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The Inequality Map

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Foreign tourists are coming up to me on the streets and asking, “David, you have so many different kinds of inequality in your country. How can I tell which are socially acceptable and which are not?”

This is an excellent question. I will provide you with a guide to the American inequality map to help you avoid embarrassment.

Academic inequality is socially acceptable. It is perfectly fine to demonstrate that you are in the academic top 1 percent by wearing a Princeton, Harvard or Stanford sweatshirt.

Ancestor inequality is not socially acceptable. It is not permissible to go around bragging that your family came over on the Mayflower and that you are descended from generations of Throgmorton-Winthrops who bequeathed a legacy of good breeding and fine manners.

Fitness inequality is acceptable. It is perfectly fine to wear tight workout sweats to show the world that pilates have given you buns of steel. These sorts of displays are welcomed as evidence of your commendable self-discipline and reproductive merit.

Moral fitness inequality is unacceptable. It is out of bounds to boast of your superior chastity, integrity, honor or honesty. Instead, one must respect the fact that we are all morally equal, though our behavior and ethical tastes may differ.

Sports inequality is acceptable. It is normal to wear a Yankees jersey, an L.S.U. T-shirt or the emblem of any big budget team. The fact that your favorite sports franchise regularly grounds opponents into dust is a signal of your overall prowess.

Church inequality is unacceptable. It would be uncouth to wear a Baptist or Catholic or Jewish jersey to signal that people of your faith are closer to God. It is wrong to look down on other faiths on the grounds that their creeds are erroneous.

Income inequality is acceptable. If you are a star baseball player, it is socially acceptable to sell your services for \$25 million per year (after all, you have to do what's best for your family). If you are a star C.E.O., it's no longer quite polite to receive an \$18 million compensation package, but everybody who can still does it

Spending inequality is less acceptable. If you make \$1 billion, it helps to go to work in jeans and black T-shirts. It helps to live in Omaha and eat in diners. If you make \$200,000 a year, it is acceptable to spend money on any room previously used by servants, like the kitchen, but it is vulgar to spend on any adult toy that might give superficial pleasure, like a Maserati.

Technological inequality is acceptable. If you are the sort of person who understands the latest hardware and software advances, who knows the latest apps, it is acceptable to lord your superior connoisseurship over the aged relics who do not understand these things.

Cultural inequality is unacceptable. If you are the sort of person who attends opera or enjoys Ibsen plays, it is not acceptable to believe that you have a more refined sensibility than people who like Lady Gaga, Ke\$ha or graffiti.

Status inequality is acceptable for college teachers. Universities exist within a finely gradated status structure, with certain schools like Brown clearly more elite than other schools. University departments are carefully ranked and compete for superiority.

Status inequality is unacceptable for high school teachers. Teachers at this level strongly resist being ranked. It would be loathsome to have one's department competing with other departments in nearby schools.

Beer inequality is on the way down. There used to be a high status difference between microbrews and regular old Budweiser. In academic jargon, beer had a high Gini Coefficient. But as microbrews went mainstream, these status differences diminished.

Cupcake inequality is on the way up. People will stand for hours outside of gourmet cupcake stores even though there are other adequate cupcakes on offer with no waiting at nearby Safeways.

Travel inequality is acceptable. It is perfectly normal to have separate check-in lines and boarding procedures for airline patrons who have achieved Gold, Platinum, Double Ruby or Sun God status.

Supermarket inequality is unacceptable. It would not be permissible to have separate checkout lines at the grocery store for obese frequent buyers who consume a lot of Twinkies.

Jock inequality is unacceptable if your kid is an average performer on his or her youth soccer team. If your kid is a star, then his or her accomplishments validate your entire existence.

Vocation inequality is acceptable so long as you don't talk about it. Surgeons have more prestige than valet parkers, but we do not acknowledge this. On the other hand, ethnic inequality — believing one group is better than another — is unacceptable (this is one of our culture's highest achievements).

Dear visitor, we are a democratic, egalitarian people who spend our days desperately trying to climb over each other. Have a nice stay.