm those selective “facts” and beliefs about others that make inequality seem natural.

So the vicious cycle is self-perpetuating: the structures ensure unequal access to experiences and opportunities. People develop differing expectations; they do different things with their lives. The differences between them grow, as do their attitudes of prejudice, submission or suspicion toward

one another.

These feelings are confirmed by the explanations, common-sense notions and ideas about the world each sees and hears. These, in turn, make the structures of unequal access seem fair and natural to some, inevitable to others. They are kept in place and we start all over again: another round of the cycle has been secured.

In addition to all this, systems of punishment and reward coax us into keeping it all going. Women who support or defend male dominance and enact a lesser self with conviction, are generally rewarded with male attention, protection and praise. Those who do not, encounter insults, belittlement and often banishment to the lunatic fringe.

In a sense, the beginning of the Black Consciousness movement was all about disrupting and inverting the punishments and rewards that protect the cycle of racism. Challenging these on a large enough scale created the space to intervene in the cycle itself. Without reversing the conventional rules of what is rewarded and who the reward comes from, it would have been more difficult to begin addressing the emotional and factual levels of oppression in a fundamental way.

Inequality – in all its different forms and manifestations – remains an incredibly difficult illness to cure. Most interventions tend to focus on a single aspect of it. For instance, equal opportunity and affirmative action programmes often address the structural dimensions of inequality, but leave the attitudinal and ideological dimensions untouched. Thus they allow attitudes and ideology the space they need to undermine whatever progress the programme makes.

Similarly, the effects of awareness-raising programmes that seek to change attitudes tend to wither in the stark glare of continued structural inequality.

We have not even begun to find effective strategies for removing inequality from our society. Yet it is clear that any constructive interventions will have to be multi-pronged and multi-dimensional. We need to advance along more than one front. Inequality won't disappear on its own; it can't be wished away.

The challenge of developing a truly inclusive and coherent world-view in which equality makes (common) sense still lies ahead. As we face a new constitution and a new political order, we need to decide how serious we feel about “believing in equality”. And if we are really serious, there is more work, upheaval and uncertainty ahead of us than we ever imagined.

Erica Coetzee is regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Western Cape office.