

Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Egalitarianism is not uniform: Integrating intersectionality into process-based accounts of human political organisation --Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Egalitarianism is not uniform: Integrating intersectionality into process-based accounts of human political organisation
Short Title:	Egalitarianism is not uniform
Article Type:	Open Peer Commentary
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Abstract:	We argue that favourable socio-ecological circumstances do not translate uniformly into opportunities for all individuals. Drawing on intersectionality theory, we show that intersectional positions shape individuals' differential ability to engage in the processes identified by the target article. Thus, while socio-ecological conditions create the possibility of egalitarianism, intersectionality shapes how those possibilities may be actualised.

Target article

Egalitarianism is not equality: Moving from outcome to process in the study of human political organisation (Stibbard-Hawkes and von Rueden)

Commentary Title

Egalitarianism is not uniform: Integrating intersectionality into process-based accounts of human political organisation

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Abstract

We argue that favourable socio-ecological circumstances do not translate uniformly into opportunities for all individuals. Drawing on intersectionality theory, we show that intersectional positions shape individuals' differential ability to engage in the processes identified by the target article. Thus, while socio-ecological conditions create the possibility of egalitarianism, intersectionality shapes how those possibilities may be actualised.

Main Text

Stibbard-Hawkes and von Rueden make a compelling and timely contribution by shifting the field from outcome-based to process-based definitions of egalitarianism. Their account persuasively shows how self-interest, particularly concerns with status, resource access, and autonomy, underpins the plural processes (demand-sharing, risk-pooling, status-levelling,

prosocial reputation-building, consensus-based collective decision-making, and residential mobility) through which relative equality is maintained. These processes are enabled by socio-ecological circumstances that limit accumulation and constrain domination. In this sense, egalitarianism arises not from a generalised preference for equality but from individuals' efforts to act on these motivations under conditions that make such actions feasible. By specifying the mechanisms through which relative equality is maintained, the authors move beyond accounts that attribute egalitarianism to fairness norms or altruistic motivations, providing a powerful explanation for the emergence of egalitarian arrangements.

This resonates with us. However, here we aim to refine this framework by attending to a structural mechanism that remains underspecified: the intersectional positions that individuals occupy within these processes. At the end of their article, the authors rightly note that inequalities can be substantial both within and between categories — gender, age, kinship, leadership, and knowledge — and that differences in motivations may further shape these dynamics. Among individuals of the same gender, for instance, differences in hunting skill, social capital, or recognised expertise can translate into unequal influence, status, or access to cooperation. We build on this observation by introducing intersectionality as an additional structural mechanism, one that highlights how such differences do not simply accumulate but combine to produce qualitatively distinct social positions that shape individuals' differential capacity to engage in the processes identified.

Intersectionality directs attention to how multiple axes of difference — gender, age, kinship position, embodied capacity, and access to knowledge — intersect to produce systematically differential positions under the same structural conditions (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016; McCall, 2005). Rather than treating these inequalities as discrete or additive, this perspective emphasises their co-constitution and the ways in which they mutually structure access to social relations, resources, and influence. An intersectional position is the specific

location at the confluence of multiple axes that shapes what is available, legible, or feasible for a given individual within a particular context.

Consider mobility, which the authors identify as central to avoiding domination. Even where mobility is ecologically feasible, its practical exercise is uneven. Childcare responsibilities, gendered expectations, physical capacity, or limited kin support may constrain certain individuals' ability to relocate, restricting their capacity to exit unfavourable social arrangements. The option of exit is formally available, but its actualisation depends on resources and relationships that are themselves unevenly distributed. Similarly, participation in consensus-based decision-making may be nominally inclusive yet influence within such processes is often structured by age, gender, kinship ties, and recognised expertise (Lee, 1982; von Rueden et al., 2014; Garfield et al., 2019). The same holds for risk-pooling and demand-sharing processes, which rely on social embeddedness, and individuals' positions within cooperation networks conditioning their ability to mobilise support when needed.

These observations suggest that the processes identified by the authors operate in relation to, rather than independently of, individuals' social positions. Opportunities are not simply afforded by structural conditions. Access to opportunities does not suffice for the actualisation of desirable outcomes. It is essential that they must also be able to be actualised by agents, differentially positioned to engage with them (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2024). This requires the ability to convert available processes into realised outcomes, a capacity that may be compromised by structurally unfavourable intersectional positions (Meliou & Mallett, 2022). In other words, socio-ecological circumstances may create the possibility of egalitarian processes, but individuals' intersectional positions shape whether and to what degree those possibilities are realised in practice, such that formally available processes may remain only partially or unevenly experienced.

Notably, this structural mechanism extends beyond the small-scale societies that are the primary focus of the target article. For instance, research on participatory governance shows that, even where participation is formally open, those who engage most actively tend to be individuals with greater socioeconomic resources, time availability, or institutional familiarity (Fung, 2015; Licsandru et al., 2025). It follows that structural position shapes not only who participates but the effectiveness of that participation in shaping outcomes. This parallel underscores that enabling conditions do not translate into uniform opportunities when individuals are differently positioned to act within them (Vincent et al., 2024). The dynamics the authors describe may be especially pronounced in small-scale forager societies, where the material and social stakes of each process are immediate. However, the underlying mechanism is by no means confined to those settings, but compounded in more complex settings with multilayered forms of social arrangements.

In summary, favourable socio-ecological circumstances are a necessary but not sufficient condition for egalitarian dynamics at the individual level. Our commentary, therefore, extends the authors' process-based account in two respects. First, it helps underscore that inequalities across axes should be understood as intersecting and mutually constitutive, rather than as separate dimensions of difference. What matters is not gender or age alone, but the specific configuration of positions an individual occupies across multiple axes simultaneously. Second, the effectiveness of egalitarian processes depends not only on their presence but on individuals' structural positioning relative to them. The same process may be experienced differently for those unfavourably positioned. Future empirical work should accordingly attend to variation within nominally egalitarian processes, examining who mobilises support most effectively in risk-pooling; whose voice carries in consensus decision-making; and who exercises mobility, to the end of illuminating the intersectional dynamics shaping the distribution of egalitarian outcomes.

Competing interests statement

The authors declare none.

Funding statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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