

Emotional responses to world inequality



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on discussions with Kenyan, Mexican and British teachers, this paper reports on emotional responses to international socio-economic inequality. Emotional regimes are explored to identify what ‘appropriate’ responses to inequality are in a variety of local and national contexts. These include rural and urban settings, and social milieus ranging from elite to deprived. Politeness, hand-wringing and humour can create a protective distance; while sadness, anger and hope for change connect with the issue of inequality and challenge the associated injustices. Distancing and connecting emerge as central themes in the analysis. The spatial patterns of emotions align with participants’ socio-economic positions, in more disadvantaged settings unapologetic anger about inequality was expressed, as was humour in the face of group or national misfortune. These emotional regimes can be understood within the wider context of participants’ socio-economic position; their senses of injustice; and their views on the possibility of social change. I argue that social norms surrounding justice and distribution can influence levels of inequality, and vice versa. This is of particular importance given the societal damage caused by inequality, which is now widely acknowledged.

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1. Introduction

Emotions are central to how people are positioned in relation to a topic or situation. Being emotionally engaged may amplify attitudes and provide an impetus for action. In contrast, denial of something being morally problematic may mean not feeling disturbed (Cohen, 2000). Connecting to or distancing from an issue is a key theme in this analysis of secondary school teachers’ and trainee teachers’ attitudes towards socio-economic inequality. Emotions are important for understanding the interconnected yet unequal social world, to the extent that neglecting the vocabulary of emotions “leaves a gaping void in how to both know, and intervene in, the world.” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p.7).

Emotions are active elements of public debate on world issues. Emotions, such as fear of terrorism, may be provoked to justify political manoeuvres (Pain, 2009). Negative emotions surrounding inequality may be roused by unmet expectations. These expectations are based on experience of norms of remuneration, capacity to meet basic needs, and level of disposable income, amongst other

factors (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). I am interested here in understanding how local socio-economic positioning and norms influence emotional responses to inequality. In particular, I consider the emotional regimes surrounding inequality in three countries that differ markedly in terms of national wealth.

It is widely argued that current levels of world inequality, normally taken to imply income or wealth inequality, are unacceptable (Amin, 2006; Dorling, 2010; Ghosh, 2008; Roy, 1999; Sutcliffe, 2005). Economic inequality is closely associated with health, social and educational inequality. It has been argued that greater economic equality would enable a fuller use of human resources, create larger markets for goods, and reduce costs of managing society, such as policing costs (Sutcliffe, 2005; Wacquant, 2010). Many negative outcomes of national inequality in richer countries have been identified, which impact upon the wealthy as well as poorer groups (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Being richer than others can even lead to feelings of vulnerability and depression. This may be partly due to searching for fulfillment in objects of social status (James, 2007). Thomas Pogge takes a Rawlsian approach to poverty, arguing that we have a responsibility not to cause harm (Pogge, 2008a). Bob Sutcliffe, on the other hand, emphasizes that redistribution is desirable for social justice independent of consequences (Sutcliffe, 2005). These authors provide some responses to

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inequality embedded in academic debate, a debate that provokes emotional and moral statements in addition to discussion about evidence and theory.

This paper presents comparative research on attitudes to world socio-economic inequality. It focuses on how secondary school teachers and trainee teachers from Kenya, Mexico and the UK talk about such inequality. I emphasize the emotional stances imbued in discussions about inequality, and pay attention to how participants position themselves in relation to inequality. The three countries were selected to span a wide range of levels of international inequality, whilst having broadly comparable national inequality (the UK is the more equal society of the three, reflecting a trend of richer countries being more equal than poorer countries; Barford, 2010). The research locations also capture diversity in terms of the countries' roles in the world economy, geographical location, and regional influences. Exploring how emotional regimes are interrelated with the local, national and international socio-economic positions of research participants offers insight into spatial patterns of emotions surrounding inequality. Characterising the emotional regimes concerning world inequality is important for understanding how people create connections and distances across social and physical divides.

2. Literature on politics, emotions and interconnectivity

Since the mid-1990s, there has been increased interest in emotions within the disciplines of sociology, psychology, philosophy, and geography (Reddy, 2005; Thien, 2005). More recent interest in emotions within the social sciences stems from the recognition of their political importance. The idea that emotions are regarded as separate from the public sphere and essentially private has been widely critiqued across feminist (or emotional) geography literature, since they are tied up with power relations. For example, social hierarchies are associated with psychosocial stress and status anxieties (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Routledge, 2012). Social constructionists view emotions as “culturally relevant, public performances, reflecting power relations and mediating between subjective experiences and social practices” (Zembylas, 2007, p.58). Understandings of politics, policies, experiences and attitudes can be improved by considering their emotional dimensions. Emotions can motivate people to act against injustices (Routledge, 2012).

In recognition of the active role of emotions, William Reddy coined the term *emotives*, a word similar to *performative*, to express how emotions influence the world (Reddy, 2005). He describes how emotional information is conveyed in responses to others in words and facial expressions. Reddy argues that communities establish norms resulting in an ‘emotional regime’, where conformity to preferred emotions is endowed with authority. Social interactionist Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 2008) uses a similar concept of ‘feelings rules’. For Hochschild, emotions are based on cultural ‘prototypes’. Particular reactions are expected in response to certain events: one *should* be thrilled to win a prize, one *should* be furious when mistreated. As cultures are fluid and interconnected, feeling rules can be interpreted as having local, national, and international influences. These expectations vary between cultures and contexts due to local differences in general standards (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). A constellation of feeling rules contributes to emotional regimes, and both terms are employed in this paper.

Attitudes to world inequality are likely to be influenced by spatial variations in emotional regimes and feeling rules. Emotional regimes, which make some responses acceptable and others distasteful or inappropriate, are partly influenced by material conditions. This is because material conditions underlie the procurement of essential goods and luxuries (and social norms of

wealth influence what is deemed essential or luxurious). Economic position also influences the cultural norms and values to which people are exposed. Thus, geographies of inequality could bear some similarities to the spatial patterns of emotional responses to inequality.

Reddy's and Hochschild's views of the social conditioning of emotions counter the common impression that emotions are involuntary (Anderson and Smith, 2001), and several researchers have documented how emotional expression is consciously controlled. For instance, protesters may avoid angry and violent responses to social injustices so as not to provide an excuse for others to delegitimize their objections (Routledge, 2012). Similarly, in Mexico and the USA, media accusations of being ‘crazy’ or ‘emotionally craven’ have undermined and silenced protest against injustices to women (Wright, 2008). In both cases, dominant groups have encouraged emotional control in an effort to maintain social control. Yet channeling rather than suppressing anger and aggression has enabled protests to persist, whilst conforming to wider emotional expectations (Thrift, 2004). However, a strong response is sometimes necessary to initiate social change. Roland Barthes distinguishes between *punctum*, as an emotionally charged response that ruptures complacency, and the more common *studium*, which is a general, polite interest in something (Barthes, 2000). Emotion demonstrates engagement, whereas polite interest suggests an emotional distance. Those carefully managing their emotional responses in order to maintain legitimacy, whilst acting upon strongly held views, negotiate conflicting demands.

Norms for emotional performance have been identified as governing emotional labour. This ‘surface acting’ requires people to display emotions that they do not feel (Moore, 2008). For example, retail workers are expected to be cheerful and friendly, whereas judges should be emotionally neutral (Kiely and Sevastos, 2008). Emotional labour at work strains employees (e.g. Nylander et al., 2011) due to dissonance between actual and performed feelings. Some people resolve this dissonance by aligning their own feelings with expected behavior referred to as ‘deep acting’ (Moore, 2008). There is less need for such emotional labour for people of higher status. Generally, people who are powerful and of high status have more positive emotional experiences than people with lower status (Collins, 1990 in Moore, 2008).

My interest in the socio-economic context of emotions resonates with a feminist approach that binds everyday emotions to networks of power and privilege within which they are located (Pain, 2009). Economic and other social inequalities are widely understood to be instances of injustice, and so have the potential to cause anger and frustration amongst those experiencing these injustices. Other researchers have demonstrated that those suffering disadvantages experience more distress and anger, and those whose advantages are associated with injustices are more likely to experience feelings of guilt (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). The type and extent of emotional response may reflect how much someone is influenced by an experience or observation, as well as by dominant feeling rules.

Distancing is of particular interest given that people and places are now generally understood to be relational and connected to others, which affects their identities and capabilities. The uneven development of places is partly due to their interconnectedness: “The ‘gap’ between the ‘first’ world and the ‘third’ is not just a gap; it is also a connection.” (Massey and Jess, 1995, p.225). Through time, humans have empathised with increasingly large groups, from families to the nation state and beyond (Rifkin, 2010). At a smaller scale, a South African Xhosa proverb ‘*umuntu gumuntu ngabantu*’ (a person is a person through persons) acknowledges the importance of society to individuals' identities (Raghuram et al., 2009; Shutte, 1993 in Smith, 2000; Therborn, 2009). Given these

interrelations and expanding geographical imaginations, distancing other people and places in our imaginations may constitute denial, whereas emphasizing connections may stress responsibility.

Anglo-American culture has a propensity to suppress emotion and avoid discussion of responsibility. Emotional suppression was exemplified when ecologist Page Spencer, writing about her grief at the destruction caused by the 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Alaska, was criticized for her “unprofessional and embarrassingly emotional” accounts (Button, 2010). Similarly, geographer Melissa Wright (2008) received criticism for her protests against injustices to women. It seems more usual for the privileged to address injustice and inequality from an emotional distance. Judging their wealth to be deserved and in the national interest (Pogge, 2008a,b; Rowlingson and Connor, 2010), and denying the severity of poverty (Swaan, 2005) enables the wealthy to approach inequality in an apparently rational and unemotional manner. Misperceiving poverty, perhaps by constructing the poor as lazy and the rich as hardworking (Reis and Moore, 2005; Bamfield and Horton, 2009), also facilitates an emotionally disengaged approach to inequality.

Income and life expectancy distances between people are increasing at the world and often country levels (Therborn, 2009). Yet the porous boundaries of places mean that these basic inequalities cannot be understood in isolation (Massey and Jess, 1995). Instead, contemporary inequalities are geographical expressions of the contradictions of capitalism (Smith, 1990). The feelings of the relatively wealthy towards the global poor are better documented than those who are more disadvantaged by inequality. This research aims to access multiple understandings of inequality to enhance appreciation of “the lives that others live partly because of us” (Cook, 2006, p.660). It is within this relational understanding of people and places that emotions towards world inequality are of particular interest.

The emotions surrounding these international connections and injustices are central to this paper. Key questions are: How do people feel about their position in an unequal global system? How do physical distance and feelings of connectivity play out in the emotional regimes associated with increasing inequalities? Does one's position within this system influence the form of appropriate emotional responses, and how? What is the geography of the feeling rules concerning world inequality?

3. Methodology

3.1. Country context

The countries selected for this research are distinctly positioned

in terms of national income, meaning that these three countries intersect with world inequality from divergent material situations. On the spectrum of Gross Domestic Product per capita, Kenya has a relatively low income, Mexico is towards the middle, and the UK has a relatively high income. The distribution of income within the three countries is comparatively unequal (poorer countries generally have higher income inequality than wealthier countries). See Table 1 for details. All three countries included in this study enacted neo-liberal policies since the late 1970s. In 1985, Mexico signed the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, which opened the economy and removed state subsidies. This was followed by further liberalisation or ‘*Salinisation*’ under President Carlos Salinas (Hamnet, 2006). This privatization in the 1990s enabled the Mexican Carlos Slim Helú to enter the ranks of the world's richest people (Harvey, 2007). In the 1980s and 1990s, private enterprise strategy and Kenyan capitalists acting as agents of foreign capital seemed to make Kenya an exception to sub-Saharan African poverty (Himbara, 1994). At the same time, under Margaret Thatcher, the UK transformed from a social democratic state, then comparable to Sweden, to one of increased service privatization (Harvey, 2007).

Each country connects to a regional identity with distinctive cultures, politics and institutions. Kenyans share in a pan-African identity (Thiong'o, 2009); Mexico and the rest of Latin America are set in contradistinction to the United States along linguistic, economic and political lines (Paz, 2005); and the UK is half-heartedly engaged in European economic and political consolidation. Still, these countries also stand out from their region. Kenya is the East African hub; all three countries have close but dissimilar relationships with the United States. Trends in values and attitudes do vary between world regions, as shown by global values surveys (Pew Research Centre, 2015), so wider regional context is worth considering.

3.2. Discussion groups

Discussion groups were used to shed light on how inequalities are addressed in social situations, and thereby access the social nature of human knowledge (Goss and Leinbach, 1996). The group setting invites discussion and accommodates open-ended questions that encourage people to talk in their own terms. Working with groups also emphasizes locality (Holbrook and Jackson, 1996), which is especially relevant to research into geographical variations. In order to capture the co-production of emotions in specific contexts, I have employed extended quotations, where appropriate, to show group interaction. Table 2 provides further detail on group composition and setting.

Table 1
Basic national statistics.

	Kenya	Mexico	UK
Population (est. July 2010) ^a	39,002,772	111,211,789	61,113,205
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (in current US\$ millions, 2008) ^b	30,355	1,088,130	2,674,060
GDP per capita (in current US\$ millions, 2008) ^b	783	10,232	43,541
Top 10% to bottom 10% income ratio ^b	21.3	21.0	13.8
GINI coefficient ^b	47.7	48.1	36.0
Income distribution			
% income of lowest 20% ^{b,c}	4.7	3.8	6.0
% income of second 20% ^{b,c}	8.8	8.1	10.8
% income of middle 20% ^{b,c}	13.3	12.4	15.9
% income of fourth 20% ^{b,c}	20.3	19.2	23.0
% income of highest 20% ^{b,c}	53.0	56.4	44.2

^a Central Intelligence Agency, 2010, World Factbook.

^b World Bank, 2009, World Development Indicators (income distribution data for Kenya refer to 2005 and for Mexico to 2008).

^c Dorling, 2010, p.341 provided by S. Abdallah of the New Economics Foundation, 2008 (UK data refer to 2005/6).

Table 2
Discussion group composition.

Group	Location	School	Subjects	Age and sex
Kenya 1	Urban (Nairobi)	Post graduate students and trainee teachers, in University	Geography (participants include a Tanzanian and Ugandan)	40f 33 m 28 m 28 m 27 m 25 m 25 m 24f
Kenya 2	Urban (regional, Central)	High-achieving government school	Geography	48 m 39 m 39 m
Kenya 3	Rural (North)	Catholic girls boarding school	Maths, Business Studies, History, Geography, Kiswahili, Religion	32f 32 m 30 m 27 m
Kenya 4	Rural (North)	Boys Catholic boarding school	Geography, English, Literature, Business Studies, Kiswahili, History, Christian Religious Education, Government	46 m 37 m 35 m 32 m 29 m
Kenya 5	Urban (regional, Central)	Girls government secondary school	Geography, Kiswahili, Christian Religious Education, Business Studies, English, History	47f 42 m 41f 39f
Kenya 6	Urban (Nairobi)	Community primary school in 'slum'	English, Science, Maths, Kiswahili, Social Studies, Christian Religious Education	27f 27f 26 m 26f
Kenya 7	Urban (Nairobi)	Private, British-system, international school.	Geography, History, Sociology (one teacher was British)	55f 42f
Kenya 8	Rural (Central)	High achieving government school	History, Business Studies, Geography, Chemistry, Christian Religious Education, Government	41 m 36f 33 m 32 m
Kenya 9	Urban (regional, Central)	Boys boarding school	History, Christian Religious Education, Geography, Kiswahili	45 m 40f 39f 38 m
Mexico 1	Urban (Mexico City)	Teachers who trained together	History, Civics & Ethics, Geography	32 m 29 m 29f 29f 24 m
Mexico 2	Urban (Mexico City)	Student teachers	Geography, History	31f 22 m 22 m 20f
Mexico 3	Urban (Central)	Small government school in a poor neighbourhood	English, Science, Civics & Ethics, History, Physical Education, Technology	65f 45f 44f 40 m 34f
Mexico 4	Urban (Central)	Government school, mixed intake	Geography, Chemistry, History	47 m 39f 29f
Mexico 5	Urban (Central)	Government school, middle class intake	History, Civics & Ethics, Geography	56f 50 m 47 m 42f
Mexico 6	Rural (Central)	Government school	Civics & Ethics, Geography, History	62 m 48 m 42f 38 m 35f
Mexico 7	Rural (Central)	Very small government school	All subjects	46f 42f 31 m 30f
Mexico 8	Urban (Mexico City)	Private Catholic school	English, History, Geography, Civics & Ethics, School co-ordinator	64f 50f 48 m 37f 47 m 43f
UK 1	Urban (South)	Teacher training college	Geography	23 m 22f 22f 22 m 21f 21f
UK 2	Urban (South)	Teacher training college	Geography	33f 22 m
UK 3	Urban (North)	Geography Conference	Geography	54 m 51f
UK 4	Urban (North)	Retirees from Further Education College	General studies, Biology, Social sciences, Geography, Environment	71f 70 m 68f 68 m 63f
UK 5	Urban (Midlands)	Independent Grammar School	Geography	37f 35 m
UK 6	Urban (South)	Private Girls School	Geography, Philosophy, Religion	59f 59f 58f 48f 31f
UK 7	Rural (South)	Private school	Geography, Music, General Studies, Psychology	34f 33f 40 m ?m

The discussion groups were one-off meetings lasting roughly 90 min, a relatively low time-commitment compared to approaches that run multiple meetings with the same group (Burgess, 1996; Kneale, 2001). The discussion guide included seven questions, starting with what inequality means, in order to develop a working definition. Next participants were asked about their awareness of inequalities at the world scale, and then about the causes of inequality. They were asked about the importance of inequality as a world issue. Four visualizations of inequality were used to provoke discussion. Of these, two cartograms are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. Then, positive and negative aspects of inequality were discussed. To conclude the discussion participants were asked to comment on the frequency with which they discuss inequality, and with whom. This gave a sense of how much the ideas that arose during the groups extend into participants' daily lives (Bedford and Burgess, 2001).

Group sizes departed from the standard number of discussion group participants, which is often in double figures (Goss and Leinbach, 1996; Hennick, 2007). Instead, groups ranged from 2 to 8 people. Small group sizes allow more time for each person to speak, and reduce the likelihood of simultaneous conversations that are hard to facilitate and transcribe. With smaller groups it is also easier to recruit participants and gain head teachers' approval.

Discussion groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The words spoken (or their English translation), and how they were

said, were noted. This included the stress on certain words (indicated by italicized text), tone of voice and other sounds such as sighs and laughter. The discussion groups in Mexico used Spanish. Those in the UK and Kenya were conducted in English (which is the medium of secondary education in Kenya). In Kenya, Kiswahili words were often inserted into English sentences. Learning languages for fieldwork can deepen understandings of different perspectives and increase cultural sensitivity more generally (Watson, 2004). Having studied both Spanish and Kiswahili in preparation for this research, I was able to conduct the groups and translate the recordings myself, checking meaning with others when appropriate.

3.3. Participants

School teachers were chosen for four main reasons. Firstly they have a wider influence on society, through their potential to expand pupils' sensitivities and awareness. Educational institutions also play a central role in reproducing social structures (Bourdieu, 1996). One teacher referred to her role as teaching children to be responsible citizens: "... You're also teaching them for a wider world in which that inequality will exist, and it will change if they have a different mindset" (urban private school, UK). Secondly, teachers often interact with pupils from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and may deal with inequalities between their

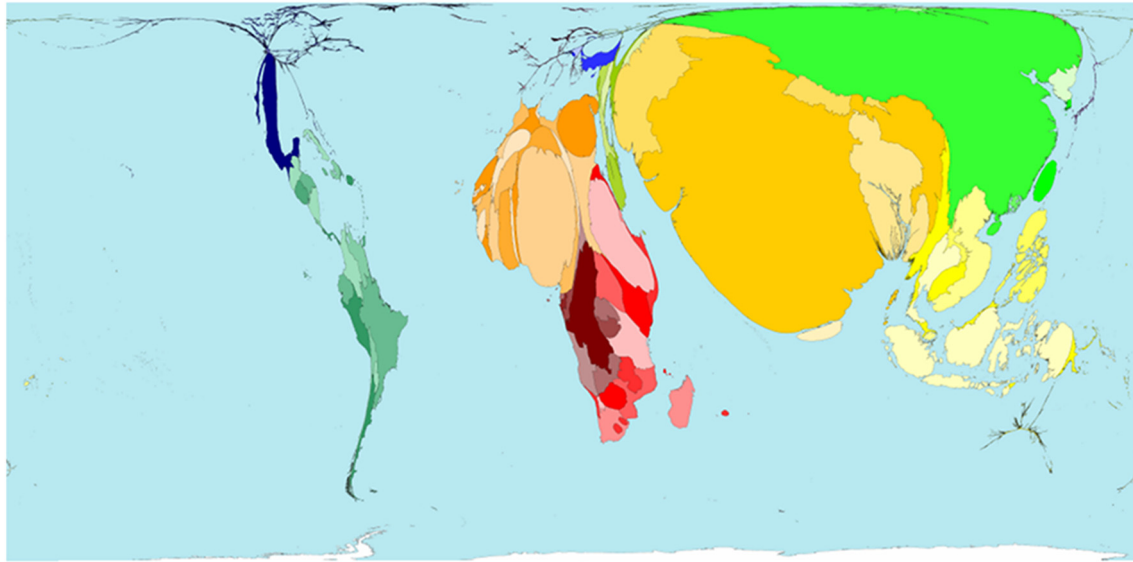


Fig. 1. Living on the equivalent of under \$2 per day. Territory size shows the proportion of all people living on less than or equal to Purchasing Power Parity US\$2 in a day (2002). Source: www.worldmapper.org.

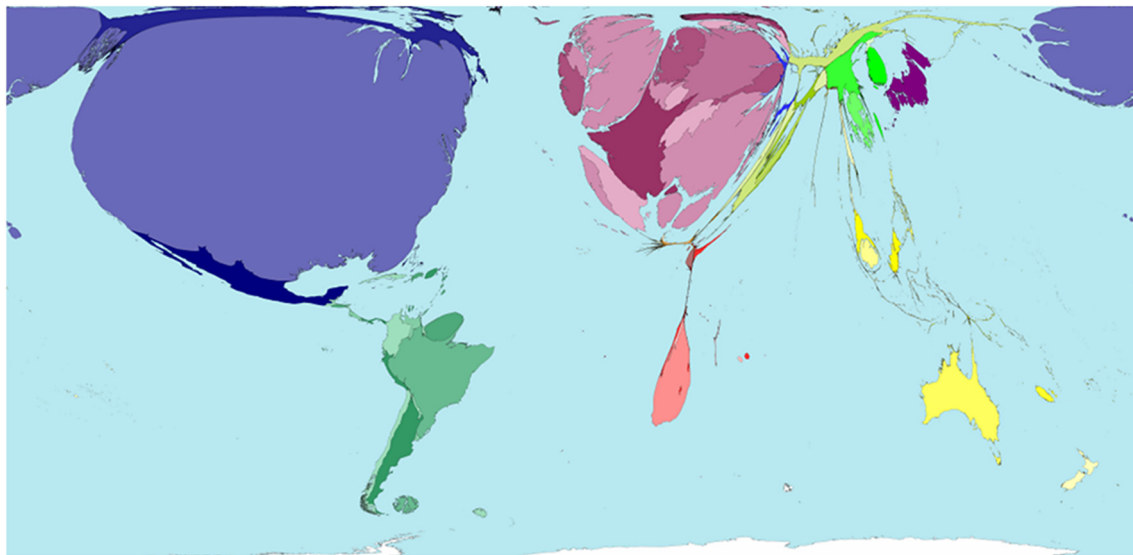


Fig. 2. Living on the equivalent of over \$200 per day. Territory size shows the proportion of all people living on over Purchasing Power Parity US\$ 200 a day worldwide, that live there (2002).

Source: www.worldmapper.org. *How to read world cartograms*: These maps can be thought of as geographical pie charts, in that the larger the size of a territory, the higher proportion of the world total is found there. If a territory has 50% of the area (excluding the sea), then it has 50% of the mapped variable. Note that data used are absolute, not per capita, values (Dorling et al., 2006).

students on a daily basis. Thirdly, although teachers are a heterogeneous group whose professional experiences vary considerably, working with participants with a shared occupation renders findings more comparable between countries. Lastly, as ‘global social dialogues’ of social movements and international institutions are already well documented (Yeates, 2009), new insights into global dialogues could come from research into teachers’ perspectives given their unique positions in relation to education and schooling.

In most cases, discussion groups were recruited from the same school or teacher training college, and most discussion groups took place within the school building. The professional context of the discussion, in terms of the social and physical setting, influenced

the roles played by participants. School hierarchies and professional desirability influenced the views and emotions expressed, and probably minimized the number of disagreements that arose between participants, requiring emotional labour from some group members. Recruiting people who know one another can reduce anxiety about involvement and debate, as well as facilitate the telling of shared stories (Holbrook and Jackson, 1996). Table 2 details the participants in each group. I mainly recruited teachers of geography, history, languages and social sciences. These teachers had varying levels of experience: from trainees to retirees. They worked in towns and cities as well as rural areas; in schools serving richer and poorer students; in government and private schools. I

conducted nine groups in Kenya, eight in Mexico and seven in the UK.

3.4. *The social position of participants*

Local context, such as being in a rural or urban area, or public or private schools, influences both teachers' experiences and their socio-economic status. Particularly in rural areas of poorer countries there may be a lack of electricity, poor school buildings, minimal support and book shortages, amongst other challenges (Iredale, 1993). In Mexico, teachers are more respected in a rural setting than in cities, due to the status and remuneration compared to other skilled jobs available locally. Rural and urban teachers will be aware of divergent forms of inequality in their daily lives.

A state-private divide exists in education systems in all three countries. Private school teachers are likely to accept dominant elites, given their choice of school. Many state school teachers will have some experience of poverty amongst pupils. Since the 1990s, Mexico opened its education system to the private sector due to World Bank pressure to reduce "non-productive expenditure". Private schools taught 13.4% of lower secondary and 21.4% of upper secondary pupils by 1999 (Delgado-Ramos and Saxe-Fernández, 2009; Marchant, 2005). In the UK, the Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997 framed parents and pupils as consumers of education. 'Consumer choice' has led to prioritisation of good results over pupils' needs (Hill et al., 2009).

3.5. *Analysis*

To analyse discussion group data in a discourse analysis tradition I focused on *what* words allow the speaker to do, *how* some topics are prioritised, and considered the grammar and word choices (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Self-definition implicit in discussion was used to evaluate how interviewees positioned themselves and others in terms of socio-economic inequality. This is because there are multiple possible interpretations of status depending on reference group. It is almost always possible to find someone better or worse off than oneself, and to feel relatively privileged or disadvantaged as a result. Emotions were analysed according to how participants related to a privileged or disadvantaged self-categorisation. Status and emotions were identified by the words used and manner of expression, in order to identify the geography of the emotional regimes employed and the logic behind them.

I worked with *emic* themes arising from the data, to make less expected findings possible (Goss and Leinbach, 1996). A reading, re-reading and cross-group comparison formed the basis for analysis. Codes were formed, altered and merged throughout. At times I mapped themes diagrammatically to create an overview of conceptual interconnections (Burgess, 1996; Kneale, 2001; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Ultimately, I collapsed emotional responses into those that emphasize connectivity between socio-economic groups, and those that create a distance. These responses infer something about spatiality and intimacy. Distance is physical, with apparent barriers, as well as a personal disentanglement from other people and places. By contrast, connection emphasizes political, economic, social or other forms of proximity, even over large physical distances. Descriptions of connection also express a level of personal engagement with the experiences of others. These approaches were analysed in relation to how respondents expressed their socio-economic status. Comparison between groups highlighted absences and presences and I identified several discursive repertoires and emotional treatments of inequality and considered how the groups relate to such repertoires (Jackson, 2001). These findings are best understood as case studies that illustrate

variations and patterns of understandings of inequalities in particular locales, positioned differently in the same world order. Due to the small and unrepresentative sample, the findings cannot be considered representative of the countries in which the research was undertaken (Creswell, 2007).

It is possible that cultural context or variations in sense of humour, amongst other things, could lead to my misinterpretation of some emotions. Nevertheless, multiple types of information from a discussion group can be used to aid a good interpretation of feelings. Respondents' words, body language, tone, and other sounds such as giggling or sighing can be read in conjunction to triangulate the emotions expressed.

3.6. *Researcher positionality*

Postcolonial responsibility requires acknowledging the partial, embedded, political and messy nature of research and writing (Noxolo, 2009; Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010). This research was carried out within the context of the global inequalities that it seeks to challenge. On leaving the UK, my home country became a more significant part of my identity. Like others (Skelton, 2001), I tried to disassociate myself from British transnational politics, immigration laws and trade policies. Inequalities often existed between me as the researcher and the participants. Some teachers working in poorer contexts could well have found it insensitive for a privileged British student to ask about inequality, although this reaction was not openly communicated during the discussion groups. Some of the teachers working in richer contexts, where inequality usually is not openly critiqued, probably thought me to be radical due to the same questions.

On first sight I was assumed to be a *Gringo* in Mexico, due to my physical appearance. I am white, female and undertook this research aged 26–27. Being British may have freed me from negative stereotypes of United States Americans whose holiday homes have proliferated in towns such as Chapala in Jalisco. On the other hand, the UK's foreign policies have often met with controversy. In Kenya I was a *Mzungu*, a racial and economic category. Typically, *Mzungus* receive a warm welcome, always pay for their Kenyan friends, and enjoy going on safari. In Kenya and Mexico there was surprise at my age and occupation: in both countries PhD students are usually over 30 years old and already have families (I had no children at the time). Within the UK, my accent gives away my middle-class background and often (mistakenly) leads people to think I come from the South of England. I attempted to manage facets of my identity whilst recognising Rose's (1997) point that we cannot fully understand, control or redistribute power.

My identity influenced participants' responses to my questions, as well as my analysis and interpretation of the data. Responses were influenced partly by a wish to maintain social desirability in front of me, the researcher, as well as other group members. Further, ideas and attitudes may have been expressed in particular ways in order that I would understand. Especially in Kenya and Mexico, it is likely that participants gave more explicit explanations to ensure my understanding. The themes that interested me, and the patterns that I discovered in the transcripts, were influenced by my own interest in and understanding of the causes of inequality. Thus aspects of my identity combined with my sensitivities as a researcher to influence the results produced by this research.

4. *Results & discussion*

Below I demonstrate and discuss how emotional regimes relate to socio-economic inequality. My analysis shows how respondents tend either to connect or distance themselves from the issue of inequality. Connection and distancing have emotional and

conceptual implications. Emotional distancing is being more cut off from an issue, whereas connecting is being emotionally engaged. Conceptually it means whether respondents describe themselves as being interconnected with others. These associated responses are influenced by whether the respondents consider themselves to be comparatively privileged or disadvantaged. Speaking of the global and local poor generally led the teachers to position themselves as privileged. Reference to wealthier nations, or the rich within their own society, resulted in participants self-defining as disadvantaged. UK groups rarely position themselves as disadvantaged. Certain emotions were associated with these positions and distancing approaches, and these intersecting themes structure the results section (see Table 3).

Generally there was agreement within groups, illustrating the co-production of emotional responses. Sometimes emotional responses were led by a dominant group member with especially strong views. In Mexico Group 6 (rural government school) there was one dominant, politicized and critical male teacher. His discourse was followed with approval, e.g.: “He’s taken the words from our mouths. We totally agree with our colleague.”

4.1. Disadvantaged, connecting

Sometimes being disadvantaged whilst connecting with inequality took the form of outrage or disgust, and a sense of manipulation. Sometimes hope was expressed, at other times powerlessness and resentment were the dominant emotions. In many cases there was a strong emotional engagement with inequality, akin to Barthes’ concept of *punctum* (2000).

“At the world level there are countries that are supposedly the powerful ones, and they are the ones that are almost moving the world. The smaller countries are those that are doing nothing more than depending on other countries. So, there is a lot of inequality.”

“We’re nothing more than their game of chess!”

(Mexico 7, small rural school)

The outrage at world inequality communicated is evident in word choice. The last quote here suggests disempowerment and resentment, but these words were spoken boldly and critically. The speaker challenges this situation by emphasizing the nature of this unequal relationship. The teachers in this Mexican village school saw few opportunities for themselves. One teacher suggested marriage to a foreigner as a way to progress socially. I found that rural groups within Mexico were particularly emotionally engaged with inequality. In small communities poverty and insecurity are not anonymous, but experienced by friends, family, neighbours and pupils. Thus socio-economic disparities may be more conspicuous and felt particularly deeply.

The term ‘feeling inferior’ was mentioned three times by Kenya 2 (high-achieving urban government school). Kenya 2 and Mexico 6 (rural government school) use the terms “inferior”, “unequal”, and “terrible” to describe inequality. This differs from the qualified, apologetic tone of the later quotations from privileged groups. Kenya 2 positioned themselves as being disadvantaged at the world

scale.

“I think something else which also brings up world inequalities, is lack of finance. ... other countries have a lot of finance to exploit all the resources that they have. So we are left behind and we feel as if there is no equality. But if we could have finance to exploit the resources at times we might be on a par with the others ...”

“and even issues of political ideologies, you see like we always adopt, if you look at the world, even like the developing countries the kind of political ideologies are foreign. They try to adopt them and try to use them to run their own affairs in those countries. And some of these things brings about a serious problem of inequality because some of the ideologies for instance, look at the way Kenya got its independence, we inherited a British kind of system, and this was a colonial system and so we had our own people come in and continue to perpetuate the system of colonialism and that creates inequality in the country.”

(Kenya 2, high-achieving urban government school)

The speakers object to poorer countries’ lack of financial and political control. The second speaker builds on the first. Both argue that uneven connections between places reinforce inequality and disempower poorer nations. Colonialism is blamed for causing national level inequality; this was a common theme in the Kenyan discussion groups. The explanation that lack of finance creates inequality paradoxically gives some hope. Through identifying the structural cause of the problem a possible solution becomes apparent. The first speaker is able to imagine a way in which greater equality could be achieved. Hope is the most positive emotion identified in relation to inequality:

“I live in the slum, and I don’t like that kind of life ... I keep thinking, ‘how can I change things? How can I move out of this you see, and have that?’ What, I talk about it with people, ‘for how long shall we continue living in this situation?’ ... ‘So what can I do to change this?’ Not just for me but for all of the other people who are living around me.”

(Kenya 6, NGO-funded slum primary teachers)

The speaker, in their mid-twenties, is dissatisfied but hopeful about the future. The speaker is a slum dweller who engages with inequality through talk of improving things for others as well. Solidarity and optimism are evident. The deprived setting meant that school meals might be the only food pupils receive. Following the focus group I was shown sacks of food donated by international organisations. This teacher’s emotional expression, of hope for the future and dissatisfaction with the present, may be a well-practised interaction with international visitors (especially those involved in aid or charity work), a performance of emotional labour by a recipient of aid. This quotation contrasts with the politicized engagements cited earlier, yet still engages seriously with inequality whilst following a set of feeling rules. Anger and outrage at the structural causes of inequality are not appropriate responses to the donor community, not part of the role of being a grateful recipient.

Table 3

Feeling rules for inequality, depending on social position and distancing. Boxes 1, 2, 3, and 4 refer to emotional regimes which consist of feeling rules.

	Disadvantaged	Privileged
Connecting	1.Anger, Hope, Manipulated	2.Anger, Hope, Sadness, Despair,
Distancing	3.Morgue humour	4.Politeness, Reluctant accepting, Discomfort, Humour (apologised for), Powerlessness

Emotional labour is needed to construct such politically acceptable responses, which perform the function of easing interactions between the privileged and disadvantaged, and facilitating a beneficial transfer of resources.

4.2. *Privileged, connecting*

Privileged participants also engaged with inequality as a serious and important issue. Emotional work was involved in acknowledging the difficulties of others, whilst not offending other group members in the privileged social context. This balancing is demonstrated below, where one female participant recovers her composure after an outspoken criticism of inequality.

“But I do have moments when I think ‘God, this is, I cannot live with this, this is awful, how can this be’, you know. And then obviously you do, you’re not actually affected by it, and I think maybe I’m just being a middle class white woman having a little bit of a worry, and then I’ll buy something Fairtrade and it will be ok. But you know I do feel it personally to be quite difficult.”

(UK 5, urban private school)

This teacher has a strong emotional reaction against inequality. She emphasizes the necessity of change, describing inequality as awful. She then qualifies her own views using her white middle-class and female position to imply that she may be more emotional (female) and perhaps less in touch with local social conditions (white and middle class). Dismissing her feelings as “a little bit of a worry” tones down her response. This softens her response, bringing it closer in line with a more emotionally neutral approach. Perhaps this is a defensive move based on previous criticism for strong emotional responses. This speaker was not challenged for her feelings about inequality during the group discussion, instead her self-regulation appears to be a response to wider social norms and feeling rules governing how inequality is discussed.

How some respondents express their critical and emotionally engaged approach, knowing that this is unconventional in their society, reminds us of the partial authority of feeling rules. Another British participant, with a strong interest in inequality, represents a small but vocal minority arguing against inequality within the UK.

“If the problem is inequality, which I think it is, you can’t just look at the third world and say, you know, ‘we’ve got to do something about the third world’. No, we’ve got to do something about the first world and the second world as well. Because they’re, for me, they’re equally problematic. ... if I have to walk through Manchester and see somebody scrabbling around in the dustbin to find food, *my life is worse*. I mean I know that their life is worse (said quickly), but my life is worse. We’ve got to get to recognise that.”

(UK 4, retired urban teacher)

This participant emphasizes connections between people. This is achieved partly by identifying that the problems of inequality need to be addressed worldwide. Inequality, referred to here in terms of poverty, is engaged with emotionally. When speaking her voice rose, and she was insistent when stating “*my life is worse*”. By commenting that poverty is bad for all of society, this respondent conceptually positioned herself within inequality. That she did not qualify her criticisms or soften her opinions may be due to her lifelong commitment to tackling inequality desensitizing her to dominant feeling rules. Over the years she will have co-constructed

an alternative set of emotional responses, building a critical culture to challenge inequality.

In the following quotation a teacher describes how privileged pupils responded to the disadvantage of others.

“... I took a group of students, year 11, 12 and 13 to, er, Mother Theresa Centre, missionaries of charities, she rescues the lowest of the low in society, people who have been abandoned by families, people that are paralysed, people that are deformed, mentally challenged and so on, and when the kids went there I assumed at that level they were psychologically ready to go in. But when we went in, they broke down and were totally disorientated So, yes, they know there is inequality, but they don’t digest, but yeah, they don’t get, they’ve got to be in contact with it to understand what it means.”

(Kenya 7, urban British-system private school)

The privileged pupils at this school are a mixture of international and home students. They are wealthy in the Kenyan context, and some will join a global elite. The initial obliviousness to the reality of poverty and disadvantage illustrates how wealthy people buffer themselves from other social groups. This participant recommends ‘being there’ to disrupt complacency, using a language of embodied understanding. Not understanding is described corporeally (or physically) as not “digesting” or incorporating new information, implying a superficial awareness. This relates to my earlier observation that the two rural Mexican groups were particularly emotionally engaged in the discussion of inequality. Nairobi has a broader spectrum of income groups than rural Mexico, yet this urban environment separates pupils from many other city dwellers. The teacher positioned herself as privileged. During the discussion she gave examples of how she connects across social distance. This included providing meals for a poor community and highlighting disadvantage to her pupils. The sense of privilege and connection resulted in tangible actions, a demonstration of [Routledge’s \(2012\)](#) description of emotional engagement with injustices leading to action.

4.3. *Disadvantaged, distancing*

The main way in which disadvantaged people emotionally distanced themselves from the inequality was through humour. Several participants in Kenya joked about poverty and the challenges experienced at the local or at national level.

“And why are we living in this situation while the other people have enough so that they can even throw it? Like the politicians who come with the helicopter and just throws money [giggles]”

Followed by group laughter (Kenya 6, teachers in poor urban area)

The brazen behavior described was of some politicians flying over the Kibera slum, throwing money in an attempt to win votes. Group laughter confirms that these comments were funny, and demonstrates that humour is an appropriate emotional response in this context. Laughter releases tension, keeping the discussion light-hearted. This laughter may stem from two causes. Firstly, having such wealth and poverty together is so preposterous that it becomes funny. Secondly, participants feel powerless to change such entrenched wealth differences. The helplessness provokes a reaction and laughter is often easier than anger to handle socially. These teachers live and work in a particularly poor community, so have first-hand experiences of the injustices associated with inequality. Collective laughter creates an emotional buffer.

Another example comes from comments about the world cartogram showing the distribution of people earning over US\$ 200 per day (Fig. 1). On this map most of Africa shrinks into a thin black line. South Africa is visible due to the very high earners living there. The following dialogue is about this map:

“[Chuckles] we're in real problems.”

“There's a strip, a black one” [chuckles]

“A black strip, of Africa” [laughs]

Anna: “That's where Kenya is, in the black line”

“Yeah” [laughs]

Anna: “Why are you laughing?”

“Because it is not there [laugh], it is not seen.”

(Kenya 8, rural government school)

Like the previous quotation, this humour is not derisive of others, but is a response to the group's circumstances. Kenya is described using the personal pronoun ‘we’. Laughter builds throughout this dialogue, with almost every speaker chuckling or laughing as they describe the map. That Kenya is not visible on a map of high earnings could be funny due to a similar combination of ridiculousness and powerlessness. Firstly, seeing one's country missing from a world map is bizarre. Unexpected occurrences or actions are often used to provoke laughter, and this map had the same effect (albeit unintentionally). Secondly, that Kenya is ‘in real problems’ is well-established, the map authoritatively reinforces this point. Laughing is a protective response.

4.4. *Privileged, distancing*

Humour featured as a way of emotionally distancing the privileged from inequality:

“Without inequality, I mean I, we would, we would all be the same, we'd all be the same [yes] who's going to do, you know, different types of jobs, [yes] you know, what it is that you aspire to.”

“Actually that's a REALLY good point, like in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, everyone's actually, so what they do is they actually engineer people so that they are equal [particularly] because if you have an entire society made up of incredibly bright, intelligent but nobody, nobody wants to clean the toilets.”

“Quite”

“Yeah”

“And that”

“Well I think that's it really isn't it, and society, and economy need [Yeah.] variation.”

“Yeah but”

“See in intelligence and in the things, in the things that, well let's face it, you want inequality in intelligence so that you can con some people into cleaning the toilets”

[Group raucous laughter]

“I mean my mum is a cleaner and she gains, she is honestly one of the people who is most satisfied with her job.”

(UK 6, urban teachers at a private girls school)

This conversation depoliticises inequality by using supposed differences in intelligence to justify some people doing undesirable jobs. These teachers distanced themselves from menial work, by asserting their own superior intelligence. The raucous laughter released tension in the discussion, which had grown whilst building an argument against equality. In the context of an elite school, intelligence justifying social disparities offers a socially acceptable explanation. One group member recovers from this laughter, by drawing on the trope of the happy poor. She states that cleaning is a fulfilling job. There were two other noteworthy instances of laughter distancing privileged British participants from inequality (UK 1, UK 3). In both instances the laughter followed statements of their own privilege, expressing uneasiness about this position. Awkwardness about privilege, rather than catalysing a social critique or expression of guilt, followed a pattern of diffusion by humour when group members were of a similar social position. It is likely that the emotional regime would have been altered by a different group composition.

Distancing by those who consider themselves comparatively privileged often took the form of non-confrontational interactions. Apparently balanced responses, noting the disadvantages and benefits associated with inequality, emotionally and politically distanced groups from the poverty and injustice associated with inequality. The following responses are to a question about awareness of world inequality:

“Obviously people are living in absolute poverty. They don't have anything, don't have enough food and other things they need such as water. And obviously that's not nice and that's what aid charities are trying to tackle I think.”

“Saying good things to inequality is difficult because they're WRONG. But at the same time you've got things like cheap clothing that people, you know they want cheap clothing. And I know it's wrong to say, but due to inequality we do get cheaper clothes and things. And it feels wrong but then it's there, it's a fact.”

(UK 1, trainee teachers, urban location)

After acknowledging the existence of economic inequality and its serious consequences, both speakers distance themselves from the possibility of change. Both comments have similar narrative forms, expressing regret about inequality and distancing themselves from inequality. Locating the possibility for change away from themselves offers a neat solution to the problem, and presents it as self-contained. The second speaker focuses on the present, implying that inequality is immutable. Distancing the causes of inequality from the relatively privileged trainee teachers avoids confrontation, the associated feeling rule is: do not challenge those who benefit most from inequality. Emotions that others might find it hard to respond to, such as guilt, anger or sorrow, are not expressed. Acknowledging the problem and distancing themselves from it positions these trainees as both globally aware yet not accountable for how their lives intersect with those of others. Studying at a University in a wealthy British city could mean these respondents were rarely confronted with deep disparities. Inequality probably felt distant, making distancing easy.

The trope of the ‘happy poor’ was used by groups in all three research countries. In Mexico and Kenya, this referred to the rural poor within that country. The argument is that rural subsistence lifestyles require little money. Kenya 1 (urban trainee teachers) suggested that \$2 is too much in the countryside. UK 1 (urban trainee teachers) respondents referred to a generalised global poor,

warning against patronizing pity when poor people might be happy. The quotation below shows how one Mexican group presented the idea of the happy poor within the district of Chiapas.

“The geography of Mexico is one of internal differences. In Chiapas there are people who are happy with \$2 per day.”

(Mexico 1, urban teachers from different schools)

The happy poor are constructed as distant by the urban, privileged groups cited above. The speakers live at a physical and social distance from the poor to whom they refer. This distancing is inconsistent with their claims to know about the emotional well-being of these distant poor. The distance allows poorer people to be imagined as having fundamentally different needs and desires from the research participants. The Mexican quote above refers to the relatively poor Chiapas district, which is home to many indigenous people. Emotions are contained and participants reason that poverty is not always a problem (see Barford, 2011 for further discussion). Following an emotionally neutral regime, research participants avoid challenging one another's socio-economic position and political stance by curtailing discussion of the difficulties associated with poverty, discussion which could otherwise prompt strong emotional reactions such as anger or shame.

The effect of living amidst urban poverty was described by a British teacher working in Nairobi, Kenya. She had become accustomed to seeing slum living conditions: “I don't blink, so you do become a little bit immune to it, because it becomes so normal” (Kenya 7, urban British-system private school). She had adjusted to living surrounded by poverty by accepting it. This created an emotional buffer and protected her from thinking through the implications of poverty. Observing severe poverty on a daily basis and not intervening requires a form of distancing, to block the possible shame, pity or anger that might otherwise occur.

Emotional regimes surrounding inequality play several roles: limiting discord, requiring politically correct responses, and protecting the group and speaker from emotional upset. Participants' socio-economic positions influence the way in which calls for social change are expressed, and the appropriate level of emotional commitment to such views. Those who distanced themselves from inequality also tended to justify it; conversely those who connected with the topic and connected with others across social divides were inclined to challenge inequality. In all three countries there were instances of connection and distancing. One's perceived socio-economic position depends upon choice of reference group, and more privileged groups in each country recognised this status. In the UK no groups considered themselves to be disadvantaged, whereas some groups in poorer and rural areas of Kenya and Mexico did identify with poorer segments of society. Perceived socio-economic position, combined with connecting or distancing, influenced whether and how research participants challenged global inequality.

5. Conclusion

Emotions are said to be “intensely political” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p.7). Inequality itself is intensely political, because if inequality in resource distribution is understood as problematic, the logical response is redistribution. *Politics* arise because those with more than their equal share of resources may be unwilling to share what they, and others, consider to be deserved wealth (Rowlingson and Connor, 2010). Whilst some research participants defended and justified inequality, others felt it was unacceptable. As others have argued (e.g., Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo, 2009; Therborn, 2009), a more public and emotionally engaged appreciation of connectivity and relationality could diminish the

conceptual, and ultimately socio-economic, distances between people. Future research might explore how changes in feeling rules associated with inequality come about, and how these changes relate to societal change.

Self-defined socio-economic position (disadvantaged/privileged) and political approach to inequality (connecting/distancing) influence emotional regimes (see Table 3). An emotional regime guides whether anger, humour, or hope (amongst other options) is an appropriate response to the highly political and morally sensitive topic of inequality. Country context had some influence on whether research participants self-defined as being comparatively privileged or disadvantaged. It was more common for Kenyans and Mexicans to self-define as disadvantaged than UK groups, reflecting disparities in national wealth. However, it is not possible to distill these findings to a list of emotional regimes by country because of the importance of sub-national variations in socio-economic status. The more privileged participants softened or excused their confrontational views and laughter about inequality; in disadvantaged settings unapologetic anger and humour at group or national misfortune about inequality were acceptable responses.

Whether research participants appeared connected to, or distanced from, inequality and its consequences is partly influenced by group dynamics; this is evident in the tendency towards consensus within the discussion groups which were composed pre-existing groups of colleagues. The emotional labour of some participants was observable, for example as they followed feeling rules of being concerned, whilst expressing their own anger or distance in a socially acceptable way. The geography of these distancing or confronting emotional techniques varies between people located at different points within the worldwide distribution of resources, and possibly relates to how much people feel they have to gain/lose from redistribution.

At the beginning of the Millennium it was asked, “What possibilities are there for developing a geographical agenda sensitive to the emotional dimensions of living in the world?” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p.8). The findings presented here offer an international perspective on the feeling rules that influence how teachers discuss inequality. Comparing emotional expressions about inequality from diverse social, economic, political and geographical settings offers insight into multiple perspectives on the same topic. Going beyond one-way analyses of how one socio-economic group makes sense of another, the work presented here helps to piece together a more holistic picture of how inequality is understood from multiple vantage points. This research has made space for both the similarities and differences between disparate groups to emerge. Paying attention to emotional expressions, whether people are connecting or distancing themselves from an issue, and how geographical distance and socio-economic inequality intersect with physical distance and relationality, offers purchase on the role that emotions play in our interconnected social, economic and political lives. This methodological approach could be productively applied to other global issues, such as the debate surrounding climate change.

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